

JUST A TATTERED OLD FLAG?



It might be inspiring to say this tattered, old flag had a battlefield story behind it—one of flying above a beleaguered American garrison or having been carried into the fight by a courageous American soldier.

But it doesn't. Not that kind of story, anyway. This flag has a hometown story that is very much connected to the battlefield.

Having just made Captain upon my release from the hospital after Vietnam, I was placed on convalescent duty as the senior advisor to the US Army Reserve unit in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

As the only regular Army officer in the area, I became the Survivor Assistance Officer—the officer whose duty it was to inform area families when a husband or son was lost in battle.

To knock, unannounced, on a family's door with that kind of news was, to me, nearly as terrifying as being in combat. But shepherding a family through the process of coping with their loss ultimately brought me the satisfaction of having helped someone through a most difficult time.

So, how does the flag play into this story? When an American flag becomes worn, torn, faded, or badly soiled, it is replaced with a new flag, and the old flag is “retired” with all the dignity and respect befitting Old Glory. At the conclusion of the ceremony, the retired flag is typically burned.

When this flag reached its retirement age, though, I was in the process of transferring to my next duty station. In lieu of burning the flag after it was retired, it was presented to me as a remembrance of my time in Tuscaloosa and of my service to those suffering the loss of someone they loved.

Every American flag is significant, but some come with a bit more personal history than others. This is just such a flag.