

In today's world, every civilian has a duty to support veterans

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BY CARYN HACKER BUECHEL AND TRISTA MEISTER



Jim Redic today, left, and in Vietnam, above. COURTESY PHOTOS

Ninety-eight years ago, President Woodrow Wilson declared Nov. 11 to be the first commemoration of Armistice Day, the temporary cessation of war between the Allied nations and Germany. The momentous step that quieted the battlefields of “the war to end all wars” occurred on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month.

President Wilson proclaimed that the day shall be filled with “... solemn pride in the heroism of those who died in the country’s service and with gratitude for the victory.”

In June 1926, the United States Congress added aspects to this commemorative day by officially recognizing the end of World War I and declaring Nov. 11 as a day to foster friendly relations with all other peoples.

With parades, parlance and pensive prayer, this patriotic tradition has continued. This day, above all others, is set to honor those who chose to spend at least a portion of their lives defending and protecting our amazing nation. “Sometimes it is easy to become complacent and comfortable in our beautiful world,” says Naples resident Brigadier Gen. Edward Dyer. “We forget that we have this world, in part, because our military protects us every day, here, around the globe and now even beyond that.” Gen. Dyer, who has 29 years of active duty experience including combat in Iraq, suggests that a portion of this day should be spent not only celebrating the many freedoms that our service men and women have dedicated their lives to protect, but also considering the cost of this duty to our veterans themselves and their families.



Florida is home to more than 1.5 million veterans, including 5,000 post-9/11 men and women who reside in the five counties of Southwest Florida.

“Veterans who saw active duty often struggle to live with memories that depict the horrendous carnage generally seen only on a battlefield,” Gen. Dyer says. “The eerie sound of automatic weapon-fire in the dark, the sight of friends and fellow soldiers going down, the bodies strewn along the ground and the heroism and self-sacrifice of so many are scenes most veterans will live with forever.”

For most soldiers, feelings of pride and accomplishment are as clear, strong and tangible as the fabric of their uniforms and the

values they represent. For many, however, fibrous recurrent memories of the trauma of war and terrorism are woven into and negatively impact their daily lives. Often suffering from post-traumatic stress, many veterans relive or re-experience their memories during horrific nightmares or through their responses to triggers (noises, smells, sights). A flash of light or a loud and unexpected crackle in the night, the odor of overfilled plumbing or even the aroma of chipped beef on toast have the potential to take a soldier back to the moment of their greatest fears.



DYER

Fifty years after the Vietnam War, this is still the case for Naples resident and former Army First Lieutenant Jim Redic.



Carlos Ruiz in Afghanistan and today, inset.

“I turned 21 in the field,” Lt. Redic recalls. “It’s amazing the things that linger and remind you of that time – like insects, leeches and fire ants. You know gunfire has two sounds to it?” he adds. “Besides the sound of the rifle, every soldier knows you hear a loud

crack as the bullet breaks the sound barrier. You only hear that sound if the bullet has gone past you.

“I still have nightmares of the war and the morgue. I am so grateful to be living in this country.”

Neapolitan Carlos Ruiz was a paratrooper in Afghanistan when he was 18. Now 25, he recalls having panic attacks, difficulty sleeping and feeling hyper-vigilant and suicidal after he returned from his tour of duty. A movie trailer about war triggered flashbacks, hallucinations and violent behavior. He was initially incarcerated and then placed in the Collier County Veterans Treatment Court Program at David Lawrence Center, where he received specialized mental health counseling, case management and mentorship.





Sarah Cox was 21 when she joined the Air Force. She now serves as secretary of the Collier County Veterans Council. HEATHER CORACE / COURTESY PHOTO

“We, veterans, chose to fight for and defend our country because of our love and commitment to the American people.” Mr. Ruiz says. “Even though some of us get lost in the realities of PTSD, our sense of service and duty never goes away.

“Our veterans need our help and support now.”

Scott Burgess, CEO at DLC, knows a veteran’s experiences at war can leave not only physical scars but deep emotional scars as well. “And though not always visible on the surface, these psychological scars are just as, if not more, life-threatening,” he says.

A veteran and family care program called Home Base reports that fewer than 50 percent of post-9/11 veterans seek help for an invisible wound of war. Offering a free warrior health and fitness program in collaboration with Florida Gulf Coast University and the Greater Naples YMCA (and a more intensive clinical program in Boston) Home Base has teamed with the Red Sox Foundation and Massachusetts General Hospital to offer free assistance for veterans and their families.

Sarah Cox was 21 when she joined the Air Force. The former senior airman, who now serves as secretary of the Collier County Veterans Council, spent four years deployed in 16 different countries. Home Base helped her learn how to deal with PTSD triggers.

“Home Base taught me how to recognize when I was being hyper-vigilant unnecessarily, how to refocus and how to avoid the events that could be a trigger for me,” she says.

The influx of television shows and movies that capture historic war memoirs and heroic missions is on the rise. These shows will certainly keep us informed and bring patriotism to the forefront; however, they might also trigger episodes of PTSD in some of our nation’s veterans.

For Ms. Cox, the looped video/audio feed of the recent shooting in Las Vegas did just that, as every veteran who saw combat knows the indistinguishable sound of automatic weapon fire.

“When I heard the video for the first time, I knew immediately that it was automatic fire from an American gun,” Ms. Cox says. “Soldiers are trained to run toward ‘it,’ and that’s what I wanted to do. Yes, it was triggering.

“I immediately wanted to be there to help, (but) it was also anxiety-producing.”

Those in the military solemnly swore to support and protect our country against all enemies and at all costs. Veterans Day gives civilians the opportunity to show respect, appreciation and honor to our soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines and coastguardsmen.

“This Veterans Day we Americans need to do a little bit more,” Gen. Dyer suggests. “We need to understand the struggles military service often brings.

“Be sensitive and aware of what our veterans are experiencing. Sometimes, it’s a price of service.

“Their mission is complete. Ours has just begun.” }

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