

# The Post and Courier

## You can leave the military, but it never really leaves you

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Occasionally, I venture back out to the air base where I'm greeted by an imposing security guard who looks carefully at my identification card, hands it back and says, "Have a good day, tech sergeant."

Every time I go back onto Charleston Air Force Base it feels good to be called by my previous rank, but odd to be in civilian clothes, walking among the servicemen and servicewomen going about their duties as I once did, years ago.

The military, for all its flaws, is a comfort zone for anyone who has ever worn the uniform.

It's a place where you know the rules and know they are enforced. A place where everybody is busy but not too busy to take care of business.

Because there exists behind the gates of every military facility an institutional understanding of respect, order, uniformity, accountability and dedication that becomes part of your marrow and never, ever leaves you.

### Reading uniforms

Personally, I miss the fact that you always knew where you stood in the military, and who you were dealing with. That's because you could read somebody's uniform from 20 feet away and know the score.

Service personnel wear their careers on their sleeves, so to speak. When you approach each other, you can read their name tag, examine their rank and, if they are in dress uniform, read their ribbons and know where they've served.

I miss all those little things you take for granted when you're in the ranks, like breaking starch on a set of fatigues fresh from the laundry and standing in a perfectly straight line that looks like a mirror as it stretches to the endless horizon.

I miss the sight of troops marching in the early morning mist, the sound of boot heels thumping in unison on the sidewalks, the bark of sergeants and the sing-song answers from the squads as they pass by in review.

### Hurry up and wait

To romanticize military service is to be far removed from its reality, because it's very serious business, especially in times of war.

But I miss the salutes I'd throw at officers and the crisp returns as we crisscrossed on the flight line.

I miss the smell of jet fuel hanging heavily on the night air and the sound of engines roaring down runways and disappearing into the clouds.



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I even miss the hurry-up-and-wait mentality that enlisted men gripe about constantly, a masterful invention that bonded people more than they'll ever know or admit.

I miss people taking off their hats when they enter a building, speaking directly and clearly to others and never showing disrespect for rank, race, religion or gender.

Mostly I miss being a small cog in a machine so complex it constantly circumnavigates the Earth and so simple it feeds everyone on time, three times a day, on the ground, in the air or at sea.

Mostly, I don't know anyone who has served who regrets it, and doesn't feel a sense of pride when they pass through those gates and re-enter the world they left behind with their youth.

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