

A Vital Part of the American Saga

Veterans Day Speech by Colonel Dan at Givhans Ferry, 14 November 2010

I have a question I'd like my fellow veterans to think about. Do you look at America today and your service to her in the same way you did as a young, no time in grade GI?

At the time, did you feel you were about to be part of an honored lineage, or embark upon a noble saga and write a chapter of America's venerable military history...or did you feel this was just something new and hopefully exciting that was about to unfold in your personal life? However you saw yourself, I'd venture to guess that you see life a little differently now than you did back in the day.

Back then we were young and bullet proof, looking for adventure...and riding a trail that was filled with more excitement than any "regular" career imaginable. Or perhaps initially you were just looking for a job; a job that would later become a unique way of life and a source of great pride.

Did you realize then you would be part of the same historical line which produced Washington, John Paul Jones, Lee, Alvin York, Billy Mitchell, Audie Murphy, Douglas MacArthur, Chesty Puller, Bull Halsey, or Norman Schwarzkopf? And the line goes on and on. If not, perhaps you realize it just a little more now that we're older, somewhat wiser and no longer as bullet proof as we once were...or at least thought we were.

If you take away nothing else from today, I want you to take this one thought and internalize it for as long as you live. As an American Veteran, you are a very special part of a most wondrous line; you share in a great legacy and it was you who helped write the heroic history of the greatest nation ever created on earth.

Have you ever thought about that? Have you ever looked at yourself in that light?

You were part of a very special American line that goes back to a bitter cold winter in 1776 when your ancestors in arms crossed the freezing Delaware in the face of a winter snow, and when they marched bloodied, barefoot and ragged into Valley Forge with little hope of victory, enduring both disease and privation, but also when they stood tall that miraculous day at Yorktown. You're part of their line...I want you to think about that.

You share a tradition with those who offered up their life's blood for the country they believed in, be it blue or gray. Whether that belief was the preservation of the union or the preservation of states rights, whichever uniform they wore, the politics didn't really matter to them when canister and mini balls were cutting down their comrades. They were with their brothers in arms, heart and soul, and you share that same legacy of dedication to something that remains so much greater than the politics which initiated the conflict.

You share those dreary cold and rainy days in the trenches of France as they went over the top in the face of shell fire, machine guns and mustard gas.

You were part of the same brotherhood that raised Ol' Glory high on Mt Suribachi in oppressive tropical heat and bloodied the snow during the frozen days of a battle in a place that would be known as the bulge.

You share with our ancestral comrades the sufferings as well as the victories, and you share in the glory of that same long trail they rode with inspired courage so long before us.

You've been spawned from a most unique line of Americans...and at a great price.

The story of your line extends from Bunker Hill to Gettysburg and Chateau Therrie; from the islands of the South Pacific to the beaches of Normandy, the plains of Europe and the hills of Korea where you faced human wave attacks with great courage and determination, freezing in the Korean winters and melting under its ruthless summer sun. You share their story.

You were part of the family that suffered the constant exhaustion of search and destroy; the anxiety that rode along with every river patrol and sortie; the feeling of endless isolation from loved ones and the intrinsic danger of life in a Viet Nam jungle where you lost brothers that meant so much more than the dry pages of a history book could ever adequately describe.

You wrote a chapter of the legend which is the American Man at Arms and wrote it with great honor and undeniable distinction regardless of any political shortcomings at home—after all, politics is not a soldier's lot in life—and the political world will never rise to the virtuous standards set by you...the American GI.

You again stood tall after 9/11 crushing terrorists in Iraq and Afghanistan, freeing more than 25 million people from fear, torture and oppression—the only life they had ever known.

And while some have criticized the wisdom of our participation in every war and others claimed the credit after the fact, you know the deeper truth of it and need only look left and right to confirm what Americans really did there and who really led a soldier's life there.

Yes, you, you are a vital link in the great chain of American exceptionalism.

You've been a proud part of a proud past...even if you didn't realize it at the time you first took that sacred oath, you have indeed joined the ranks of Washington and all who followed him throughout history.

You are part of a brave and honorable saga that stretches back more than two centuries and regardless of the politics that sent us to those battlefields, you stood fast, stood strong and stood together with honor for reasons many may never understand...but deeply engrained within every soldier's soul is the indisputable affirmation that we now know those personal reasons were selfless, noble and pure. Again, think about that.

Perhaps for the adventure and excitement at first, but then as reality stared you in the face and you looked that elephant in the eye, you did it for your brothers and

then as time crystallized your vision, you came to the realization that...you also did it for the country we love like no other.

Our personal vision of why we did what we did continues to evolve as we grow older.

Looking back on it through the eyes of the passing years, I'm sure it's something we wouldn't trade for a million dollars nor perhaps relive parts of it again for that same amount.

You endured trials you would have never believed possible before wearing that uniform but in which you now take immeasurable pride...and rightfully so.

Dr Lewis Beebe, a civilian Physician during the American Revolution, to me embodies those patriots throughout history like many of you here today who, although having never worn the uniform, so admirably supported and inspired those who did and in such a wondrous way as to encourage them at every tumultuous turn and embolden them in the face of every trying tribulation.

Dr. Beebe experienced the travails of a soldier from the view point of one who saw the aftermath of the battlefield first hand and wrote with great admiration about those he treated. And I Quote...

"The bravery of good soldiers consists in enduring hardships and fatigue with patience" and I would add to his virtue of patience, those of Honor, Selfless Sacrifice, Courage, Dedication and Determination—a simple statement to be sure, but one with deeply held significance.

Over the years tens of millions have sincerely envied and deeply admired the life you led.

John Wayne got tears in his eyes when he first met Colonel Bull Simons, the leader of the Son Tay Raiders, whose mission in Nov of 1970 was to rescue our POWs being held in North Viet Nam at the time.

It was reported the actor said, "Colonel, you're the soldier in real life that I only played in the movies."

Whether you realized it then or not; whether you realize it today or not, I'm sure the way you look at your service has matured over the years and it's this realization I ask that you take away from our gathering here today—the realization that you were and you are a vital part of a divinely inspired legacy—The American legacy.

That you not only share her history; you lived her history and wrote a seminal chapter of that history. You are an unrivaled segment of an unsurpassed line and I am extremely honored to call you my brother. I salute you; and I thank you all.