

## **What Veterans Day Means to Me**

By Rebecca N. Seeger, Col, USAF (ret)

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Good afternoon, Dr. Cruz Rivera; distinguished guests; NAU staff, faculty, and fellow students; my brother James and; especially, fellow veterans. I am very pleased to be here. Mr. Yanka, thank you for giving me the honor to speak on this important day. When Mr. Yanka asked me to speak, he gave me two directives, and yes, I still follow orders: first, talk about what Veterans Day means to me and, second, present a message of unity. The first directive is fairly easy for me, as I imagine it is to all who have served or have been in military families. The second directive is a bit more challenging, but I will do my best.

But first, I want to honor the men and women who gave the ultimate sacrifice or suffered at the hands of the enemy, our brave POWs, MIAs, and KIAs; all of the veterans who served in combat or on the Homefront; and the military dependents who led a military life without the uniform: my grateful thanks to each and every one of you.

To begin, what does Veterans Day mean to me? It is a day to honor the sacrifice, selfless service, and dedication to our nation that all who have served in military uniform have taken willingly and without reservation. It is also a day to remember the veterans in my life.

Archibald Lamb was born in Bedford Virginia in 1760. During the American Revolution he served as a Private in the Virginia Rifle Regiment of the Continental Army. Archibald Lamb is my and my brother's Great Great Great Great Great Grandfather.

Gustav Seeger was born in Germany in 1827. He served as a Captain in the Prussian Army before immigrating to the United States. Family legend is that he served as the Royal Surveyor to the King of Prussia. Gustav is my Great Great Great Grandfather.

Henry Clay Cole was born in 1844 in either Vermont or New York. He enlisted in the 9th Wisconsin Light Artillery Battery Regiment during the Civil War. Henry Clay Cole is my Great Great Grandfather.

Bernard Edwin Seeger was born in South Dakota in 1911. He enlisted in the Navy in 1944. He was a Gunners Mate 3rd Class and served on the SS Lawrence J. Brengle, SS George Bancroft, and USS Albermarle in the European and Middle Eastern theaters during World War II. Edwin was my Grandfather.

Carl Edwin Seeger was born in Tabor Iowa in 1935. He served in Vietnam and survived an F-4 crash in Florida, but more about that in a minute. Carl was my father.

Roy Ernest Seeger was born in Tabor Iowa in 1923. Roy served with the 838th Bomber Squadron, 487th Bomb Group stationed in the United Kingdom. He was a Sergeant and Flight Engineer on board B-17G # 42-98013. On a mission on Sunday, 14 January 1945, his squadron was tasked with bombing the Oil Refinery at Magdeburg and Marshalling yards at Osnabruck in Germany. His B-17 was shot down and Roy, the co-pilot 2nd Lt Stephen S. Hunter, and the pilot 1st Lt Clement J. Kochczynski were killed in action. The other members of the crew were the Waist Gunner Sgt William A. Anchondo, Bombardier 2nd Lt Thomas M. Clark, Navigator 2nd Lt Loren W. Crandell, Tail Gunner Sgt William W. Peak, and Ball Turret Gunner Sgt Frank G. Scott who escaped the aircraft but were captured and held as POWs for the remainder of the war. Roy was my Great Uncle. I actually have the War Department telegrams that were sent to my Great Grandparents announcing his status as MIA and KIA.

Why do I mention each person by name? Because they are not simply veterans, they are also people who had families who loved them, ancestors who, but for their lives, I would not be here. They deserve to be remembered. The stories of veterans in my life do not only include my ancestors, of whom there are numerous others, but also those who influenced my life for the better.

I want to go back to the Spring of 1969. Dad was stationed at Davis-Monthan AFB and our parents were hosting a backyard BBQ for his fighter squadron which was soon deploying to Vietnam. My brother, sister and I are not invited to the party...we were banned to my brother's bedroom. However, we could sneak peeks out the back window to see what was going on. When we would do this, one young man in the squadron would attempt to scare us by jumping in front of the window. We loved it. The young man was Lt Bobby Gomez. About a year later, on April 23rd, 1970, Lt Gomez, the weapons officer, and Capt Al Lucki, the F-4 pilot, were shot down over Laos. Bobby was 26 years old. Our father, also an F-4 weapons officer, was part of the same strike mission. Bobby was promoted to Capt while in MIA status. His status was changed to KIA in 1977.

In April of 1977, I was finishing my freshman year here at NAU. I get the call...our Dad was in an F-4 crash at Eglin AFB...it was pilot error. The pilot broke his back. Our Dad was flying again just three weeks later. The doctors either misread or failed to read his x-rays as he had 11 fractured vertebrae. He retired shortly thereafter and lived in chronic pain for the next 35 years until he passed away in 2012.

Fast forward to August 1993, I am meeting my seminar 31 mates at Air Command and Staff College. We are an interesting group, with both an Israeli and Thai officer, a Marine and Army officer, and the rest of us Air Force officers. One classmate, an F-15 pilot, is thoughtful, studious, and very intelligent. After a few weeks, he finally told us his story. Two years earlier, he was shot down on the next to last day of Desert Storm. He was part of a two-ship strike mission. After bailing out, he is on the ground with a badly broken leg and using his radio, yelling break right, break right to his wingman as he saw the next scud launch. All this time, the Republican Guard is shooting at him. His wingman is safe, but his radio is killed. Then Captain Bill Andrews was captured, escaped, recaptured as the Iraqis were searching for deserters, and held for the next eight days in a basement.

