



Boothbay Harbor Rotary Club

P.O. Box 518

Boothbay Harbor, Maine 04538

Veterans Recognition Day, November 12, 2009

Remarks of VADM James B. Perkins, III, USN (Ret'd)

Good evening!

Before I start I've got to say something about Fort Hood and the massacre that took place there last week. We are truly a joint force these days and share both the bad days and good days with our comrades in the other services. You take a whack at one of us, you whack all of us. I grieve with my Army shipmates.

Thank you for your invitation. It's truly a privilege and a pleasure to be with Rotarians again; friends I visited with many times with my Dad. He was very proud to be a member this club and, as you probably know, he was a Charter Member. It was a real thrill for me to be here while growing up with some of the icons of this region – too many to name. I'm sure I'd leave someone out, but any list of Boothbay Region icons would certainly include the inimitable Harold Clifford banging on the piano. It always seemed to me that the emphasis during the songfest was on volume rather than fidelity – it's good to see some things never change!

It's also great to be back in the Boothbay Region – something I look forward to every opportunity. When I pass over the Piscataqua Bridge, it's like a weight is lifted off my shoulders and when I bear right onto Route 27 there at Race's Cabins, I start to smile. As I may have mentioned to some of you, I think you have to go away, and come back, to realize what a very special place this is; and it is a very, very special place

When Frank Helman asked me to speak to you on Veterans Day it was, most appropriately, at the service honoring the life of Gunnery Sergeant Al Sherman, United States Marine Corps. Al, with Arnie Brewer, epitomized the word “veteran” for me as I grew up in Boothbay Harbor. They were my first heroes.

As I reflected on Frank's invitation later, I thought first about the great time that Frank and I and other veterans have on Memorial Day. There is great camaraderie and my only regret is that there are so few of us out there (more later on that).

And I then thought about the difference between Memorial Day and Veterans Day – what each stands for.

As you know, Memorial Day used to be called Decoration Day and came about in 1869 to honor the war dead after the Civil War

And Veterans Day used to be Armistice Day commemorating the end of World War I – the war to end all wars (which, regrettably, it wasn't of course). You probably remember some teacher – it was Marge McLaughlin for me – reading that well known line “on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month the guns fell silent.”

These two special days have evolved into a solemn remembrance of our war dead on Memorial Day and appreciation of those who have served, living and dead, on Veterans Day.

And by extension, I think we should also celebrate those who currently serve – “*future veterans*” if you will – on Veterans Day: the members of our Army, our Navy, our Marine Corps, our Air Force and our Coast Guard – and, often forgotten, our Merchant Marine. And they are OUR services. Every one of us knows one or more of these warriors, every one of whom is a volunteer.

Veterans Day was celebrated in different ways yesterday all across our country. Birmingham, Alabama, had a big parade and honored a special veteran. In San Diego, there was a ceremony aboard the retired carrier Midway followed by a massing of the colors. In tiny Bedford, Virginia, a solemn service is held at their D-Day Memorial to honor both fallen and surviving veterans. Bedford, as you’ll recall, suffered the highest per capita loss in the nation on D-Day when 19 of their 32 sons in the Army died on Omaha Beach. At Branson, Missouri, there was a gathering of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of veterans – ship and unit reunions and individuals taking advantage of that city’s wonderful hospitality. And, of course, the Veterans Day culmination as the President laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknowns.

It’s all a bit intimidating for this sailor to try to provide the Boothbay version – I feel a little inadequate, especially with his distinguished group of veterans – but I’ll give it my best shot

I’m proud to be a veteran and I’m sure those of you who are veterans in this room are similarly proud. And I’m also sure that those of you who *have* served take some comfort and some satisfaction in the newfound respect and affection that both veterans and those who *currently serve* enjoy.

Of late, we have enjoyed a virtual sea change with organizations, politicians and the general populace each trying to outdo each other to show us how much they appreciate the members of their armed forces and their veterans. On the way up here from Newport, Rhode Island, on Tuesday, I decided to take note of this phenomenon – to look for ways “Support our Troops” is being expressed.

First, I looked for those ribbons on the transoms of cars. By my count 47 cars sported one or more – though I’m certain I missed some – especially as I white-knuckled it around Route 128, dodging 18-wheelers and Massachusetts Kamikazes trying to kill me.

And I also took note of roadside signs. A couple that we liked:

Coming out of the airport at Providence

“Welcome Home Troops
Rhode Island Thanks You”

And then there’s that great sign at the gas station coming into Wiscasset – and of course Wiscasset is a wonderful place to read signs as you’re sitting there in gridlock – that sign reads very simply

“Thanks to those protecting our freedom”

And there are many more examples of how we’re celebrating our troops and our veterans:

A new GI Bill – one that provides even better benefits, including an option to pass the higher education privileges to a son or daughter.

Then there's a bunch of restaurants featuring reduced dinner prices to veterans.

And back in September, the Red Sox announced that they had teamed up with Mass General to take on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Just acknowledging that PTSD happens and removing the stigma is an incredible step forward! I hope you've seen the Tim Wakefield commercial as he tells the story of the Navy Chief Petty Officer, a corpsman who treated wounded Marines under fire in combat, who has PTSD and is being treated by this program.

And in Washington, classy restaurants are falling all over themselves to host "Wounded Warriors" dinners for the servicemen and women who are recuperating at Walter Reed and Bethesda. And I've got to tell you there are few more powerful scenes than to meet a young Marine or soldier, missing one or more limbs, who's not feeling sorry for himself but rather is fired up and telling you he's going to rejoin his unit; his buddies; his shipmates.

It is the personification of that line – "It's the Land of the Free because of the Brave."

As a nation, we have embraced our servicewomen and men – acknowledging their sacrifices and contributions – as never before.

But, as some of you will remember, it hasn't always been that way.

When I returned from Vietnam, after firing gunfire support off the coast for six months, we got a message a couple days prior to entering port in Long Beach, warning us not to wear our uniforms off base – rocks had been thrown at cars and sailors had been spit on.

When I reported to the Pentagon 15 years later there was still a Vietnam hangover. We wore civilian clothes – coat and tie – to work each day. One of several things I thank Ronald Reagan for was putting us back in uniform *the day after he was inaugurated*. Admittedly it was a little traumatic – some of us had ‘whites’ that were actually ‘yellows’ and many of us had to go on a crash diet to carry out the orders of the Commander-in-Chief – but we wore our uniform with pride.

Hopefully that Vietnam hangover is behind us – never to reappear. And that we continue to honor our servicewomen and servicemen – and veterans – regardless of how popular our foreign policy happens to be.

Let me close with a request (actually two requests)

The first one’s easy: Sometime in the next week or so, search out a veteran and thank him or her for their service. There’s a target-rich environment here tonight! They will probably mumble something self effacing but I can assure you that those five words – “Thank you for your service” – are incredibly significant to a Veteran.

This one’s harder – once you have their attention, ask ’em to join Frank and me and the other local Vets on Memorial Day as we show our respect for the fallen by marching in the Region’s five parades. I’m bringing two marchers with me this year – see you out there!

Thank you again for inviting me and for your kind attention. God bless and keep our troops and veterans safe, and God bless America!