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We said we'd never forget: Will we?

For the first time in 20 years, we celebrate Veterans Day in relative peace

BY JOSEPH REAGAN

Director of Military and Veterans Outreach
Wreaths Across America

On Nov. 11, 1918, Ralph Lindsey wrote from his hospital bed in France "Armistice signed at 11 o'clock. Grand celebration all over France. War is at last over and I am still alive!"

Later in life if you asked him about the scars on his chest, he would simply respond with a shrug and say, "I zigged when I should have zagged."

Ralph was my great-grandfather, and now, nearly 103 years after he wrote those words, our nation once again finds ourselves celebrating the contributions of our veterans during a period where their sacrifices may be less visible than they have during the past 20 years of war.

After returning from World War I, like many others from his unit, he found tremendous success, he took over the family business and raised a family. His friends, H.A. Durkee and Fred Mower, both former infantrymen, started a small company based on a unique marshmallow confection.

Another from his unit, Walter Brennan, is one of only three men to win three Academy Awards, his distinct voice the result of the same gas attack that wounded my great-grandfather. Take a moment to look at Brennan's accomplishments – IMDb lists nearly 250 film credits and called him, "In many ways the most successful and familiar character actor of American sound films."

To be clear, the end of the United States' involvement in the Afghan war doesn't mean our service members are serving without risk. Our military will continue to execute missions across the globe in support of our national security. Some of those more sensitive missions may never be known to us. That aside, superficially this



Veterans Day will be much like years past with parades, speeches and free meal deals in honor of the nearly 19 million veterans living in our communities.

Unfortunately, many veterans – especially those who served in combat – may see this acknowledgement as, at best, shallow; and at worst, patronizing. Even before the fall of Kabul, many veterans complained that, while they believed Americans were genuinely grateful for their service, few cared enough to actually learn about the sacrifices our all-volunteer military makes on their behalf. This civil-military divide is not only impacting the military's ability to recruit new troops, but also our veterans' ability to find meaningful post-service careers.

A few years ago, I was traveling from a conference in D.C. in uniform. I was seated next to a young man who was wearing a sweatshirt from a very prestigious college in the D.C. area. He was clearly bright, affable, and I was enjoying our preflight conversation when he turned to me and said, "So, you're in the military; did you not get a chance to graduate high school?"

This is just one of the many,

many cringe-worthy stories demonstrating the real-life challenges of this civil-military divide. This divide is even more pronounced in Congress where, in the 1970s, nearly 80% of the members of Congress had served in the U.S. military; today, less than 20% of the 117th Congress have ever worn a uniform.

When my great-grandfather and grandfather returned from WW1 and WW2, respectively, they entered a job market that was saturated with fellow veterans who understood them and the value they bring to our communities – as did our elected representatives.

A congressional study in the late '80s looked at the return on investment on veterans programs (e.g., the GI Bill). It found that, for every dollar spent on veterans benefits, nearly \$7 came back to the community through some form of economic output. Having worked with numerous veterans groups since leaving active duty, I can tell you this figure is an understatement.

The truth about our veterans since the end of the draft in the '70s has become increasingly diverse, as individuals saw (and continue to see) the military as a way to

achieve economic mobility. They are smart, driven, resilient and entrepreneurial – words that most Americans (like my seatmate) don't always associate with a veteran. After WW2, nearly 50% of veterans owned their own business, like my great-grandfather; and most veterans outperform their non-military peers in the long run.

There is still work to do. While many veterans thrive in their post-service years, others struggle. Veterans continue to be over-represented in the homeless population, court system, substance misuse disorders, and suicide deaths. These are hard problems, but they are solvable ones.

For the past 20 years, Americans have claimed we support our troops, but how we choose to treat our veterans over the next few years will be the measure of whether we meant it or not. As a nation, we put an impossible burden on a small group of men and women who volunteered to serve – fully knowing the hazards of their chosen profession. If we are truly grateful for their service, we will invest in those individuals who have invested so much in our freedoms. Each generation of veterans have shown, time and time again, that when they thrive, our communities, and our nation, thrives as well.

About Wreaths Across America

Wreaths Across America is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded to continue and expand the annual wreath-laying ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery begun by Maine businessman Morrill Worcester in 1992. The organization's mission – Remember, Honor, Teach – is carried out in part each year by coordinating wreath-laying ceremonies in December at Arlington, as well as thousands of veterans' cemeteries and other locations in all 50 states and beyond.

Can You Help?

Relative launches GoFundMe to assist Grand Island family

On Wednesday, Nov. 3, the Masucci family of 1945 Bruce Lane on Grand Island sustained a devastating fire to their residence. Members of the Grand Island Fire Co extinguished the fire, which was centered in the garage of the residence. However, it also resulted in significant damage to the structure and the loss of two pets.

As related by spokesman Kelsi Gantt, northeast regional manager of GoFundMe.com, relative Jessica Ramani launched a GoFundMe page soon after to assist her aunt and uncle.

"My name is Jessica and I'm fundraising for my family who was devastated this morning by a fire. I recently moved out of state and cannot be there to help in person, but this is the least I can do.

"My aunt and uncle are two of the most hard-working, dedicated people I know, and they worked so hard to have such a nice home. They have two handsome young sons and had three gorgeous dogs. Due to the fire, they lost two of the three dogs, and if any of you can imagine, it's just about the same as losing a human loved one.

"They have no idea I set this up, and would never ask for this. But please help me support them!"

At this writing, a GoFundMe account with a goal of \$10,000 has been established to assist the Masucci family. Thus far, \$7,455 has been raised. To assist the family and contribute, visit <https://gf.me/v/c/vv6/help-the-masuccis>.

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