



Gary Peterson *Columnist*

VETERANS DAY - WHY THOSE WHO SERVED GET IT

A day of honor:

Veterans cut through the political noise to find holiday's essence

Veterans Day comes to us this year on the wings of a hot wind. The national discourse lacks civility. Peaceful protests turn incendiary. There is the presumption of many to speak on behalf of those we should be honoring. Shall we review? Taking a knee during the national anthem, popularized by dozens of NFL players, has driven a wedge in society. Such disparate souls as President Donald Trump and former baseball broadcaster Vin Scully have decried the gesture as an insult to veterans.

“It’s honoring all who serve. Not everyone served in combat. But everyone who served in the Armed Services has served a vital mission in their own right.”

— *Raymond La Rochelle, Navy pilot and Vietnam veteran*



Vietnam veteran Raymond La Rochelle, who flew 365 missions as a Navy pilot during the Vietnam War, says the Veterans Day holiday gives our nation the chance to honor all who served, whether it was in combat or during a time of peace.



Raymond La Rochelle, USNR, was awarded the Purple Heart and the Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Silver Star in 1968.

COURTESY OF RAYMOND LA ROCHELLE

An unseemly feud erupted over the president’s condolence call to a Gold Star widow in October. The firestorm of rhetoric — focused on the sincerity (or lack of) expressed during the call — almost overshadowed the death of Army Sgt. La David Johnson, killed in an ambush in Niger. “Insulting,” said a congresswoman who heard the call.

Confederate statues and monuments were (and weren’t) removed after a wild and deadly August protest in Charlottesville, Virginia. It felt as if the Civil War was being re-fought with each decision. An activist in St. Louis, referring to a 40ton stone monument to Confederate soldiers located in that city, told U.S. News & World Report “the fact the monument sits in a city with a large African- American population makes the structure even more insulting and outdated.” About 18 percent of our military force is African- American.

Finally, an 18-hour Ken Burns documentary on the Vietnam War plunged veterans of that intensely unpopular conflict back into the worst months of their lives, when wearing a uniform made them a target of ridicule.

So, happy Veterans Day?

Yes, say veterans who seem to have the capacity to see through the noise. Specifically three veterans who attended the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors Veterans Day Ceremony this week.

“It’s honoring all who serve,” said Raymond La Rochelle, a Navy pilot who said he flew 365 combat missions during his year in Vietnam. “Not everyone served in combat. But everyone who served in the Armed Services has served a vital mission in their own right.”

“It’s an opportunity for us to remember there is an element of sacrifice that needs to be recognized,” said Mark Siden, who served in the Army and Air Force from 1993-2015 and deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq. “And so we bookend our year with a Veterans Day for the living and a Memorial Day for those who’ve passed.”

How is it that veterans see the bigger picture that a lot of nonveterans don’t? Perhaps because veterans are taught to respect authority and tend to leave politics to the politicians.

“I don’t feel affected about those (issues) because I know what I sacrificed for the country,” said former naval Senior Chief Petty Officer Guillermo Rocha, who deployed in Afghanistan. “That’s how I look at it. I don’t deal much with politics.”

Siden, a history teacher at De Anza High School in Richmond, sees a contextual tableau.

“I feel that since the flag stands for liberty, equality and justice, when people kneel, it gives the act of kneeling meaning,” he said. “We’ve seen tyranny across the world and it gives us a perspective and more respect when people express their First Amendment rights or any rights guaranteed by the Constitution.”

Another thought: Veterans are familiar with some of these issues. They’re recurring themes. La Rochelle, a past president of the Vietnam Veterans of Diablo Valley, is no fan of the anthem kneel-downs. But he’s seen their like before.

Two months after La Rochelle returned from Vietnam, two San Jose State sprinters, John Carlos and Tommie Smith, participated in a black glove protest during the national anthem at the 1968 Summer Olympics. Twenty-four years after that, the George H.W. Bush-Bill Clinton presidential campaign was enlivened by a spirited debate over flag burning. Siden and Rocha would remember that.

A documentary on Vietnam? Try the real thing.

After La Rochelle returned home from Vietnam, he considered himself fortunate if an insult was the worst he got.

“I definitely saw some antagonism toward the Vietnam War, toward Vietnam veterans, specifically,” he said. “Having a teenage girl screaming, ‘Murderer!’ That stuff happened. And some (veterans) had people actually spit at them. That is not just some fairy tale. It’s true. It happened.”

“We see this every generation,” Siden said. “Every generation needs to struggle with the tension between liberty and equality. I was always trained to be apolitical about that.”

Good advice for a happy Veterans Day.

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COURTESY OF ROY LA ROCHELLE



Some players in the NFL have started taking a knee during the national anthem to protest police treatment of black citizens, a gesture that started with former 49er Colin Kaepernick. Critics claim the protest dishonors veterans.

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