

Sack Lunches

I put my carry-on in the luggage compartment and sat down in my assigned seat. It was going to be a long flight. "I'm glad I have a good book to read. Perhaps I will get a short nap," I thought.

Just before take-off, a line of soldiers came down the aisle and filled all the vacant seats, totally surrounding me. I decided to start a conversation. "Where are you headed?" I asked the soldier seated nearest to me.

"Chicago – to Great Lakes Base. We'll be there for two weeks for special training, and then we're being deployed to Iraq."

After flying for about an hour, an announcement was made that sack lunches were available for five dollars. It would be several hours before we reached Chicago, and I quickly decided a lunch would help pass the time. As I reached for my wallet, I overheard the soldier ask his buddy if he planned to buy lunch.

"No, that seems like a lot of money for just a sack lunch. Probably wouldn't be worth five bucks. I'll wait till we get to Chicago."

His friend agreed.

I looked around at the other soldiers. None were buying lunch. I walked to the back of the plane and handed the flight attendant a fifty dollar bill. "Take a lunch to all those soldiers." She grabbed my arms and squeezed tightly. Her eyes wet with tears, she thanked me. "My son was a soldier in Iraq. It's almost like you're doing it for him." Picking up ten sacks, she headed up the aisle to where the soldiers were seated. She stopped at my seat and asked, "Which do you like best – beef or chicken?" "Chicken," I replied, wondering why she asked. She turned and went to the front of the plane, returning a minute later with a dinner plate from first class. "This is your thanks."

After we finished eating, I went again to the back of the plane, heading for the rest room. A man stopped me. "I saw what you did. I want to be part of it. Here, take this." He handed me twenty-five dollars.

Soon after I returned to my seat, I saw the Flight Captain coming down the aisle, looking at the aisle numbers as he walked, I hoped he was not looking for me, but noticed he was looking at the numbers only on my side of the plane. When he got to my row he stopped, smiled, held out his hand, and said, "I want to shake your hand." Quickly unfastening my seat belt I stood and took the Captain's hand. With a booming voice he said, "I was a soldier and I was a military pilot. Once, someone bought me a lunch. It was an act of kindness I never forgot." I was embarrassed when applause was heard from all of the passengers.

Later I walked to the front of the plane so I could stretch my legs. A man who was seated about six rows in front of me reached out his hand, wanting to shake mine. He left another twenty-five dollars in my palm. When we landed in Chicago I gathered my belongings and started to deplane. Waiting just inside the airplane door was a man who stopped me, put something in my shirt pocket, turned, and walked away without saying a word. Another twenty-five dollars!

Upon entering the terminal, I saw the soldiers gathering for their trip to the base. I walked over to them and handed them seventy-five dollars. "It will take you some time to reach the base. It will be about time for a sandwich. God Bless You." Ten young men left that flight feeling the love and respect of their fellow travelers. As I walked briskly to my car, I whispered a prayer for their safe return. These soldiers were giving their all for our country. I could only give them a couple of meals.

It seemed so little.

"A veteran is someone who, at one point in his life, wrote a blank check made payable to 'The United States of America' for an amount of 'up to and including my life.' That is honor, and there are way too many people in this country who no longer understand it."