

The Virgin Islands Consortium

At This Year's Veterans Day Event, An Overwhelming Sense Of Gratitude For The Armed Forces

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ST. CROIX -- The tradition of soldiers, JROTC groups, school bands, Boy Scouts, Legionnaires and others marching through the towns of Frederiksted and Charlotte Amalie on Veterans Day has become a well attended affair over the years, with residents lining the streets to show their support and appreciation for those who sacrifice to assure freedom. This year's event was made even more special with army personnel from the U.S. dispatched to the territory in response to Hurricanes Irma and Maria, along with members of the Danish Emergency Management Agency, who joined the local groups for a once-in-a-lifetime spectacle.

On St. Croix, the parade began at the Claude O. Markoe school, as has become tradition, and saw participating groups parading through the town all the way to the Budhoe bandstand. Residents cheered on as the men and women in uniform marched and sang to the distinct sound of base drums, and the loud command of battalion leaders.

The event carried a distinct weight of gratitude for the men and women in uniform, whose lives were put on hold as they attended to the people of the territory impacted by the storms. On every corner, in every town, on all four islands, military personnel could be seen helping distribute food items, directing traffic, maintaining law and order, and even providing reassuring smiles in the immediate aftermath of the hurricanes. They were also involved in rescue missions that saved lives, and manned aircrafts that evacuated the critically ill to off-island medical facilities.

And as normalcy started to take hold, these soldiers were dispatched to schools ravaged by the storms to help with cleanup, and dealt diligently with residents during the curfew period. There were countless unseen efforts as well, whose stories will be told far and wide.

Usually, a cry of local leaders at such events (including Memorial Day) has been of the sacrifice service members from the U.S. Virgin Islanders, many of whom have made the ultimate sacrifice during battle, and the fact that the U.S.V.I. remains an unincorporated possession of the United States, whose citizens do not have the right to vote for president.

But such rhetoric, though not abandoned, was replaced this year with an overwhelming sense of appreciation to the U.S. government and, with this year's Veterans Day marking the service of women, the leading role of females in the Mapp administration during the storms: Mona Barnes, a former state command sergeant now serving as head of the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency, which, along with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, led the response effort. And Brigadier General Deborah Howell, adjutant general of the V.I. National Guard, which also played a critically role in coordinating the relief, rescue and recovery challenge.

"This year, I think more than any in recent times, we in the Virgin Islands can appreciate our great nation, United States of America," Governor Kenneth Mapp said during his address. "And we can appreciate the nation because of the amount of support and help that we have received in the last 9 weeks. As Brigadier General Howell said, 22 contingents from various states came into the Virgin Islands -- various units of the National Guard and the military -- to help all of us here during these trying times."

"We know we carry the distinction of having the highest per capita sacrifice of members of the military in conflicts on behalf of the nation. We want to thank all of you who serve, all of you who fight for our freedoms, all of you who fight to protect us, and all of you, who in a time of disaster, live your homes that are destroyed and come out and serve the community," the governor said.

Veterans Affairs Director Patrick Farrell said while veterans are honored on Veterans Day, the purpose of his office is to assure that veterans are "put first" everyday. "I ask you in the community to help us do that in whatever way you can," he said.

Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett paid homage to the enduring sacrifice of veterans.

"We've seen in these last months that purpose with which our veterans have carried through tumultuous times that we live in. We lived in times of winds of war, winds of nature, winds of politics that pushed themselves across all of us, and it's our veterans that hold us firm, as well as our National Guard," Ms. Plaskett said.

The delegate also spoke of recent conflicts in which thousands of soldiers have made the ultimate sacrifice: 2,345 soldiers during the Afghanistan war and 4,486 during Iraq war. Ms. Plaskett also noted the over 50,000 soldiers who were wounded during the two wars. "We thank them for what they have given for us," she said.

General Howell praised veterans for their "dedication, commitment and service." And she hailed veterans as "the gift that keeps on giving," mentioning their service around the world not only to preserve peace, but in a variety of essential fields in both the public and private sectors.

"Take a minute to say thank you to them for their contribution," she said.

The adjutant general, like Mr. Mapp and Ms. Plaskett, expressed indebtedness to the show of support from the U.S. government by way of its military during the two Category 5 hurricanes that impacted the U.S. Virgin Islands in September. She recalled the moment she saw three Black Hawk helicopters on the horizon. "It was my brothers in arms, various services. In my estimation, they were coming for me, they had my back. It served as the impetus to keep on going, my sign of hope," General Howell said.

Keynote speaker Major Kathleen A. Parris, a decorated Medical Service Corps officer well acquainted with the traumas of war, brought to light her experiences, many of which detailed the reality of the wounded during and after conflicts. Her stories included male soldiers who, after being injured during battle, struggled to relay to their wives that they would no longer be able to satisfy them sexually. She spoke of children whose only communication with their fathers were that of voice recognition because of disfiguring wounds sustained during battle. And, among other stories, Major Parris remembered comrades leaving rehab facilities with suitcases packed with various prosthesis limbs.

"In short, it weighs on you," she said.