

WHAT VETERANS DAY MEANS TO ME

BY BENJAMIN PATTON

It's a special honor to be able to share my thoughts on Veterans Day. Notwithstanding my lifelong connection to military service through my family and work, it still feels awkward to do so as a civilian. And yet, when you consider the meaning of Veterans Day (and Memorial Day for that matter), perhaps it is indeed fitting.

There are distinct differences between these two consequential holidays of remembrance of our servicemen and women.

Memorial Day is perhaps the more complicated of the two. It is a somber occasion meant to encourage us to reflect on those who have given their lives in the service of this country. That is why at community gatherings on that day, the names of each local life lost in the line of duty is recited. (I honestly don't know if the names of vets lost to suicide are also read, but they should be, as they are also casualties of war.)

And yet Memorial Day weekend remains one of my favorites. For many, it's an opportunity to set aside the challenges of life and immerse ourselves in people and things we love. And maybe that's okay. Maybe that ability to forget, to lose ourselves in a festive weekend is simply proof of the value and purity of the gift of those servicemen and women who died for our cause.... And yet that ability, that freedom to be able to forget is precisely why it's so important that we remember.

Veterans Day also commemorates our veterans but in a very different way.

Indeed the origin of this less widely observed holiday was conceived that way. Originally designated "Armistice Day," it marked the end of World War I, a seemingly interminable, horrifically costly and some say avoidable protracted conflict. When legally renamed Veterans Day by President Ford in 1978, a broader meaning took hold: "To celebrate and honor our vets for their patriotism, love of country, willingness to serve and sacrifice for the common good." (VA.gov).

Growing up, my parents took every opportunity to remind me not only of the profound importance of thanking our servicemen and women, but also the often misunderstood notion that we celebrate not just the combat vets who spent time directly in harm's way, but ANY AND ALL veterans – meaning plainly, anyone who ever took the oath and wore the uniform. A large minority of actively serving men and women are at home and doing all the things that must be done to make an army work. Even the great General Patton knew that - and it crept into his standard stump speech to troops in the field.

"Every man is important. The ordnance men are needed to supply the guns; the quartermaster is needed to bring up the food and clothes for us because where we are going there isn't a hell of a lot to steal. Every last damn man in the mess hall, even the one who boils the water to keep us from getting the GI shits, has a job to do."

There is no way we as a nation can ever adequately thank our veterans and their families for the sacrifices they have made in the service of this country. Veterans Day and Memorial Day, along with Independence Day, Flag Day, Armed Forces Day and others, are important times for us to stop and take a moment to reflect on that sacrifice. But always remember that these are not the only days we are meant to consider our millions of valiant servicemen and women. NO, not by a long shot. These handful of days are merely signposts, reminders if you will, that we need to think about and support these courageous Americans and the families that support them every day. EVERY DAY. They did their job, and now this is ours.

So this Veterans Day, go to a parade. Buy an American flag. Look a veteran in the eye and shake their hand. Introduce yourself to a military family. Ask a question. As my wife often tells me, be interested, not interesting. Above all, mean it. They will know it if you don't, and you will feel it if you do. ★

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