

Veterans Day & Military Service

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This Thursday, November 11, is Veterans Day. A federal holiday in the United States, it is also celebrated as Armistice Day or Remembrance Day in other parts of the world. Veterans Day falls on the anniversary of the signing of the Armistice that ended World War I. Major hostilities of World War I were formally ended at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918 with the German signing of the Armistice.

Veterans Day is not just another day off work. It is a day to reflect on the sacrifice of America's warriors and a time to remember that American freedoms come at a high cost. As I was thinking about Veterans Day, I thought about my own service and realized that you can leave the military but the military never leaves you.

Occasionally, I venture onto a military base in the United States where I am greeted by a security guard who looks carefully at my identification card, hands it back saying, "Have a good day, Sergeant Major." It feels good to be called by my previous rank, but strange to be in civilian clothes, walking among the men and women going about their duties as I once did, years ago.

The military, for all its flaws, is a comfort zone for anyone who has ever worn the uniform. It is place where you know the rules and know they are enforced. The military is a place where everybody is busy but not too busy to take care of business. Because there exists behind the gates of every military facility an institutional understanding of respect, order, uniformity, accountability and dedication that becomes part of your marrow and never leaves you.

I miss all those little things you take for granted when you are in the ranks, like the sound of turbine engines powering the helicopters on night missions and standing in a perfectly straight line that looks like a mirror as it stretches to the endless horizon. I miss the sight of troops marching in the early morning mist, the sound of boot heels thumping in unison on the sidewalks, the bark of sergeants, and the singsong answers from the squads as they pass by in review.

I even miss the hurry-up-and-wait mentality that enlisted men and women gripe about constantly, a masterful invention that bonds people more than they will ever know or admit. I miss people taking off their hats when they enter a building, speaking directly and clearly to others and never showing disrespect for rank, race, religion, or gender. I don't know anyone who has served who regrets it, and doesn't feel a sense of pride when they pass through those gates and re-enter the world they left behind with their youth.

To romanticize military service, however, is to remove it from its reality, because it is very serious business, especially in times of war when far too many of our comrades gave the ultimate sacrifice. Veterans Day is for reflection of ones own service and for honoring those who served.