



Guest Director's Column - Veterans Day 2021

What Does it Mean to Be a Veteran

By Michael McBride, MD, MS
CDR US Navy Reserves
LTC US Army Reserves

I should have known.

I should have known what it means to be a Veteran.

I am the son of a Vietnam Era Veteran.

We spent two years on a naval base in California during the height of the Vietnam War.

My parents' best friend, Art Tyschkeiwicz, was shot down over Vietnam.

Every night we knelt by our beds and prayed, "Help Uncle Art come home safely."

They found his remains and he was buried at sea. My mom flew out to the USS Enterprise to escort Art's widow. I never heard her talk about it.

I should have known what it means to be a Veteran.

I grew up in a country striving to be a more perfect union.

Our town was patriotic. We celebrated Flag Day, the 4th of July, I wished people a "Happy Memorial Day."

It was a bastion of freedom, freedoms I never fully understood or appreciated.

Then two towers crumbled while people faced a choice of jumping to their deaths or dying in the fire and rubble.

People chose to charge a cockpit knowing this was their last desperate act for survival.

What does it mean to be a Veteran?

First you talk to a military recruiter. I was warned if their lips move, they are lying.

Then the hurry up and wait of examination, scrutiny, background checks, and lots and lots of paperwork.

At age 40 I joined the army and duckwalked in my underwear with 17-year-olds.

At 50 I joined the navy and duckwalked in my underwear with 17-year-olds.

I could duckwalk like Chuck Berry singing Johnny B. Goode.

You raise your right hand and take an oath to protect and defend the constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic. I took that oath three times, the last was in Wood National Veterans Cemetery.

You learn to follow orders because the military protects democracy but does not practice it.

To be yelled at for not tucking in your bootlaces, because every rule is based on a story of someone dying.

To forfeit your independence, privacy, safety and put your life in the hands of total strangers.

To immediately make lifelong friends with people from all across the human spectrum, and not care about their color, creed, or caste. Everyone is green.

To train.

To train as a team toward one goal; complete the mission.

To train how to be lethal in the service of the mission and your comrades.

To train to put on not one but two tourniquets, and do it slowly because slow is smooth and smooth is fast.

To train for trauma and death. What makes the green grass grow? Blood, blood, bright red blood.

What does it mean to be a Veteran?

Sometimes to deploy.

To leave a home and wonder if you will ever see it again.

To write letters of love and apology to a spouse and children, to be read in the event of death.

To prepare physically, emotionally, and spiritually for death, including suicide in the event of potential capture.

I deployed to Landstuhl Army Hospital in Germany where I tried to see every blast injured service member from Iraq and Afghanistan.

To sit with soldiers who told their stories of war and trauma.

Wards filled with teenagers who lost limbs, sometimes multiple limbs.

Stories too painful to think about without weeping.

I had two deployments to Iraq.

I watched hundreds of American soldiers stand in formation at the Al Faw Palace in Baghdad as they took the oath of citizenship. New Americans.

To be in a concrete bunker while the base was attacked by rockets and mortars. Tracers filled the night sky as the base defenses shot down incoming rounds.

I thought of Francis Scott Key who watched the battle of Ft. McHenry and penned the words to the National Anthem. For the first time I thought, "This is what it means to be an American."

I became friends with an Iraqi Army doctor. He asked our help in setting up a medical clinic at Abu Ghraib. I asked him about PTSD and he said there was no PTSD in Iraq because all Iraqis have been traumatized. It was normal.

The navy sent me to Kandahar, Afghanistan to work in the combat trauma hospital.

This was my fifth deployment and I was used to seeing US service members who were young and poor, joining the military as their only opportunity.

I never saw soldiers from my hometown. All those kids went to college. Like mine.

Every Sunday, the base allowed the locals to host a bazaar. I bought a chess set for my son.

The Afghan merchant was also a father and shared his dream of a better world for his son.

One Memorial Day I was on my way home and was asked to stay behind. I later learned they needed space on the cargo plane for flag-draped caskets of fallen warriors, on their way to Dover where grieving families waited.

What does it mean to be a Veteran?

To come home but never come home.

To feel happiness that is always colored with guilt for surviving.

To regret missing moments in my children's lives I can never get back.

To live every day with memories.

To sleep with dreams that try to protect me.

To become emotional when I hear the National Anthem.

To realize Memorial Day is the saddest day of the year.

To do penance by sitting with veterans at the VA, listening to their stories of resilience and recovery.

To listen to veterans describe how much they miss the military and want to return.

To listen to veterans acknowledge it is easier someday to die than to live.

To discover alcohol, cannabis, and opiates numb the pain and emotion, for a moment.

To hear of the death of a veteran through suicide or drug overdose, and grieve like you lost a family member.

To walk through a veterans cemetery knowing each stone holds a sacred story of service, sacrifice, and purpose.

What does it mean to be a Veteran?

Ask a Veteran.

Michael McBride, MD, MS, is a Commander in the US Naval Reserves and an Assistant Clinical Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Medicine at MCW. He practices at the Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center.