

The Quiet Dignity of Military Service

Charles D. Stimson

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The U.S. military is the finest military in the world and is critical to the strength of our country and the freedoms we cherish.

On Veterans Day we should pause to think deeply about the importance of service, integrity, humility, and sacrifice.

We must thank veterans for their gift of service, noting veterans are also grateful for the opportunity to serve the country they love.

Thank you to Professor Robert Paquete and the Alexander Hamilton Institute for the honor of giving the General Josiah Bunting Annual Veterans Day Lecture. I'd like to share my thoughts on the quiet dignity of military service, why it is still held in high esteem, and how, on this Veterans Day, we should pause to think deeply about service, integrity, humility, and sacrifice to one's country.

The History of Veterans Day

Before there was a Veterans Day in our country, we celebrated the anniversary of the ending of World War I on November 11, 1918. It was called Armistice Day. Then, on October 12, 1954, former five-star Army General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was then President, issued a proclamation declaring that the act approved by Congress on June 1, 1954, which expanded the

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significance of November 11 and declared it a legal holiday that observed Armistice Day, was to be forever known as Veterans Day. In that proclamation, President Eisenhower called on citizens to give “tribute to those who have thus added strength to the Nation and in renewed dedication to their work, building peace with honor among all nations.”

Think about that language for a moment. Give “tribute to those who have thus added strength to the Nation.” This was the same Eisenhower, who, 10 years before, on June 1, 1944, as the Supreme Allied Commander, gave the go-ahead for Operation Overlord—D-Day—the largest amphibious attack in history. Eisenhower’s Order of the Day that pivotal day was “Good luck! And let us all beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking.”

The outcome of D-Day was by no means assured. But it was noble. Over 2,500 Americans died that day on the beaches of Normandy. We know the names: Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno, Sword—and the headland between Utah and Omaha, Pointe du Hoc. Over 4,400 men, Americans and allies combined, died that day. But Eisenhower, along with [former President] Franklin Delano Roosevelt and [U.K. Prime Minister] Winston Churchill, knew that to win the war and defeat Hitler, they must liberate German-occupied France. Thousands more men died between that day and Victory in Europe Day (VE Day) 11 months later on May 8, 1945.

But 10 years later, when the Supreme Allied Commander was the President of these United States, he called on us to give tribute to those veterans who gave strength to this nation. Eisenhower’s choice of words—“gave strength to this nation”—remains as true today as it was at the beginning of our Republic. From the colonists, who fought against a tyrant King of England to give strength to the concept of a new nation (radical at the time), a country with laws of the people, by the people, and for the people, to the men and women who are deployed in more than 150 countries to this day; each, in his own way, gives strength to our country.

Our experiences in uniform are not, however, unique to Americans. Veterans, who fought and died for their country, did so—with some notable exceptions—to strengthen their country. I want to share two such stories with you.

VE Day Memorial in London

May 8, 1995, was the 50th Anniversary of VE Day, and I was a young Navy Lieutenant stationed at the U.S. Naval Headquarters in London, England. The wardroom—U.S. Navy officers—were invited to attend the formal

ceremony and military flyover in Hyde Park. It was a warm, sunny day, not a cloud in the sky.

I got up early, and made my way to the Royal Enclosure, as U.S. Navy officers were invited to be near the stage. As I was waiting for the ceremonies to begin, hundreds of World War II vets, all British men, walked slowly towards the Royal Enclosure. Each wore grey slacks, a white dress shirt with rep tie, [and] blue blazers with campaign medals on their lapels. They were the same age as my father, who also fought in the war as an enlisted man in the U.S. Navy. When the ceremonies began, I was standing shoulder-to-shoulder with these vets.

The main ceremony was taking place at Buckingham Palace. There, throngs of spectators listened to 1940s-era songs sung live, accompanied by a military band. The Palace forecourt was transformed into an open-air stage. The speeches, music, and festivities were played on large screens two miles away in Hyde Park, where I, along with about 1 million other people, gathered to celebrate.

Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth, and the Queen Mother, who was 94 years old, stood on the very same balcony at Buckingham Palace where the Queen Mother stood 50 years before when VE day was celebrated. Dressed in a pale, lovely yellow dress, the Queen Mum, beloved by all in the crowd, spoke:

This day will bring back many memories, to many people, and I do hope, that all those who go to those many ceremonies, will remember, with pride and gratitude, those men and women, armed and unarmed, whose courage really helped bring us to victory. God bless them all.

