

This Veterans Day, Don't Thank a Veteran

In thinking back on the days of Easy Company, I'm treasuring my remark to a grandson who asked, "Grandpa, were you a hero in the war?"

"No," I answered, "but I served in a company of heroes."

-Mike Ranney

Easy Company, 506th, 101st Airborne WWII

This Veterans Day, 96 years to the day since the WWI armistice was signed, the American combat veteran is in a status unprecedented throughout our nation's history. Once the holiday of our fathers and grandfathers, a decade of sustained global warfare has swelled the ranks of those Americans who can say they too went to a foreign land prepared to fight, and to die. The U.S. combat veteran is your neighbor, your mailman, your doctor, your town constable, your homeless disabled transient, your friends and family and that buddy from high school. They responded to a call for action ignored by most. They volunteered to absorb a litany of horrors, and face the smoke-obscured deadly hydra of terrorism with bravery in their souls and love for their brothers and sisters at their side. The beast stared into them daily for days, weeks, months, years, and they stared back with a grin and defiant middle finger while America invented reality tv and cultivated a ridiculous obsession with pumpkin spice.

Learning our lessons from Vietnam, the unpopularity of the War on Terror and subsequent Operation Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom did not lead to mass ostracization of our heroes as they returned home from a hell you could never imagine. Enshrined in our righteous post 9/11 fury, the American troop became focus of both pride and unwarranted pity. Yet, for all our flag waving and back thumping, we fail our veterans every day.

I have covered at large the epidemic of veteran suicide plaguing our nation, and the broken system that spawned it. We have discussed before, dear readers, the skyrocketing rates of vicious prescription medicine abuse cycles being thrust upon these warriors by a smiling doctor with a gleaming Support our Troops sticker on the back bumper of his car. You and I read of veterans dying while waiting to be seen at VA hospitals. Corruption, bureaucracy and a network of raging indifference has cut down many a warrior who survived traversing the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Now, an evil arises in the east. The beast has grown a new head in the form of an insane terrorist organization hell bent on turning the region back into the Middle Ages. Again, tens of thousands of my brothers and sisters keep a wary eye on the news, praying for the word to come down that it's time to switch the machine back on, time to grease the wheels of a juggernaut of power and destruction unknown throughout the entire course of human history. Again, politicians are wringing their hands and spewing half truths and fallacies. Again, most Americans could not care less but for the 5 minutes of thought they devote on the topic upon glancing at a headline on social media. Again, our military industrial complex holds its breath, waiting for word that the registers will soon again be flush with cash. And again, the veterans from the last war whisper warnings in the ears of all to no avail, warnings of lessons learned the hard way in the streets of Iraq and hills of Afghanistan. Just as every war that ends is supposedly the war to end all wars, ever will this cycle continue for the next millennia, as it has done for the previous two.

This Veterans Day, do not thank a veteran. Though well-intentioned, that platitude is as much of a dismissal as it is a pleasantry. Instead ask him how he is doing. Ask her what made her join the military; I guarantee you will be surprised at the very wide range of responses to that one. Ask them about a funny story they have from deployment, for it is just as much about fraternity and the hijinks that ensue from the collective boredom that comes when you drop a large group of American youth in a foreign country with little to do other than win a war. Ask him what he thinks of the current situation; he may surprise you with his insight. Support politicians who fight for cannabis reform to expand access to medical marijuana to veterans suffering and dying from PTSD and grievous bodily injury. Volunteer at your local Soldier's Home or V.A. hospital. Treat them with the respect they have sweat and bled for, the respect not to be treated like some damaged goods for your empathy.

This Veterans Day remember war veterans make up our numbers in America more than they have in generations. We are proud of our service, we love our country and we want nothing more than to ensure that all the sacrifices made by our fallen brethren were not only appreciated, but not in vain.

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest to children ardent for some desperate glory the old Lie: Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori

-Lt. Wilfred Owen, British Army WWI