**The Patriots of Ordinary Times**

**(Column 44, November 2, 2020)**

By Lucia A. Silecchia

On Veterans Day a number of years ago, a cafe chain offered a free coffee drink to any veteran who visited on the eleventh day of the eleventh month. My Dad, a 1950’s Army veteran, went to claim this gracious token of appreciation. He came home, coffee in hand, but a bit dejected because the young man at the café knew nothing about Veterans Day – or the free coffee offer.

This was no mere failure of a retail manager to acquaint employees with a seasonal promotion – although that seemed a bit embarrassing. What was sadder to me was that this showed how painfully easy it has become to forget the place of Veteran’s Day at the heart of our national remembrances.

Originally observed as Armistice Day, November 11th initially commemorated the 1918 ceasefire that silenced the weapons of World War One, naively hoped to be “The War to End All Wars.”

It soon became painfully obvious that “The Great War” did not end all wars but was, instead, the opening scene in a painfully bloody, violent century of human history. So, in 1954, Congress renamed November 11th as Veterans Day to honor not only those who served in World War One, but all those veterans who served before and after them.

In his proclamation of the first Veterans Day in 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower called this a day for us all to *“solemnly remember the sacrifices of all those who fought so valiantly … to preserve our heritage of freedom, and let us reconsecrate ourselves to the task of promoting an enduring peace so that their efforts shall not have been in vain.”*

Tucked away as it is between the exuberance of Halloween, the abundance of Thanksgiving, the rush of Christmas, and the anticipation of New Year’s, Veterans Day is all too often overlooked – or seen as simply a welcome day off.

Yet, I hope that it is more than that. I hope that it is kept as a sacred time for gratitude or, as President Eisenhower urged, a time for solemn remembrance of sacrifices made and reconsecration to our best ideals for which those sacrifices were made by so many who wore a uniform in the past, in the presence, and in the future.

When my Dad left the service, he was healthy and well. No dark shadows or nightmares of things seen, heard, smelled and felt in a battlefield haunted his dreams. When *“Taps”* was played at his grave, it was for a beloved grandfather with silver in his hair, a wallet filled with pictures of the children he lived to see grow up, and a beloved wife with whom he shared more than half a century of married life. He was a veteran much blessed – and for his health and safety and the long (but yet not long enough) life he lived, I am so deeply grateful.

But I am also so very deeply grateful, this Veterans Day, for those whose service came at a heavy price to them and their loved ones.

There are those whose lives were disrupted and whose dreams were deferred. There are those who lost limbs, eyes, peace of mind and more far away from the comforts of home. There are those who came home not to the welcome of a loving family, but to the abandonment of those nearest and dearest, ingratitude and misunderstanding, and a lifetime of suffering in mind and body and soul. And, there are those whose service did not end with a discharge into the arms of their loved ones but into the colder embrace of a grave dug far too soon. To these veterans, my gratitude is of the solemn kind reserved for those who gave me more than I will ever understand.

I am glad that this solemn day falls in November.

The All Saints Day celebration that starts the month reminds me that there were great saints made in the battle field. Indeed, it is surprising how in the most violent of circumstances, great virtue can be found. St. George, St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Joan of Arc, St. Sebastian, St. Francis of Assisi (really!), St. Thomas a Beckett, Servant of God Emil Kapaun – soldiers all – pray for us! Pray for peace.

The All Souls Day memorial that follows is a reminder to pray for all those who have left this world and await the fullness of heaven. Maybe, throughout this month, those who died in or after wartime can also be in our prayers – whether we know them or not.

The Thanksgiving festival that wraps up the month is also a reminder of the importance of gratitude to all those who, through the centuries, served selflessly, served with honor, and served bravely. Thank you for all you gave to me because you were willing to risk your own ordinary times.

*Lucia A. Silecchia is a Professor of Law at the Catholic University of America. "On Ordinary Times” is a biweekly column reflecting on the ways to find the sacred in the simple. Email her at* [*silecchia@cua.edu*](mailto:silecchia@cua.edu)*.*