World War II-era planes did a fly-by (or “fly-past” as the Brits call it) over Buckingham Palace and Hyde Park and the million-plus spectators: a Swordfish, a Harvard, the Firefly, a Bristol Blenheim, a Catalina, the DC-3, a Lancaster, the B-17 (the Flying Fortress), the Mosquito, the Hurricane, a Meteor, and finally nine Red Arrows, in formation, catching the sunlight and streaming red, white, and blue smoke.

Later that evening, at exactly 8:38p.m.—the time the war ended in Europe—the entire nation held two minutes of silence. I stood there in Hyde Park in the Royal Enclosure, shoulder-to-shoulder with hundreds of men who fought in the war. It was dead quiet. The sun was still up but cast shadows across the vast green park; cars and buses stopped; the noise of the city genuflected to the moment. We bowed our heads.

As first, I did not know what it was. I felt it as much as I heard it. It was soft, muzzled. I felt my shoulders being moved—up, down, up, down. And

then I realized what it was. Men, warriors, stoically crying, softly, remembering, alone yet together. The men that liberated the free world, whom I had the privilege of standing next to, had been overcome by the emotions of the day and were remembering. But in their very British way, they grieved in silence, humble—like so many of my father’s generation.

When General Josiah Bunting gave the first of these inaugural addresses, now named after him, he spoke of humility. He lamented the lack of modesty in modern society, saying, “a quality of character that is almost nonexistent today—modesty.” He said that modesty is the ability to do what is necessary without need for recompense, that your conscience should be your guiding force.

It may seem odd to say, but one of the qualities of leadership I have admired the most in military men and women, officers and enlisted, is a quiet sense of modesty. Perhaps it is because in a meritocracy like the military we know that many have gone before us and given the last full measure, and that we hope, quietly, in our own minds, that we, too, would have the courage to do the right thing if and when called into battle. Knowing that you may die for your country, and that millions of other patriots before you have done so, has a way of molding your character.

As I stood there among those men, who served in and survived World War II, I couldn’t help but think of how my father’s service in the Pacific in WWII had shaped his character also. He rarely spoke of his own service. One of his ships was kamikazed and almost sunk. He survived, only to be tasked with removing the bloated remains of fellow sailors and Marines from the hold of the ship.

Instead, my dad, like those men standing next to me, I surmised, thought of his shipmates—brothers in arms—who died during or after the war. Lives lived to the fullest; they made their country stronger. It was a day I will never forget, and the highlight of my 27 years of service.

It was more meaningful than my two tours as a Commanding Officer, my deployments to Africa, serving with the SEALs as their JAG [Judge Advocate General], being stationed in Europe during the war in the Balkans, or anything I have done in my four tours on active duty or my 27 years in uniform.

We are a country of over 328 million people. Yet today, less than one-half of 1 percent of the population currently serves, representing 1.3 million active-duty personnel and about 600,000 reservists. But you’re more likely to know or have met a police officer, firefighter, doctor, teacher, or nurse. There are over 3.7 million teachers in this country, about 700,000 police officers, 1.1 million firefighters, 1 million doctors, and 3.8 million nurses. Each is a noble and important profession.

But there is something unique and different about military service that most in our country still admire, emulate, and revere. Vets have certain skills, experiences, leadership qualities, and a sense of honor and duty that is not replicated in any other profession. At a time when fewer and fewer young people are even physically able to qualify for military service and less than one-half of 1 percent even serve, we still send vets to Congress in large percentages. In this last Congress, almost 20 percent of the United States Senate are veterans; 77 of the 435 Members of the House of Representatives are vets (17 percent). Forty-eight Members of Congress served in the military after 2000. Seven Senators received the Congressional Medal of Honor, including Bob Kerrey from Nebraska and Daniel Inouye from Hawaii. Each man and woman gave strength to our nation.

Teaching History

In the summer of 2019, I took my family, including my four kids, all of whom we adopted from Russia, to France. We wanted, like so many parents, to bring their history education to life through travel. It is one thing to study D-Day, the French Revolution, and Louis the XIV; to read *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*; to peer into the eyes of the Mona Lisa, stare at Vincent Van Gogh's self-portrait, or marvel at Monet's water lilies; or to look at pictures of the Eiffel Tower, Chartres Cathedral, the Sistine Chapel, or Les Invalids: It is another thing to be there, to see it yourself, to smell the salt water of the raging Atlantic and peer over the cliffs at Pont du Hoc. And so we went.

To make the most of our time at the Normandy beaches, I hired the best private guide I could find to take us on a day-long tour of the beaches, from dawn to past dusk. Having been there with my parents in the 1970s and 1980s, by myself in the 1980s, and with my wife in the 1990s when we were stationed in London, I thought I knew those beaches, the stories, the sacrifices. I was wrong.

