

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Veterans Day Special: To Anyone Who Says 'Thank You for Your Service'

Opinion / **Published On November 11, 2020 06:21 PM /**

Staff Consortium **November 11, 2020**



Quamid Francis

Leaving the military is similar to immigrating to a new country: the reputation you earned, the education you achieved, and the skills you built rarely translate on US soil. The people who most intimately know what you are capable of are hundreds or thousands of miles away, and employers barely understand your resume. Sure, lots of folks graciously thank you for your service, but that gesture is often offered with limited understanding of the composition and impact of that service. Entering the civilian world can feel like entering the ocean alone, in a life raft with nothing to help you navigate.

To a great extent, this is our collective experience as veterans. Many of us are highly skilled as a result of our training and service, but that can get you but so far. As much as we are prepared to effectively serve, we are not sufficiently prepared to successfully transition. Indeed, illustrating the challenges many veterans face when transitioning out of active service is not part of the recruitment pitch.

At some point before enlisting, every veteran was approached by a military recruiter, wearing that hard-to-miss military uniform, some donning eye-catching medals earned in service. Recruiters paint a vivid picture of what it is like once we join; their accounts always included the sense of belonging and camaraderie that was in store. By and large, they were right. From the outset and through our service, we ate together, shared sleeping tents in the field, learned together in military-style classrooms, grieved together when our comrades fell, celebrated weddings, anniversaries, and baby showers, and held going away dinner parties when someone left active service or relocated to a different duty station. We would even take up cash collections to support life milestones. And of course, we trained together — undoubtedly the cornerstone of our unbreakable bonds. Even when we went through hell together, we always belonged. We learned to love it and appreciate it because it would be the first time some of us felt that sense of belonging and had collective clarity of purpose.

This new way of life, this new world, the military world, was our safe haven, even though it was undoubtedly dangerous. We found community. There was dignity in the work that we did. We were mostly united in our common causes, even as the nation for which we fought became more divided. We had a map for our personal wellbeing, too. We knew when our next medical and dental appointments were, the precise times we had for meals or “chow,” the scheduled dates for which we had to do our next physical fitness test, and so forth. We knew what we had to do and when we had to do it, every day, week, month, year.

The civilian world is starkly different from the military tribe where we had come to belong. The SHOCK of transitioning to civilian life is high voltage, and it can be disheartening.

The skills and talents veterans possess may not directly translate and are often unrecognizable due to the language barrier inherent in military jargon. Indeed, military jargon is probably deserving of its own English translation. What's more, the customs, norms, and traditions we came to know are no longer available once we leave the military. These professional, personal, and communication challenges can and do sometimes lead to poor outcomes. For example, close to 40,000 veterans experience homelessness on any given night — many of them women who are much more likely to have children under the age of 18 compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, veterans are more likely to be underemployed compared to nonveterans. According to a recent LinkedIn study, 33% of veterans are underemployed even though veterans are 160% more likely to have a graduate degree or higher compared to nonveterans. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, social isolation is exacerbated among veterans, which is why government agencies like the New York City Department of Veterans' Services launched Mission: VetCheck, which seeks to reduce social isolation that veterans may experience, and connect them to support. And suicide is far and away the worst possible outcome a veteran could face; sadly, nearly 20 veterans die by suicide daily, which is about one and a half times the rate among nonveterans.

Those poor outcomes are predictable, which makes them all the more tragic. The material and emotional toll — that shock — that veterans experience doesn't have to occur. Not if we don't want it to. History tells us we mobilize around what we prioritize. Think of how America rapidly mobilized during WWII, producing over 18,000 B-24 heavy-bomber aircraft and other weaponry, far outproducing our German and Japanese adversaries by huge margins. More recently, we now see the national attention and resources directed at finding a vaccine to end the global COVID-19 pandemic. Almost every major pharmaceutical company is converging around this common cause.

The point is this: when America identifies a problem deemed worth solving, it directs attention and resources toward it, up to and including military armed conflict. So, it's unconscionable that there aren't sufficient systems, structures, and resources in place to mitigate the shock experience veterans face after they have faithfully and dutifully served their country, some having narrowly avoided paying the ultimate sacrifice: dying in support and defense of this country. Are our brave men and women not worth our time and resources?

A good friend of mine who served in the Army recently told me, "I feel so disjointed. On the one hand, I feel as though I outgrew my old [civilian] surroundings (friends, acquaintances, etc.), but on the other, I don't feel as if I belong anywhere right now. It's like I'm in some sort of purgatory." Sure enough, this was precisely how I felt soon after leaving the Marine Corps.

In the five years since I left the Marine Corps, I've heard similar sentiments from many of my fellow veterans. They often reach out to me for advice and support, which leads me to believe that these feelings of bewilderment are more common than not.

Equally troubling are those who opt to suffer in silence, some not even publicly identifying as veterans. The fact is, it shouldn't be the sole responsibility of veterans to support veterans. That ought to be a collective American responsibility. Americans vote to elect presidents and members of Congress, who in turn vote to send service members to war to, among other political reasons, preserve the everyday freedoms that we all regularly enjoy without much consideration for the role of the military.

The consequences of insufficiently supporting our veterans after they've left active service could precipitate intractable effects. Of most concern to me is the devaluing of military service altogether and veterans not publicly self-identifying as veterans due, in part, to the growing military-civilian divide. And if that divide continues to expand, it could further perpetuate a lot of the negative outcomes many veterans experience, and the stigmas many tend to associate with veterans. These stigmas make it harder for veterans to reintegrate back into society — to become respectfully employed. By respectful employment, I mean acknowledging and fairly compensating veterans based on their skill sets and experience. By the same token, veterans ought to be able to share their experiences without being looked at as "robots" void of independent thoughts, distinct identities, and curiosities. It is of great importance that all Americans assume our collective responsibility to ensure that "thank you for your service" this Veterans Day doesn't ring hollow.

If you're an elected official, employer, executive, philanthropist, how are you serving those who have served? Are you intentional about it? Is what you're currently doing

sufficient? Are your efforts merely performative? I mean, everyone loves a good military parade and to be photographed with a veteran at a military ball or sporting event. If you're an elected official, when was the last time you introduced, passed, or co-sponsored a veteran-specific bill that could address some of the real issues veterans face? If you're an executive, are you confident your human resources department is military competent? Are your employees trained on how to assess a veteran's qualifications based on their military occupational specialty? If you're a philanthropist, are you supporting veteran-specific organizations?

If you're an average American, do you mostly, or only, utter the word "veteran" on Veterans Day and or other military holidays? Are you sure about that? How can you hold yourself and others more accountable for making theoretical respect of veterans into material support for veterans? Take at least a few minutes today to think about it and plan a first step.

And to my fellow veterans: your experience is invaluable, and you have more than what is required to be successful in your post-military career in any sector of your choosing. Your transition will not be seamless, and certainly not the way you envision it, and that's OKAY. That's the hard part. Accepting what is. It's time to be YOU and to bring your greatness to your civilian life. All of these attributes come to you naturally: excelling under stress, applying solution-driven approaches to solve complex problems, leaving a positive and memorable mark on anyone or anything you engage, following up, and following through, building community, and perhaps above all else, thriving in new environments. I challenge you to look deep within yourself and ask yourself: How can I be the best, most authentic version of myself?

We all stand to gain from rising to the challenge of bridging the veteran-civilian divide. Beyond Veterans Day, and beyond "thank you for your service."

Submitted on Tuesday. Written by: Quamid Francis, Chief Diversity Officer and Deputy Chief of Staff @ NYC Veterans' Services. Marine veteran. Operations management strategist. I find joy through service.