These are just three stories of Americans who served our nation and paid a price that most people cannot comprehend. I was lucky enough to have known each of them. I can also tell you stories of people who chose to be Americans in order to serve. Lt Col Jorge Bennett from Honduras, Major Sherryanne Douglas from Jamaica, and 1st Lt Adriana Beyen from the Netherlands. Col Bennett came to the United States to study at UCLA. He became a citizen in order to serve in the Air Force. Major Douglas enlisted in the Marine Corps after high school. After leaving the Marine Corps, she earned her Bachelor's degree and became a citizen to continue to serve her nation in the Air Force. Lt Beyen enlisted in the Air Force, and similar to Major Douglas, she earned her bachelor's degree and became a citizen so she could continue to serve. She was medically retired from the Air Force and went to work for the VA serving veterans at a VA hospital in Arkansas.

What does veterans day mean to me? It means honoring all of those, citizens and non-citizens alike, who stepped up to serve the United States with integrity and excellence. Col Bennett, Maj Douglas, and Lt Beyen had to take the extra steps of becoming naturalized citizens so they could continue to serve.

Capt Gomez and Sgt Seeger made the ultimate sacrifice. Col Andrews was held as a POW. Our dad lived the remainder of his life in pain from the F-4 crash. Yet neither Col Andrews nor our dad ever expressed any regret. They were proud to serve this nation. The sacrifice was just part of the job. I want my service and my life to always make our dad proud. All of these veterans inspire me to continue to serve our nation, our veterans, and those Americans who need our help now more than ever: the homeless, the impoverished, and the marginalized. Today, I am a doctoral student at NAU. My field of study is college-in-prison programs as incarcerated people are legally and socially marginalized and made invisible. Mahatma Gandhi said, "The best way to find yourself is in the service of others." Tagore said, "I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy."

As veterans, we continue to live our lives with the core values we served with. Integrity, service, honor, loyalty, courage, duty, and excellence. From my experience, Veterans serve. Veterans find meaning in that service. Veterans serve with integrity. Veterans serve with joy. But whom do we serve? Other veterans? Of course. We are brothers and sisters in arms. And we never leave a brother or sister behind. Society? Yes. We serve the American people and, indeed, we try to serve all of humanity. That is why we served in some of the most challenging and dangerous places on earth. But we did it because it was the right thing to do.

I know you are all familiar with the adage, we are only as strong as our weakest link. I truly believe this. Many of you have likely witnessed, if not been a part of, a flag folding ceremony. There are many flag folding ceremony scripts but my favorite has the line that ends with "but it is still our country, right or wrong." I always reflect when I hear that line. To me, it means that we know our country is not perfect but that we can strive to make it better. It means that we support and defend the Constitution of the United States in order to make a more perfect union, even while no longer wearing the uniform. Again, another moment for reflection, what does "a more perfect union mean?" These are not just words; they have meaning and seek action. Union comes from the Latin word unionem which means oneness, unity, a uniting. A perfect union, then, is a perfect unity.

I love my country and I know I am not alone. I especially love the promise of our country, a more perfect union, and the ideals of the American dream. Our country, right or wrong, does not mean we celebrate what is right and ignore what is wrong, it means we acknowledge what is right and fix what is wrong.

Service does not end when we leave the military. It is a lifelong pursuit of making the community, the nation, and the world a better place. I may not be able to change the world, but I can make it a better place for one person today, and another tomorrow. A simple act of service today could exponentially grow if everyone tried to make a difference.

Furthermore, my message of unity, my voice alone is easy to ignore. But imagine if all Veterans spoke with one voice; we could not be ignored. We could change the world. We could forge stronger chains that take us another step toward a more perfect union.

Unity does not mean agreement in every idea. But it does mean respecting everyone's perspectives equally, it means listening with open hearts and open minds, it means lifting those of us who struggle, who are marginalized, and who are unable to benefit from all that America can offer. If we just listen to each other, we may find that we are not so far apart as too many politicians, pundits, and naysayers want us to believe. The military has traditionally been on the forefront of unity. The military services were amongst the first to integrate in this country. As Veterans, we can continue to serve our nation and the world while modeling the behavior of unity, respect, integrity, and sincere listening. As Veterans, we are leaders and we can lead the nation in forging stronger chains by directly confronting and fixing the institutions that have allowed persistent racism, classism, sexism, and divisiveness to continue, those institutions that weaken the chain links of our nation. Remember Abraham Lincoln's prophetic words which are so apropos today, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." Alexander the Great admonished us to "Remember upon the conduct of each depends the fate of all." Finally, John Hume stated, "Difference is the essence of humanity. Difference is an accident of birth and it should therefore never be the source of hatred or conflict. The answer to difference is to respect it. Therein lies a most fundamental principle of peace: respect for diversity." As you may have picked up, I love inspirational quotes from people far more eloquent than I. I will say that I agree with these quotes with one exception. Hume's statement that "difference is an accident of birth." I think that difference is an intentional act of birth for no progress can be made if we are all the same, no creative thought can be found if we all agree on everything, no joy can be lived if life is the same every day with no challenges, struggles, and opportunities for growth. Through unity we can grow as a nation and as humankind. As Veterans, we have earned the respect of our fellow Americans. They look to us for leadership in the community and the nation. We can be the driving force for unity, we can begin forging stronger chains, we can move our country towards a more perfect union.

Thank you for your time and patience. I hope I have, in some small way, at least given you pause to think about the Veterans in your life and how all of us can serve to take our nation and the world towards the ideal of America: a more perfect union. Again, thank you.