

The Unimportant Tribe



SFC Tovmassian (left) and PFC Zarechian-Soudoni (right). You will note they had to take the photo themselves.

BY KARINE M. TOVMASSIAN

The sublime nature of Saroyan's words echo today in our modern ears, with the same precision and uninterrupted intention they were first written. Most Armenians have all read these words and more often than not use the quote as a self-validation of their existence despite the magnanimous odds. As an American of Armenian descent, I find myself often wondering what Americans think of Saroyan's words. Mostly the following thoughts come to mind: "Gee Will, you sure nailed it, now where's my remote?" We are that very tribe of unimportant people that Saroyan, a native son of the United States, wrote about. Decades of endless battles fighting Mongols, Tatars, Persians, Turks, Communists, and body hair have carved a molecular association with war, creating a structural deformity in our DNA, such that we carry a fondness for upholding the laws of the countries where we are exiled, to the extent that their constitutions allow, including fighting in wars that are not ours to fight, yet we fight. An old Armenian adage rings true even today: On the forehead of every Armenian, the word "Work" is inscribed. For some the toil of work comes in the form of military service.

I find the term "military service" to be quite apropos in describing what our soldiers do every day. They don't just clock-in to work; they provide service to a nation. Oddly, the only other comparable example is worlds away, where Armenian monks serve God and also provide a service to entire peoples. These two sorts are really in the same business. Both ends serve to protect the people from outside dangers with a slight but important difference, in that, soldiers fight for what is tangible and the monks for what is not. Life, for everyone else not on the physical or spiritual battlefield carries its own perception of reality, and the fact that we go about our business

every day unaffected implies that the soldiers and the monks are doing their jobs. Both sides quietly understand how the comfortable lives of the people are the causality of their actions. Although the secular sort would argue that our unaffectedness leads us to living on auto-pilot, calling us to mindfulness and prayer, whereas the soldiers are content knowing we are in an Occidental coma.

Sergeant First Class (SFC) Robert Thompson from Imperial Beach, Calif., and Private First Class (PFC) Zarechian-Soudoni from Greenfield, Calif., happened to bump into each other in the very unknown but rather important town of Tarin Kowt, Afghanistan, a couple of months ago. I suppose those of us who speak Armenian have at one point or another raised our ethnic eyebrows to our relatives or friends to indicate the proximal closeness of another group of Armenians, offering up the ancient knowing that every Armenian possesses: the ability to identify another Armenian from across a crowded room and then to immediately silence their own group so the others don't realize they've been a target of the last hour's gossip. That very eyebrow arch has for 2,000 years greeted and warded off our own sort. But, you see, SFC Thompson is what the Armenian community refers to as an "ABC: Armenian by Choice." Indeed, his eyebrows are bushy enough to compete with an archaic arch of an Armenian's, but what do we make of this meeting? Especially since, SFC Thompson's wife is authoring this very article and has just received simple but direct instructions to "mail *baklava* and *locum*."

This unimportant tribe has through its own veins discovered and rediscovered purpose and cultural validation on foreign soil, partly due to a forced exile by the Ottoman Turks during the Armenian Genocide (1915-21), and partly due to a curious and adventurous spirit that often results in meetings where *baklava* is requested from places like Tarin Kowt, Afghanistan. This resilient spirit is what I attribute to other

ABCs whose Armenophilic tendencies often put to shame native Armenians' or diasporan Armenians' knowledge of history, music, food, and all things Armenian. And why should this matter? I spoke to a few retired Armenian Americans who served in the U.S. military and fought in previous wars to search for some answers.

Souren Mourachian, from Cranston, R.I., was drafted into the service in 1943 at 19 years old. He was a PFC in the 104th infantry division U.S. Army. In our brief chat, he explained to me that after four months of training he was shipped off to France, then Belgium and Holland, and finally wounded up in Germany, in 1945, where he was hospitalized until discharged. He told me this informational bit as a parenthesis to the following: "My parents are from Sepastia, Armenia [now Turkey]. My father came to America in 1910 alone. My mother lost three children during the genocide in the village of Govdoon where they [the Armenians] were marched into the Syrian Desert to their deaths. They [my parents] met up in 1920 and had three more children. I feel honored to have served in a war [World War II] that was a mess of the whole world at the time. We did our part and I was glad to do our part. I benefited by serving because under those conditions I was able to go to college and have a fairly decent job. [Being] Armenian is just my background; my parents came for freedom and opportunity. This is that country. I am happy that I could have done something for my country. God blessed me a long time ago."

