

Memoir Bridge Project 1 - My Dog Tag

I believe the Roman legionnaires were the first to be given a military identification tag. It was a lead disc on which was the name of the recruit with a leather string worn around the neck, and used for identification of the dead and wounded. Materials changed during the last two thousand years, but the practice remained. The Israeli army, like many others, employs the same practice on recruitment. This featherlight metal disc became more significant to me than the unit designation or the rank on my sleeve.

My first day in the Army, a fluorescent-lit building, the smell of stale food, a uniformed grumpy faced administration clerk sitting behind a table.

“What’s your name?”, Bambou Tanya Kenneth- I answered. “What?” B a m b o u Tanya Kenneth- I repeated. A couple of minutes later she presented me with a dog - tag. It seems that the clerk didn’t understand my name, so she just dropped it and left me with my middle and last name.

Underneath the “Tanya Kenneth” my service number ID was stamped in easy to see and touch numerals. The identity disc was thin, made of non-reflective aluminum color. It had rounded corners and a hole at one end, through which a metal chain was threaded - it was to be worn around the neck. “Whatever happens”, the clerk let me know, “You don’t take the disc off your neck”.

After that, me and other eighteen-year-old girls were led to a room piled up with army uniforms. The sizes were XL and XXL and a USA flag was affixed to it’s front. We went through some more supply hand out stations that day, and each issued unfamiliar items that should makes us soldiers: a water canteen, a flack jacket, an helmet, and a rifle. The equipment, just like the uniforms, was ragged and worn-out— dates and names were scribbled in black marker pen on the helmet, the canteen was cracked, and the flack jacket was frayed like a floor rag.

After a long bus ride into the desert we reached boot camp. Basic training in the desert was an experience I never had and hopefully will never have again. It was in mid-August, the American uniform were thick and heavy; The rifle I carried had the repugnant smell of rancid gun oil and kept on bouncing and hurting me around the hips as I ran (which was frequent); The dog-tag shafted my sweaty skin, turning it red and itchy.

I shared a room with eight other girls. Sometimes at night I would wake up from the teeny noises my sweat drops made as they hit the mattress. We used to get up before dawn, put on the enormous uniforms and stick the disc underneath the shirt. At a quarter to five we would present ourselves for roll call, facing the fence that kept us apart from the boundless desert. We held our rifles at 90 degrees and our commander would walk between us, checking, observing, and committing on every minute infraction. Is the weapon clean, spotless and oiled? The cartridge loaded with the prescribed number of bullets? The shirt buttoned up and the identity disc around our necks?

One morning I forgot to wear the disc. It happened at a time in which I started taking it off at night, and that morning as I was getting my things together, I hurried and forgot the disc under my mattress. When this major infraction dawned on me, it was already too late. I remember standing in ranks, shaking in fear. Luckily an emergency siren went off right in the middle of the roll call right just before the commander reached me and all of us had to run to the nearest shelter.

Following basic training, all through my army stint, the dog tag was with me. My permanent base was located in Tel Aviv, and my uniform was tailored to my liking. Sometimes, as I was walking back home from the base, I would take off my uniform, and change into a dress or a pair of jeans in some backyard or in the train's restroom.

I used to stick the disc into the shirt's pocket. I rarely wore it, only for special occasions such as an inspection by the Sergeant major or during official ceremonies.

Now I remember, that there used to be a tradition in the army in which we flipped the disc over to the back of our necks. Only a soldier that had gone through more than half of his army stint could do that. It was a status symbol. Soldiers used to brag about "flipping the disc", looking down upon the raw recruits.

I don't think I ever did wear the disc on the back of my neck. I never really succumbed to such military traditions or practices. While most of the soldiers were quick to sew on the new rank on their sleeve, I procrastinated over and over again until one day the Sergeant major decided to press charges. Now that I think of it, he probably could not understand how I could possibly not insist to show off my brand new rank.

When I finished my compulsory term of service, I had to return to logistics all that I was issued with during those two years. I cannot explain why I chose to keep the dog tag. I could have thrown it in the trash for that matter, and it would not have made a difference. But I chose to hold on to it. I found a place for it in my jewellery box, in the cupboard, in my room.

For the next three years, every time I fumbled through my jewellery box I saw it. Usually it was transparent to me, just another thing in a box in my room. But still I kept it there. Sometimes I would stop and look at it. Maybe once or twice since I left the army it brought back memories, emotions, and smells from those army days.

It's embarrassing to admit, but sometimes, when preparing to leave the house, as I'm going through my jewellery box, I would come across my dog tag, pick it up and use it to clean the accumulated dirt from underneath my fingernails. Then the disc would return to the box, the memories from the army would return too to their place, and I'd continue with the day.