

Veterans Day

Today is a time to reflect and remember, as the nation thanks our veteran airmen, soldiers, sailors and Marines, and it is truly an honor to stand with you today.

Like most military pilots, while I was on active duty I was not very reflective, but over time our perspectives change. So when I accepted an invitation a few years ago to speak in another state on Veterans Day, it was important to me to reflect on being a Veteran, and how being a Veteran helped shape my views. In preparation for that day, I walked around two city parks in their small town. I wanted to study the monuments honoring their Veterans from past wars, and it was important to me on a personal level to be able to reflect upon the names carved in the stone.

The monument to WWI listed almost 500, including two nurses – Mildred Curtis and Caroline Hansen. Among the names listed were eight doctors and three dentists, and I thought it interesting they were separated out because of their profession. Who were those people? Farmers, shop keepers, teachers, laborers? There were four men named Aldrich, six named Brown, and among the nine who died there was a Robert Dunn. Four other Dunns were listed on that monument. Were they his brothers or cousins?

The WWII monument listed 52 names including a Hugh Stone who was killed. There was an Irving Stone listed as killed on the WWI monument. Were they related? Was there a mother who lost a husband and then a son?

Korea, often called our “forgotten war,” shared a monument with Vietnam, and there were the names of 11 who served there. There were the names of 17 who served in Vietnam and some who did not come back alive.

There was monument to Desert Storm with a February 1991 end date chiseled in the stone when in actuality U.S. service men and women had been in the mid-East continuously for the past 27 years making it, by far, our longest continuous conflict in a region in American history.

Regrettably there will be other monuments added to those parks in my lifetime.

We come together today to honor our military citizens, but I am concerned that as a society we do not.

In this country we call for debate, but too frequently we want only our own voice to be recognized, and opposing views are shouted down. By doing so we do not honor the men and women who served so we might be heard.

We are a country evenly and often bitterly divided on many issues. Those with opposing views are treated with contempt. But without respect for each other, we do not honor the men and women who served.

Too often we do not respect the office of the President, and we blame him and his party for all our ills. Please do not insult me by claiming it is one political party or the other that is solely responsible for our problems. We are in this together, and by behaving in such a manner we do not honor the men and women who served.

We have become a nation that puts our own personal self-interest first, while claiming everyone else is a special interest group. We have become a nation that believes government must provide instead of us providing government. With our actions, we do not honor the men and women who served.

We demand protection for our industries from global competition when we should be supporting education, a rededication to a strong work ethic, and the technology to makes us more competitive. Our sense of entitlement without effort does not honor the men and women who served.

Our veterans are our link to our history. The Vets from WWII and Korea - there has never been a generation like them since, and newscaster Tom Brokaw called them the Greatest Generation for a reason. They grew up in the Great Depression, yet possess an uncommon dedication and commitment. They raised the baby boomers, built the interstates, the cars, the houses, and the factories. They created the prosperity we enjoy today and made the United States the world's singular superpower.

Those of us from Vietnam, the Cold War, Bosnia, Somalia, the Gulf, Iraq, and Afghanistan have our own stories – often not shared, and frequently misunderstood, but very much a part of the colorful, diverse tapestry we call America.

As I looked around the parks, I noticed a group of high school students. They live in a world where the sum of human knowledge doubles every 12 months, but they are also a generation that has never played a record, seen a black and white TV, may not know that President Reagan was shot, and were not born when the

Challenger blew up. I know better, but I pray they will not have their own first hand memories of the world's trouble spots.

I would leave our younger generations and students with some challenges today. I would urge them to question and learn from our Veterans as our Veterans are a national treasure. Question them to learn and understand their dedication, their commitment, and their values. Question them and understand what the words "integrity," "loyalty," and "service before self" mean. Learn what the phrases "Semper Fidelis," "Non sibi sed patriare," "Semper Paratus," "This We'll Defend," and "Aim High. . .Fly-Fight-Win" mean.

As Veterans we still have a duty to this country that did not change with our discharge, separation, or retirement. Those of us who served must not judge too harshly the generations that follow, and we must continue to recognize them for their own greatness. We must become the mentors and teachers. We must explain our history; talk about our experiences; and share our hopes, our dreams, and our fears. We must teach our values so those who follow may better understand their own, and we must recognize that they too are a national treasure.

To do so will honor the men and women who served.

For the past several years I have had the privilege and honor to speak on peer leadership and responsibility to several hundred high school students each summer here in Williamsport at a program called Pennsylvania Free Enterprise Week or PFEW. In closing, let me share with you a letter I received from a young lady who attended last summer, and to the best of my knowledge I did not personally meet her. She wrote:

Dear Colonel Hall,

I was one of the students you spoke to at PFEW this past summer. I wanted to wish you a very happy Veteran's Day. Thank you for believing in a nation founded upon hope for the future. Thank you for believing in my generation. It truly means a lot that you think we can aspire and achieve for good. May this holiday remind you of how important you are to our country and to the individuals you believe in.

Sincerely,

Abigail Sledge

Cranberry Township

She wrote to me, but she spoke to all Veterans. Veterans, you make a difference, and I thank you for letting me share this day with you.