Col. James Vartanian served with the U.S. National Guard. For any of you Armenophiles, he is directly related to fighting legend and *fedayi* Sepastati Mourad. (Apparently, his grandmother was Mourad's niece.) That's the American equivalent of being General Patton's great-grandson.

Staff Sergeant Everett Marabian, 79, served at the U.S.

"I should like to see any power of the world destroy this race, this small tribe of unimportant people, whose wars have all been fought and lost, whose structures have crumbled, literature is unread, music is unheard, and prayers are no more answered. Go ahead, destroy Armenia. See if you can do it. Send them into the desert without bread or water. Burn their homes and churches. Then see if they will not laugh, sing and pray again. For when two of them meet anywhere in the world, see if they will not create a New Armenia."

—William Saroyan

Army Headquarters in South Korea. His family hails from the ancient Armenian rebel city of Moush, which served as one of the biggest uprisings against the Ottoman Turks, who had killed his grandfather, a priest in the village of Palo. When I asked Marabian what he recalls from his experiences in the Korean War, he said the following: "I was never caught and I was never a prisoner. I've seen many of the dead bodies come back home. They were transferring the bodies at the end of the war, 55,000 American soldiers were killed." He quickly added: "That's 48 Americans killed every day over a period of 3 years and 1 month." When I explained to him that I was writing up a piece to honor two Armenian Americans that had found each other in Afghanistan, he added the following: "Put this down, I served for 15 months, the maximum deployment was 16 months. These boys today are being sent back over and over."

He also told me that he had met two officers who were Armenians serving in the Turkish army, and explained that the Turkish soldiers were very defensive at the realization that three Armenian soldiers (2 Lieutenants and 1 Staff Sergeant) were chewing the fat together at the United Nations Military Forward Command Post in Yong San, South Korea. However, he also said, "We are all there for the same cause and the Turks fought very well. There weren't many of us but with Armenians being a minority like the Irish, one of the proudest things I ever did was go there [South Korea]. I will never forget what my mother said to me before I left. I was her only son: My son if we never see you again we know you will be in Heaven, but you must go there to stop those communists!"

Back to SFC Robert Thompson, who has since changed his name to Tovmassian, serving as the senior medic to the medevac crew from Charlie Company, 1/52 Aviation out of Fort Wainwright, Alaska. (Side note: The hardest part of writing an article where one includes one's family is that one runs the risk of people accusing the author of self-promotion. After asking my husband for a few words regarding his "Armenian" experience in Afghanistan, his mindset leaves me no room to cringe from other's perceptions.) SFC Tovmassian does not hesitate

when he offers up his thoughts: "Embrace your country, serve it well, and always remember your family and your honor. Your word is your bond, and through service you secure peace and freedom for all."

And on meeting his 27-year-old colleague, SPC Benjamin Zarechian-Soudoni, an Armenian American from Iran, who is also a medic: "We both serve with selfless dedication to the care of the sick and wounded. Medics are a special type of soldier, we care and fight to guard and save our wounded. We learned of our connection through our culture and service to others and through the army, which has afforded us both a better life."

This tribe of unimportant people, with roots tracing back to their origins as the first nation-state to adopt Christianity as an official religion in 301 A.D.; this small group, which has always maintained stewardship of the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem; this insignificant people, who have fought terrorism before it became fashionable, continue to add value and maintain the integrity of anywhere they are placed. These immaterial people who have centuries of experience in battle and recognize King Leonidas from the movie "300" as their very own Commander Vartan Mamigonian (who lost the battle against the Persians, with 66,000 Armenian forces vs. 300,000 Persian forces, but won the war on remaining a Christian nation) developed a battle cry that transcends momentary glory. Armenians live by their ingrained ability to leave a place better than they found it. Service is at the very heart of every Armenian battle cry.

Originally from Bucharest, Romania, Armenian-Greek writer Karine Macri Tovmassian received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Honors English and Foreign Languages and Literatures from California State University, Northridge. She received her Master of Arts Degree in Commercial Diplomacy from the Monterey Institute of International Studies, in Monterey, California. She serves as an active consultant to governments, agencies, and philanthropic organizations. She is currently moving to Fairbanks, Alaska where she awaits Sgt. Tovmassian's return from war. For more information on Karine's writing visit www.ThinkerExtraordinaire.com.