

More than one a day. That is how many members of our active-duty military, National Guard and Reserve forces have committed suicide over the last year.

Simply put, we are losing more servicemembers by their own hands than we are by the enemy in Afghanistan.

Only those who experienced firsthand the horrors of combat can understand why most of these young men and women feel compelled to take such drastic and permanent measures.

But those of us gathered here to observe Veterans Day know that we love them. We appreciate them. We are grateful for their service.

We are their friends, their family, their co-workers and their neighbors. It is up to us to ensure that every veteran feels that his or her service to this country is appreciated by their fellow Americans. There are many tangible ways that we can acknowledge their sacrifice, but the easiest is to simply say “Thank you for what you have done for our country.”

If he is showing signs of unhappiness or depression, encourage him to seek help through the VA immediately. If she has had difficulty obtaining the benefits that she is entitled to, let her know that The American Legion has thousands of trained service officers nationwide that will help her navigate the bureaucracy free of charge.

And if that veteran has made the Supreme Sacrifice, remember the price that has been paid for our freedom and offer your support to the loved ones left behind.

But Veterans Day is a time to honor not just those who have fought for us in battle, but, in fact, all of the outstanding men and women who served in our nation's Armed Forces since our founding more than 237 years ago.

Not all veterans have seen war, but a common bond that they share is an oath in which they expressed their willingness to die defending this nation.

Perhaps most significant in preserving our way of life are the battles that America does not have to fight because those who wish us harm slink away in fear of the Coast Guard cutter, the Navy aircraft carrier, the Air Force fighter squadron or the Army soldier on patrol. Or they have heard the words that recently retired General James Mattis shared with his Marines: "Be polite. Be professional. But have a plan to kill everybody you meet."

On May 21 of this year, the United States lost one of its bravest veterans. Army Technical Sergeant Vernon McGarity was seriously wounded during a German artillery barrage at the Battle of the Bulge. Refusing an offer to be medically evacuated, he tenaciously led a small unit against the enemy's great Western Front offensive and rescued two of his wounded comrades under heavy fire. He directed devastating fire on a light cannon, which had been brought up by hostile troops to clear resistance from the area. He took it upon himself to destroy a machine gun position by killing or wounding all hostile gunners with his deadly accurate fire. Only when his squad's last round had been fired, was the enemy able to advance and capture McGarity and his men.

For his actions, McGarity was awarded the Medal of Honor.

After the war, McGarity served in the Tennessee National Guard for 28 years, retiring as a lieutenant colonel. He also worked for over three decades for the Veterans Administration in Memphis, helping his fellow veterans secure the well-deserved benefits that they earned.

The valor and dedication that defined warriors from previous generations continues today.

April 15, 2013 was a day that changed Boston forever. When two cowardly terrorists detonated bombs at the end of the Boston Marathon, three innocent people were killed and hundreds wounded. At least 15 victim lost limbs.

Enter Marine Captain Cameron West and retired Marine Sergeant Gabriel Martinez. Both were among a group of wounded warriors who visited the Boston Medical Center six days after the attack. The two men, West, who previously lost his right leg during action in Afghanistan, and Martinez, who lost both legs, shared their upbeat attitudes with the Boston victims.

One victim, Celeste Corcoran, was still naturally despondent over the recent loss of her legs. "I can't do anything right now," she told the Marines.

"After this, you'll be more independent than you ever were," Martinez answered. "This isn't the end. This is the beginning."

While we should all be grateful for the remarkable advancements made in military medicine and prosthetics, the fighting spirit and inspirational stories of our veterans are not due to technology.

These traits come from the heart.

When then-Governor Ronald Reagan introduced returning POW John McCain at a speaking engagement in 1974, the future president asked, "Where do we find such men?"

He was speaking of many veterans, when he answered, "We find them in our streets, in the offices, the shops and the working places of our country and on the farms."

And many of these veterans are women, such as Army Chief Warrant Officer Lori Hill. While piloting her helicopter over Iraq in 2006, she maneuvered her chopper to draw enemy gunfire away from another helicopter and provide suppressive fire for troops on the ground. Despite flying a damaged aircraft and suffering injuries, she landed the helicopter safely, saving her crew. For her actions, she became the first woman to receive the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Women are major contributors to our military presence in Afghanistan and many have given their lives in the War on Terrorism. The American Legion recently issued a report calling upon VA to improve its response to the unique needs of women veterans. The VA and military health systems need to adequately treat breast and cervical cancer as well as trauma that resulted from domestic violence, sexual harassment and assault. America is home to more than 1.2 million women veterans and they deserve our support.

In the poem "Tommy," the great writer Rudyard Kipling lamented over the rude treatment a British soldier received at a pub. Writing in classical old English, Kipling compared the abuse with the more favorable treatment that "Tommy" receives by the public during war.

"For it's Tommy this, an ' Tommy that, an' 'Chuck him out, the brute!"

But it's 'Savior of 'is country' when the guns begin to shoot;

*An' it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' anything
you please;*

*An' Tommy ain't a bloomin' fool – you bet that
Tommy sees!”*

Ladies and gentlemen, let us always treat our 22
million veterans as the saviors of our country that they
are. Even when the guns are no longer shooting.

Thank you for being here, God Bless America and
God Bless our veterans.

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