

VETERANS DAY:
Knowing War and Its Meaning

11 November 2008



(Acknowledgment of introduction, distinguished guests, officers and members of the DAV and Auxiliary, and others who are present.)

The brutal reality of combat, as seen in the infantry during World War II, lies at the center of Edwin Rolfe's poem, "No Man Knows War."

Let me share a few lines from his poem with you now:

Battle knows only three realities: enemy, rifle, life.

No man knows war or its meaning who has not stumbled from tree to tree, desperate for cover, or dug his face deep in the earth, felt the ground pulse with the ear-breaking fall of death...

*War is your comrade struck dead beside you, his
shared cigarette still alive in your lips.*

< **PAUSE** >

Sixty-some years later — in Iraq or Afghanistan —
Edwin Rolfe’s poem would be filled with sand and rocks,
not trees. But the same truths persist in Iraq or Afghanistan
today:

“Battle knows only three realities: enemy, rifle, life.”

There are fewer large-scale battles like those of World
War II. But then, there are no rear areas in today’s wars.
There’s just the ever present danger of powerful roadside
bombs, rocket-propelled grenades, and suicide bombers.

Every war is different, very different in its own way. But
the three realities remain the same, always the same: enemy,
rifle, life.

The emphasis may shift a little if you serve in a missile unit or on the deck of a ship, but the hard facts of war remain.

As a representative of the Disabled American Veterans, I thank you for coming to this observance to pay tribute to those who bore the burden of these painful realities.

Offering a salute of honor to the men and women who paid the price of freedom ... that's the real meaning of Veterans Day.

The big sales at the shopping malls have nothing to do with this holiday's significance. And it's hard to imagine anything like it during World War II, when the whole population was deeply involved in the war effort.

Today's situation is so different. Only one half of one percent of America's people has served in Iraq or Afghanistan – a situation in stark contrast to the large, 20th century wars.

With the burden falling on such a small segment of society, their sacrifices are highly magnified as our troops return to Iraq and Afghanistan for a second, third, fourth, even fifth tour of combat.

And when they come home, so many look around and comment that the country they served seems to be a country at peace — not a country at war.

So little is being asked of everyday citizens in our nation, while the troops fight their hearts out in far-off lands.

In fact, an opinion poll taken not so long ago revealed an unpleasant truth. People said they just didn't want to read about the wars in the newspaper any more. They didn't want to see reports about them on TV.

It's a sad comment in a moment of grave sacrifice for our men and women in uniform.

But not all of the news about public opinion is bad. Though yellow-ribbons are falling off cars across America, another recent poll showed that people support their veterans in overwhelming numbers.

Americans are nearly unanimous in upholding the need to maintain strong, effective programs for all of our veterans. They are particularly concerned about those who come home from war disabled in body, mind and spirit.

Our nation's citizens want their veterans to get proper medical care from the Department of Veterans Affairs — the VA.

According to another survey, taken toward the end of the recent Presidential election, Americans see this issue as a *high national priority*. It ranks right up there with our damaged economy, high gas prices, and the mortgage crisis.

Our politicians need to pay attention to this focus in public opinion.

It's important because we stand at a crucial turning point — one that offers a unique opportunity for a fresh start in the way our government deals with the men and women it sends to war.

It is estimated that 330,000 veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will flood the VA's medical facilities during the coming year. That's one-third of one million new patients on top of the six million VA patients of all prior wars.

It is widely recognized that the VA provides great medical care, for the most part. But the VA is in danger of being overwhelmed and falls short of the mark in some instances. A big part of the problem is a lack of resources, inability to plan realistically, and a failure to meet some of its toughest challenges head-on.

In political circles, there's some denial of the extent of the problem. You've probably heard politicians and news reporters talk about 30,000 troops wounded in Iraq, but let me share some facts with you.

Pentagon casualty statistics for both Iraq and Afghanistan now top 80,000.

This number is a real number, though it never appears in the news and it grows every day.

And this number doesn't include most of the 320,000 brain injuries and 300,000 cases of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder that have returned from the combat areas.

These last veterans worry me a great deal. They can fall through the cracks so easily.

There is a crisis in America when it comes to meeting the needs of our veterans, and it must be addressed.

Congressman Bob Filner, Chairman of the Veterans Affairs Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives, put it this way:

“We must be willing to pay the cost whatever that cost may be ... When funding is short, it is our veterans who pay the price.”

Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Daniel Akaka was blunt in saying that the current “situation is bad for taxpayers, bad for the VA, and bad for veterans.”

The American people want their veterans to have full access to quality medical care. These legislators and several of their colleagues are pushing for a better plan that will move that vision toward reality.

Importantly, it’s a bipartisan effort. That’s what needs to happen.

Let’s face it, the defense of America is bipartisan. Believe me, no one at the recruiting station asks if you’re a Democrat or a Republican. They ask you to raise your right hand.

And, support for veterans among our nation’s citizens has always been completely bipartisan.

In recent years, however, partisan bickering has infected veterans’ issues in Congress and the White House.

This was not always the case, and it does not have to remain that way.

We can return — we must return — to a truly bipartisan approach to caring for America's veterans.

If our politicians cannot put aside their partisan differences when it comes to veterans' programs, they'll fail to do the things they must. And the veterans we celebrate today will be the ones who suffer the penalty.

None of us wants that, which brings me back to our current opportunity.

In the recent campaign, both presidential candidates made a point of talking about veterans' issues.

There was genuine recognition that America has not done its best for the men and women who fight our wars — far from it. Both candidates called upon our nation to do much better.

We in the DAV found it refreshing to hear veterans' issues discussed so frequently and with such vigor.

That was great, and it could signal a new beginning ... if we hold our leaders accountable for making veterans a national priority now that the election is over.

The most important thing to remember is this: If America is going to send its young people off to war, it has to be prepared to deal with the consequences of war.

- And dealing with the physical, mental, and spiritual consequences of our nation's defense must head the list. Providing timely access to good VA medical care for our disabled veterans is a matter of utmost importance.
- Equitable compensation and timely benefits for disabilities resulting from military service is also vital. We have to do right by young people coming home sick and wounded from military service today. And we cannot allow the cases of older veterans to languish forever in the system either.
- Education, jobs, and so many other readjustment benefits are also vital to those who served.

- There's more, of course, and it must all be addressed.

On Veterans Day 2008, the America people should be doing what you're doing today — thinking about these things rather than comparing the prices of new sweaters at the mall.

That's why I feel so honored to share your company at this event.

You made a responsible and faithful decision about Veterans Day. You made it your business to honor the men and women who once, in the defense of freedom, knew only three realities: enemy, rifle, life.

Just as they saw war and knew its meaning, you understood Veterans Day and felt its meaning.

Thank you for observing this unique national holiday with me. And may our country be forever blessed.

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