Arnauld La Velaine de Maubeuge—Igor for short—was our guide. A former Sergeant and scout group leader in the Infantry of Marine Troops—a part of the French Army—Igor holds a master's degree in languages, literature, and history of foreign civilizations and a degree in medieval civilizations and history of religions; he speaks six languages: French, English, German, Italian, Arabic, and Latin-Greek.

He started our tour in, of all places, La Cambe. I had never heard of it. It is close to Omaha, 25 kilometers from Bayeux. In all, 21,200 men and boys are buried there, under dark granite crosses and small plaques on the ground. In the middle of the huge graveyard, pushing 20 meters into the sky, is a grass mound with a tall black cross on top.

When I asked Igor what La Cambe was and why we started the tour here, he said, “They fought and died for their country too. We tend to forget that.” After a pause, he pointed to several gravestones and said, “The youngest boy was 14 years old.”

It was a German military war cemetery. Over 20,000 German men and boys, many of whom were not loyal to Hitler or devoted Nazis, did their duty and gave the last full measure. It was a fitting start to an emotional day, which ended at the American Cemetery at dusk, with taps and the lowering of the American flag amidst the perfect rows of pristine white crosses.

A Tradition of Service

It may seem odd to you, but on Veterans Day, when we think about the dignity of military service and thank vets for their service, many of us thank you—the American people—for supporting our service. Many of today’s veterans are the sons and daughters of vets. It is a family tradition. My family is not unique in this regard.

My dad went into the Navy at 17 years of age during WWII and served in the Pacific. He served like his dad, who was a Navy pilot, because it was the right thing to do. He died, at the age of 80, in 2004. Before he died, I gave him a copy of Tom Brokaw’s book, *The Greatest Generation*. When I asked him what he thought of the book, he said, “I don’t agree with the title.” Puzzled, I asked why. Because, he said, “Every generation of Americans is the greatest. We were just doing our duty.”

After my dad passed away, I found an old trunk in my parents’ attic. Inside, I found dozens of letters to and from my dad and his mother written during WWII. He kept them all. They are beautiful letters: Some are about the day-to-day life aboard ship, others about the food—always the food—and others much more personal.

You veterans know these letters: a baby’s first step, first words, an uncle who passed away, the dog had puppies, your daughter cries herself to sleep at night because she misses you. It is you, our family members and loved ones—and sometimes pure strangers—who reach out and tell us how much you miss us, support us, love us. For your letters, care packages, e-mails, Skypes, voicemail messages, texts, and personal “thank yous,” we are eternally grateful.

“Do Your Duty”

When evil attacked us on 9/11, my wife Laura and I realized that I would be recalled to active duty. I was a reservist. Her dad had been in the Navy. We knew it would be a long war.

I got the call at 7 a.m. I was being deployed. Laura was in California on a business trip. I called her and woke her up; it was only 4 a.m. there. After I told her the news, and we discussed it a bit, she ended the call saying, “Do your duty.” Her response was no different than the responses of other spouses across this great country since the very beginning when duty has called. To you, our family members, especially our spouses: Thank you for giving us the moral support to do our duty.

Most of those who serve do so for love of country. We are not heroes, and we do not like it when people call us, or others who served, heroes. Because there are real heroes, and we are reminded of them as we serve.

Take Ross McGinnis, for example. A typical young man, Ross McGinnis grew up in the small town of Knox, Pennsylvania. He lived there with his two older sisters, Katie and Beckie, and his parents. He worked at the local McDonald’s and liked music and cars more than school. But, with his nation at war, unlike most of his peers, he joined the Army.

On December 4, 2006, 19-year-old Private First Class Ross McGinnis was manning a .50 caliber machine gun atop a Humvee in Baghdad when a terrorist threw a grenade through the gunner’s hatch. He reacted immediately, shouted a warning to his four crew members, then dropped down into the Humvee and covered the grenade with his body. He was killed instantly.

In 2008, his parents received his Medal of Honor at the White House. The next day, at the Pentagon, there was a ceremony in his honor. The four soldiers he saved were in attendance. They spoke of Ross’s sacrifice and talked about the debt everyone owed to him.

When Ross’s dad got up to speak, he looked at the four soldiers and told them, “You can’t be expected to live the rest of your lives living up to something or paying back something. It can’t be carried as a debt. A debt is something you can repay. A gift is something for you to enjoy. So live your lives, enjoy your lives, because it was a gift.” Ross McGinnis’s actions represent the highest gift of military service. His service made our country stronger.

