

Honoring our Veterans

Some years ago, I read the story of Ted Pace.

Ted is from Pittsburgh, and served his country during World War II. At the time (2010) he was in his 80s, and he saw a problem. With World War II veterans were dying in increasing numbers, and he felt more needed to be done during their funerals to recognize their military service.

Though Congress mandated in 1999 that two active duty servicemen be available to participate in veterans' funerals, Mr. Pace wanted to do more. He established a full-fledged Honor Guard, recruiting from his post, as well as VFW Post 6664 a few miles away. Soon, 22 fellows had signed on, veterans who served in World War II, Korea and Vietnam, veterans eager to serve again.

This band of brothers would participate in more than 270 funerals a year sometimes five days a week, sometimes twice daily. They've performed services in the mud in pouring rain. They've performed during blizzards and subzero temperatures.

Ask any why they do it and you get the same reply: It is their great honor to serve. Their service is all the more remarkable in that most of these men are retirees, often in their 70s and even 80s.

Often recited by a chaplain at the tomb of a soldier is the soldier's prayer. It reads: *"It is the soldier who has given us all our freedoms. It's the soldier, not the reporter, who has given us freedom of the press. It's the soldier, not the poet, who has given us freedom of speech. It's the soldier, not the campus organizer, who has given us the freedom to object. It's the soldier, not the lawyer, who has given us the right to a fair trial. It's the soldier who salutes the flag, who serves under that flag and whose coffin is draped under that beautiful flag, who has given us the freedom to comfortably sit in our living rooms each evening with our loved ones."* And these are all gifts given by soldiers to people who have no idea who most of them are. Additionally, three shots are typically fired in the air by the honor guard, symbolizing duty, honor and love of country.

These men served their country, and the wars they fought have long since ended. But yet, to preserve freedom, women and men continue to serve. Take Major Joseph Amon, a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom. A reservist who has served since 1983, he wrote in an e-mail to his family: *"Having been part of the Army since March of 1983, I am relieved to finally have the opportunity to put 23 years of training to constructive use. I am not worried or scared about going, and those of you who know me well understand that I consider patriotism a verb-not a noun. While I have my reservations about leaving my family, I am confident the benefit of contributing far outweighs the sacrifice of being away from my family for the brief period. I support this mission, our president and more importantly freedom."* Countless people share stories like that, and numerous people pay for those beliefs with their lives. On top of this are the scores of people who wage the battle of the home front, being both a dad and a mom all the while waiting anxiously for loved ones to return. The love that these people show for their country and for their family is incredible, and from our soldiers we have so much to learn.

This week, as we honor Veteran's Day this upcoming Friday, I think it's worth asking ourselves, how often do we say thanks, not only to God but to those who help make it so we can worship our God freely? Or do we just take our freedom for granted?

We are so fortunate to live in a country founded upon freedom. But it's so easy to take what we are given for granted. We must never forget that evil is a real presence in the world, something we've certainly seen in Gaza in recent weeks, and since our country's inception, people have wanted to see our country perish. Others have worked hard to crush freedom, which is why people in the world are still persecuted for their faith. But right now at this very moment are men and women who, by their own choice, decided to go off to far away lands to serve our country to preserve freedom. These people don't seek glory for themselves. Rather, they simply serve and do their job because they have a love for our nation and for what America stands for.

And so, a couple of challenges for us as we think of our Veterans' service.

The first is to live out the freedoms our military protects. We might not love all our government does, but my hope is we do love our country by praying for our soldiers, by voting and exercising our freedoms of speech. It's so easy to fall for one-liners such as "one person can't make a difference" or "things will never change." The early Christians did not fall for that, and instead they lived out the faith in the face of great struggle. Soldiers do not fall for that either – which is why throughout our country's history, so many people have served. You and I can do so much, and we need to live out our faith both here in the Church and in our civic lives.

And secondly, I'd invite you to show your appreciation for what our veterans have done. Pray for our servicemen and women. Talk to them; write them a letter; donate to a support organization for veterans. Several parishioners are active in the "Beyond the Yellow Ribbon" campaign which supports military members and vets. Most of the heroes of our military will never be read about in the papers, but because of them, we have freedom.

Edmund Burke, the Irish politician, famously said: "All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing." Thank God for the men and women who do something to stand up to evil, to fight for truths that matter, and for our great country. May God bless them and keep them in His loving embrace, and may we never forget the great sacrifice all those who serve and have served make.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Paul