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Ten Things You Should Know  
to Help Bring the OIF/OEF Veteran All the Way Home  
By Alison Lighthall, RN, MS  
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Founder, HAND2HAND CONTACT

10. OIF stands for Operation Iraqi Freedom, also known as the Iraq War, and it began on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2003. OEF stands for Operation Enduring Freedom and is a multinational military operation aimed at dismantling terrorist groups, mostly in Afghanistan. It officially commenced on Oct. 7, 2001 in response to the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks;
9. Returning Service Members do not think of themselves as heroes, no matter how extraordinary their skills, courage, or actions may be. Their heroes are the ones still over there or coming home in a flag-draped boxes;
8. Service Members are as varied in their political beliefs as everyone else in America. Some are adamantly against the war, others staunchly support it, and everyone else falls somewhere in between. Assuming that everyone who joins the military is a card-carrying right-winger will only make you look stupid;
7. No matter what his or her opinions about the war are, every Service Member of every branch of the military takes a solemn oath to support and follow our Commander In Chief, the President of the United States, and therefore *cannot* say anything derogatory about him;
6. No one can describe how hot it was while deployed in a war zone, so don't ask a returning Vet about the heat. Instead, imagine yourself putting on every piece of winter gear you own, in multiple layers, putting a metal bowl over your head, turning your oven on to 120 degrees, climbing inside, and living there for 6 months;
5. Worse still is asking any Veteran, "Did you kill anyone?" It is an unanswerable question. Perhaps she did and wished she hadn't. Perhaps he didn't and wished he had. Perhaps she did, but it wasn't fast enough to prevent a comrade's death. Perhaps it was accidental or perhaps it was so many instances of killing, he lost count. War requires things of us and taps into parts of us that are never otherwise touched—things most people need to work through or want to forget. US military personnel do not take killing lightly, and anyone who has not been there simply cannot discuss it with those who have, much less pass judgment. Listen quietly if they choose to talk about it, but otherwise, leave it alone;
4. OIF/OEF Veterans often want to go back to the war zone. Sometimes it's because they feel called to go in to finish the mission or support their buddies, sometimes it's because they feel they can no longer fit in to American society and its frivolous interests and fads. But regardless of reason, it is fairly common, so if they tell you they're planning on redeploying, please don't look at them as if they are insane
3. They are exhausted when they get home—physically, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually exhausted. They often do not have the energy or focus to talk for long periods of time. It will take some time for them to adjust, so follow their lead;
2. There is nothing black-and-white about what has happened to them. Almost always, there are good things that come from a deployment experience. Likewise, there are some pretty difficult things that they face once they are back home. Do not make any assumptions about their experiences;

And the # 1 thing you should know about OIF/OEF Veterans are...

1. They are not the same people they were before they deployed. But do not assume that is a bad thing. The Service Member may come home more confident, with better problem-solving skills. He may return with a deeper sense of gratitude for the comforts that he used to take for granted or she may have found a greater sense of purpose and direction than she ever had before. Yes, there may be many unseen wounds of the soul and spirit. But there are tremendous resources to help heal those wounds, both for the Service Member and the Service Member's family, and an ever growing number of people who truly care and want to help.

If every American understood these 10 important facts about our returning Veterans, life would be a lot easier for them. So pass it on.

[www.hand2handcontact.org](http://www.hand2handcontact.org)