

Walking in Sacred Places



Thursday night, Lola and I walked across the parking lot of a shopping center, between rows of vehicles, waited until a break in the traffic occurred, and joined a processional of people, all headed in the same direction.

We walked into a zone where people talked in hushed tones, where strangers had gathered for a common purpose. We walked among men and women who treated each other and the scene reverentially. It was a sacred place; the Spirit of God was there.

We walked where four Marines and a sailor had walked, had worked, and had lived – until that fatal morning of Thursday, July 16, when a 24-year-old gunman went on a rampage spraying bullets into this recruiting center on Lee Highway in

Chattanooga, then heading to the Navy and Marine Reserve Center on Amnicola Highway. There, he killed four Armed Forces personnel before being shot and killed by Chattanooga police. A fifth serviceman died later from his wounds.

Slain as a result of the attack were Randall Smith, petty officer 2nd class and a logistics specialist in the U.S. Navy; Lance Cpl. Squire (Skip) Wells, who dreamed of becoming a drill sergeant; Gunnery Sgt. Thomas Sullivan, who served two tours of duty in Iraq; Sgt. Carson Holmquist, an automotive maintenance technician who completed two deployments as part of Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan); and Staff Sgt. David Wyatt, deployed three times, including twice in Iraq.

Rows and rows of American flags, red-white-and-blue balloons, a Bible here and there, crosses large and small, flowers, letters, patriotic signs and messages filled the long makeshift memorial. Several trucks were parked by the side of busy Lee Highway, young men standing in the truck beds waving huge flags at passing cars.



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At one point, three veterans from Bradley County, wearing military hats, played the National Anthem on a boombox, facing a large American flag and holding their salutes until the vocalist finished. Crowds watched, hands over their hearts by most, and applauded as the song ended.

“Just remember,” one of the veterans shouted, “freedom isn’t free. These brave men gave the ultimate sacrifice to protect our country and guarantee our freedoms.”

A boy, maybe 10 years old, walked up with a bottle of water in each hand. “Would you like some free water, Ma’am?” he asked. “Would you like some water, Sir?” It was obvious on his face – he was on a mission. He was doing his part to honor these victims.

About halfway along the memorial, we stopped and tried to take it all in. The emotions were overwhelming. Tears streamed down Lola’s face – and mine, as well. “It seems so senseless,” she said. “The love and support being offered here by everyone helps, but it can’t take away the pain of these families. And we’ve all been wounded by what’s happened here.”



We drove a few miles to the site of the second shooting, the Navy and Marine Reserve Center. Entrance to the facility was prohibited, but trucks and automobiles lined the highway where another memorial had sprung up. As we arrived, a bagpipe band was playing, and its soulful sound caught everyone’s attention.

What we were witnessing was an amazing demonstration of how love does what hate cannot. Love unites, encourages, strengthens, comforts, offers hope, and speaks to the heart. And the people of Southeast Tennessee are giving the world an example.

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No one can come to either of these two sites without being affected deeply. Thousands of individuals and families – from this area and from other states – have come to pay their respects to five men who voluntarily offered themselves in duty to country, and gave their lives.

For us. And for freedom.

– Beecher Hunter