



Student Perspective/Opinion Veteran's Day Reflections as a Service Member and Medical Student

by Corey McKenzie - MCW-Milwaukee medical student and Ensign in the Medical Corps of the United States Navy.

Many emotions and thoughts flood my conscience when I think about Veterans Day. Why? I am a service member; I have many service members (retired and still serving) in my immediate social circle and family. I know veterans who never made it home. I know veterans who made it home, only to meet their maker while fighting the continued conflict in their mind.

The best way for me to describe all of my emotions and thoughts surrounding Veteran's Day is to tell you about my in-laws - two people that gave more for this country than most can fathom, but who would never take the limelight or sing their own praises. As you will find, most veterans are humble about their service. Almost all of them will tell you, "I miss it." My father-in-law is certainly of this opinion.

Imagine a trajectory where all who join - no matter their ethnicity, culture, economic background, gender, history - are melded together, trained on a level field, and prepared for a future determined by one metric - and one metric only - *Service*. That's the "military way." If you sign the dotted line, you're welcomed into a group that will forever have your back and forever demand the most of your character. My father-in-law joined this group and served for twenty-one years. He retired at the second highest rank of an enlisted sailor. For twenty-one years, he sacrificed his freedoms for ours.

My mother-in-law also sacrificed. During deployments, imagine going through birthdays, graduations, holidays, weddings, funerals, and every life event by

yourself with six kids and on a tiny budget. Most enlisted sailors live near the poverty line and are eligible for WIC and food stamps. When sailors deploy, the budget is cut in two, financial straps pull more tightly, and both adults must have enough money to live on.

Very few people understand this true sacrifice. Here's the most fantastic part: Veterans don't need you to. Their service is their burden to bear alone and they never ask other people to share. Heroes walk amongst us.

Veteran's Day fills me with pride and gratitude. As Americans, we are so lucky. We rarely must contemplate our freedoms. But, when we do, and if there are grounds to get better, we have the freedom to voice our concerns. Daily, the quality of life of every American is challenged. Our society questions the fairness of everything. We live in a country where social justice movements are possible. This is a freedom made possible by those who protect our rights. Not everyone agrees with one another, but we live in a country where we get to have the conversation. Our military members make these conversations and social changes possible.

To use a metaphor, if the USA is a house and the people who live in it need to either remodel or tear it down to build something better, our service members keep the foundation strong and ready for whatever is next. This is a day where we tip our hats to these silent heroes and preservers of our freedoms.

Veteran's Day also fills me with disdain and frustration. Our veterans are largely forgotten and not treated with the gratitude they deserve. They signed the dotted line and risked everything. Their healthcare, both mental and physical, is not where it should be after they retire. Twenty-two veterans a day succumb to suicide. I joined the military to pay for medical school, but my eyes have been opened to the health care gaps our military, and especially veterans, receive. I plan to use my education to change this. I can think of no population I would rather serve than those that served so selflessly. Honor, courage, and commitment are military ideals, but don't they also apply to medicine, as well?

Interestingly, there are many parallels between military service and medical service. We both give up large parts of our lives in the service of others. We are constantly volunteering to care for others' needs before our own. Our society, by in large, is more stable and free because of our service. We each have alarming suicide rates, and we struggle – *Boy, oh boy! Do we struggle!* – to face that reality. Neither group requires praise. Each strives to hone its craft and make processes better. Probably most important, both are vital threads in the fabric of society. Even if the idea of military service is completely foreign to you as a medical professional, I hope you can see how similar and relatable your own life can be to military service. My hope is that someone reading this might change the way they think about our veterans and their sacrifice.

This Veteran's Day, I hope each of us takes a moment to feel the weight of the sacrifice our veterans gave. If you know a veteran, reach out to them. While they will not expect praise, their day may be just a bit brighter by a simple, "Thanks." Don't worry about what you say; if it comes from the heart, it will be well received. Most are warriors on the outside and big teddy bears on the inside. Never forget, they serve for you! I leave you with the first article of the Code of Conduct. Hooyah!

I am an American, fighting in the forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense.

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The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the US Navy, the Department of Defense, or the US Government.

If you or someone you know is struggling with thoughts of suicide, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 or reach the Crisis Text Line by texting HOME to 741741.