After I was commissioned as an officer in the Navy in 1992, I was assigned to Naval Station San Diego. I drove across the country with my dad, who served, as I mentioned, as a Navy Signalman in the Pacific, mostly with the Marines on troop transport ships. When the war ended, he was discharged from the Navy in San Diego, and took the train home to Seattle from there. His last barracks was on 32nd Street Naval Station in San Diego.

When my dad and I got to 32nd Street, Naval Station, San Diego, Dad wanted to see if his old barracks were still there on 32nd Street Naval Station. Being the all-knowing Lieutenant Junior Grade, I assured my dad—a mere enlisted man whom I now outranked— that the building was certainly not there: It was 1993.

You know what happened. My dad was right. The building was still there. It was not a barracks anymore; it had been converted to a modern building and was now the Navy courthouse where I would try cases. Every time I strode into that courthouse, I thought of 2nd Class Signalman Doug Stimson serving his country in a time of war. It felt right.

Some of you may have a family tradition of serving. You have those black-and-white photos proudly displayed on the walls of your home. Your service was inspired by their service; our country is enriched and strengthened by both.

Today, when we travel in uniform, you thank us for our service. Many of us are speechless, as we know in our heart that it is we who are the lucky ones. We could not think of our lives without our service because it is our service that brings the most meaning to and defines our lives.

But it is not so long ago that things were very different. During Vietnam, some of our fellow Americans mistreated and disrespected the men and women who served in the armed forces, merely because the war itself was unpopular. I hope we never repeat that again in our country's history.

It is through our service to this great country that we have come to love her more deeply. We know every word of the Star-Spangled Banner and the Pledge of Allegiance, and we sing or say them with pride. And unlike others who fight for a king, dictator, or tyrant, we take an oath not to or for a person but to support and defend the Constitution of the United States of America.

A Creedal Nation

Our country is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed, set forth most clearly in the Declaration of Independence, the greatest and most universal statement of self-government ever to exist. Our Constitution and the Bill of Rights promulgate those guiding principles—those First Principles—that live in the DNA of every member of the U.S. armed forces: that all men were created equal, that we are endowed with inalienable rights, from God, and chief among them are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Our all-volunteer force is truly remarkable in the history of the world. It is *the* finest global force for good the world has ever seen. We liberated millions in Western Europe from the evils of Nazism. It was because of our military resolve and might that we won the Cold War, emancipating hundreds of millions from the oppression of communism. And since 9/11, we have freed millions of Muslims from the tyranny and brutality of al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and Saddam Hussein.

And when there is an earthquake, or tsunami, or major disaster somewhere in the world, it is our military that is the global first responder. Unlike most others who have gone to war, when we go to war, we do not seek to take more land, exploit resources, impose a religion upon other peoples, or build an empire. We go in the name of liberty and freedom, universal principles shared by mankind.

President Ronald Reagan said, “Our founding documents proclaim to the world that freedom is not the sole prerogative of a chosen few. It is the universal right of all God’s children.” Once a year, as a country, we gather together on Veterans Day to say thanks for the gift of service, for sacrifices, for serving a cause greater than yourselves, for protecting us, for standing watch, and for putting yourselves in harm’s way. We thrive as a nation and benefit as individuals because of the gift of service.

A Day of Thanks

For those of us who have worn the uniform, every day is a day of thanks. We are thankful for the privilege of serving in the United States Armed Forces; we consider ourselves blessed to be Americans. We love America and what she stands for and recognize that this is an exceptional nation. We know that we serve because we believe, as our Fathers did, in America’s divine providence and the justice of her cause. The valiant sacrifices of our brothers and sisters in wars past, tragic as they were, were worth it, because they believed what we believe: that without a strong and prosperous America, the world would be a more dangerous place, and America would be less free. And so we serve.

In a higher sense then, Veterans Day is our chance to say thank you to the American people. Thank you for supporting us. For standing behind us. For believing in us, for giving us the resolve and strength to carry out our mission. Your support and gratitude is felt by every service member. Thank you for letting us serve such a noble country.

William Shakespeare captured the human condition better than anyone else. One of his finest plays is Henry V, in which King Henry, before the Battle of Agincourt, rallies his troops with his St. Crispin’s Day Speech. His language captures the great bond—the dignity of military service—of which I speak. With apologies to the bard for some small modifications, let me conclude:

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me

Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This Veterans Day shall gentle his condition;
And gentlemen in America now a-bed
Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us to preserve this blessed land America.

To the men and women of our armed forces, thank you for your gift of service. God bless you, and God bless America! Happy Veterans Day.

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