

The Meaning of Military Service
on Veterans Day 2012

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5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry
1st Air Cavalry Division

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First of all, let me say thank you to everyone in our Association on behalf of Bob Child, Juan Gonzalez and myself for the honor of being chosen as wreath bearers at the memorial service tomorrow at the Vietnam Memorial Wall. This is a great privilege and we are all three humbled by this assignment to represent all of you on such a solemn occasion. Thanks also, General Edmunds, for the very special commemorative silver dollar coins that we certainly didn't expect. We will cherish them always in remembrance of this Veterans Day 2012.

1LT Bob Childs was the best Artillery Forward Observer in Vietnam and also probably the luckiest. His job was supposed to be one with a short span of duty because of always being right next to an infantry company commander and a bunch of radio antennas. But he was also the luckiest FO in Vietnam because he went through four Bravo company commanders in 10 months and never got a scratch, although he was right next to me when I was wounded and had to be medically evacuated during the battle of Hue on February 21, 1968.

SGT Juan Gonzalez was the best pathfinder in Vietnam and in his own soft-spoken way he had to talk a chopper pilot into landing to pick me up that day. The battle was still raging when the chopper arrived in the area and the pilot didn't want to land. Though Juan is soft spoken, he can be very firm, as he was when he told the reluctant pilot that his captain was bleeding to death and if he didn't land and pick him up, Juan was going to shoot him down! I am here tonight because Juan can be very insistent!

Tonight we honor mainly all living veterans. Veterans Day is not to be confused with Memorial Day. Memorial Day is observed on the fourth Monday in May and honors American service members who died in service to their country or as a result of injuries incurred during battle. Veterans Day is always celebrated on November 11, no matter when that date falls, and pays tribute to all American veterans--living or dead--but especially gives thanks to living veterans who served their country honorably during war or peacetime. President Eisenhower issued the national proclamation for the first Veterans Day in 1954. So tonight we honor all of our living brothers in arms and tomorrow we will remember and honor the

fallen veterans of the 5-7 Cav. We just had a reunion in San Antonio last summer. At each reunion we call the names of those who died in Vietnam and add the names of those who died since our last reunion. Sadly, a few more good men have died since we met at our last reunion. One of those who recently died is Bill Koutrouba. I never knew Bill but I wish I had. Jim Thomas called him the bravest man Jim ever knew. When I first read Brett Coulson's account of the battle at LZ Colt on the night of October 9/10, 1967 the first thing I thought was "I wonder whether Koutrouba got the Medal of Honor?" Because if Coulson's story was accurate, then Bill Koutrouba should have been our fifth recipient of the Medal of Honor. Shortly before he passed away the current Surgeon General of the Army sent him a personal letter thanking Bill for his service and for his bravery under fire as a combat medic. So this Veterans Day let us remember Bill Koutrouba.

What is the meaning of military service and becoming a veteran? I submit to you that the highest duty of every citizen is to serve his or her country and to defend what this country stands for, especially when serving means the possibility of

going off to war. To serve is to place ideals and others above oneself. And that truly is a noble thing. To serve is to find purpose and meaning in a higher calling than self-interest. It is to rise above the pursuit of one's own selfish desires, to learn to put first principles and others first, before self. Citizenship does not only convey rights. It also incurs responsibilities. And those who fulfill those responsibilities know the sense of satisfaction and the peace of mind not known to others that is expressed so well in a few words from the Alma Mater of West Point: "Well done! Be thou at peace."

When America has called, its citizens have responded courageously to do their duty. Most who have answered the call to duty have been young, without having had time to complete their education and form a mature sense of who they are and who they want to become. Many were unsure about the cause but they still answered their country's call to serve. In 1897 Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, a Civil War veteran who received the Medal of Honor and was wounded six times after volunteering to leave his university teaching job to serve in the 20th Maine Regiment and who later became the president of his

college, Bowdoin College in Maine, spoke of the heroism of his fellow veterans with greater eloquence than mine when he said about them that “However humble or unknown, they have renounced what are accounted pleasures and cheerfully undertaken all self-denials– privations, toils, dangers, sufferings, sicknesses, mutilations, life-long hurts and losses, death itself – for some great good, dimly seen but dearly held.”

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The majority of our living veterans today are Vietnam-era veterans. The decade of that war threatened our national unity and purpose more than any other event since the Civil War. Not all who were called to serve did so, although most, like all of us, did. Those of us who served in Vietnam were young. But we too were mature enough to recognize and do our duty for “some great good, dimly seen but dearly held,” just as countless others before us, like the Civil War veterans who were praised by Joshua Chamberlain, had done.

Today there are over 23 million living veterans, which is fewer than 10% of all Americans. This recalls for me Churchill’s

famous quote about the Royal Air Force after the Battle of Britain, “Never have so many owed so much to so few.”

Over 1.8 million veterans are women, and their numbers are growing because there are not enough qualified military age young men willing to serve to fill the quotas for our armed services today. Women fill up the ranks that men leave empty and today women do almost everything that men do in combat, which means they come home with PTSD and traumatic brain injury; some have been wounded or killed. Over nine million veterans today are over 65, and nearly two million are under 35. About 1/3 of all living veterans have a VA rated disability. The median income for veterans in 2010 was higher than the median income for our population as a whole. So veterans have done better, on average, than others in economic achievement.

But a little more than 15% of veterans live below the poverty line today. And the unemployment rate for young veterans is higher than the overall unemployment rate. The homeless rate for veterans is nearly 50% higher than the homeless rate for the general population, a total of 67,500 veterans out of 636,000

total homeless people in 2011, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

These facts are unacceptable, for as Teddy Roosevelt once noted, “A man who is good enough to shed his blood for his country is good enough to get a square deal afterward.”

We do indeed owe a great deal to our veterans of military service. No one has acknowledged what we owe our veterans better than Abraham Lincoln in the immortal words of his second inaugural address early in 1865 when he declared it to be our nation’s duty “to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan.” There is a big bill to be paid for many years to come if we are to keep Lincoln’s pledge.

Let me close with the words of General of the Armies General John J. Pershing in a General Order he published on November 12, 1918, the day after the Armistice to end the war to end all wars had gone into effect. The spirit of his words still applies to all veterans living today.

That General Order reads in part as follows:

“I thank you for the patience and courage with which you have endured. I congratulate you upon the splendid fruits of victory which your heroism and the blood of our gallant dead are now presenting to our nation. Your deeds will live forever on the most glorious pages of America’s history...

Sustained by your high ideals and inspired by the heroic part you have played, you will carry back to our people the proud consciousness of a new Americanism born of sacrifice. Whether you stand on hostile territory or on the friendly soil of France, you will so bear yourself in discipline, appearance and respect for all civil rights that you will confirm for all time the pride and love which every American feels for your uniform and for you.”

Thank you all for doing your duty and serving your country so well in our war in Vietnam that, like all of our Nation’s wars, was fought for “some great good, dimly seen but dearly held.” And thank you for giving me the honor of sharing these thoughts with you tonight as we celebrate Veterans Day of 2012.

I am proud to be a member of this great Association and among its brave warriors and your families tonight. Gary Owen!