

Veterans called to utilize military values at home

Written by Steve Zerr ,Veterans service officer

Thursday, 29 May 2014 13:45 - Last Updated Thursday, 29 May 2014 14:02



“In every generation, there are men and women who stand apart. They put on the uniform and put their lives on the line so the rest of us might live in a safer, freer, more just world. They defend us in times of peace, times of war, and times of crisis, both natural and man-made.”

I'd like to take credit for those words because they speak to the very heart of what any veteran has been through for his or her country. The idea of putting “their lives on the line,” to me not only speaks to the dangers they face but placing the needs of the country ahead of their own.

No, I didn't come up with those words. They came from President Barack Obama, our president at the opening of his Armed Forces Day proclamation.

But when I read these words, you have to look past our differences. He, as much as any president, needs to be thankful for our military and what every service member has pledged since the beginning of our great country—“...To support and defend the Constitution.”

“I, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to the Uniform Code of Military Justice, So help me God.”

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Many of us veterans when we first made this pledge probably didn't have the time to think about what we were doing, much less the words and their meaning. We were in a room with a bunch of other enlistees or draftees, who we barely knew if at all, wondering what kind of horrors were to meet us around the next corner.

For myself, the navy was a job and the oath was just words along the way to my first real pay check. I was about to hop on my first commercial jet and fly to a city I had never been to. The oath was just part of it, another hoop to jump through.

It wasn't until I reenlisted that the words sunk in. I remember standing on the deck of the USS West Virginia while in the dry dock at Electric Boat in Groton, CT. I wasn't too worried about all the hoses and electrical cables that are common in a shipyard ruining my handshake photo. All I wanted was to make sure the biggest reason I was reenlisting was in the background—The USS Nebraska.

Yes, the ship that bears the name of our great state was made of steel and will never make a port call to Omaha, much less Dawson County. But she was something I could relate to as a 20-year-old. It was a couple of years later that I was able to serve onboard "Big Red," something I still look back on fondly.



Not every service member gets to have that connection with home. The barren landscapes of Iraq and Afghanistan may sometimes resemble Nebraska in the middle of a drought, but last time I checked, the indigenous majority of the population here, namely the cows, didn't have weapons.

I can't imagine what it would be like to actually have to battle for your life every day. The combat veterans, from whatever crisis, have my utmost respect. They have lived on what we call the "pointy end of the spear." The oath they swore to sometimes was the difference between living and dying.

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As members of the military, we are taught to follow orders. At basic training, the drill instructors do their best to break each and every one of us down just so they can build us back up in a military manner.

Most veterans look back on their days of basic training as difficult, but remember the days as when they became who they are as adults. In a strange place with strange people, training to do something they will remember for years to come.

I like to compare the military to being part of a sport team. There's a common goal, or mission. There's the training to accomplish that goal or mission. And the best part, the awards and honors afterward.

For the athletes, the accolades occur pretty quick, like winning medals or championships with trophies in a case that you'll get to see years down the road.

The accolades aren't nearly as visible for veterans, if they come at all. We all remember, or at least have heard about how this country "welcomed" back the returning warriors from Southeast Asia back in the '60s and '70s. Luckily, America learned from that mistake and opened up its arms for those returning from the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The hard part, or maybe it was just me, was how did I become a veteran. From the time I put on a military uniform, I was ordered, told or taught exactly what I was supposed to do. There were procedures to follow, lessons learned from precious incidents and just common sense military standards to adhere to.

One day I was a sailor, the next...a civilian. Much like Forrest Gump did when his tour was up, I headed back home...as fast as I could. Sure I had "recommendations" from the military for what to do when I got out...things I should do. But it was a way different life.

The term "veteran" didn't seem to fit me. It was as foreign to me as "public speaker" was to me

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a few weeks ago.

Yep, I was a wartime veteran, but what did that mean? I watched as much of the first Gulf War on CNN from the safety of my barracks room in Georgia, just so I felt involved. I hadn't even seen my ship at that point of my career. But when I was tired, I could just turn the television off and go to bed, knowing that I was safe and sound.

Did I feel guilty? You bet!



Maybe that's the reason why I have so much respect for the combat veterans, they were there...they made a much deeper sacrifice than I did.

What I've learned over the past seven weeks of being this county's veterans service officer is that there is a generation of veterans out there just like me—I did my hitch, I'm out and I don't want any part of government services or the military.

That's my new mission—to bring those "lost" veterans back into the fold. One of my goals is to get them involved in their communities, help out other veterans and use what they learned in the military. Values like honor, courage and commitment could be a benefit to our neighbors.

Why not help out as part of a volunteer organization or seek a position on a committee, like a school board or city council? Why not become a mentor or an advocate for troubled youth?

My feeling is that if we, veterans and civilians included, decide not to help out then the sacrifices of the veterans before us is diminished. Yes, the veterans sacrificed plenty when they were in uniform, and they answered the call. But to allow the lessons we've learned to go unused or unshared is a bigger tragedy.

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