

# THE BRUNSWICK BEACON

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## GUEST EDITORIAL

### American Veterans Have Earned Place At The Table

BY WILLIAM M. DETWEILER

A citizen telephoned the American Legion's National Headquarters in Indianapolis recently to say that he didn't think veterans deserve any special recognition, honor or benefits.

It was the caller's opinion that America's wartime veterans have given no more or no less to our country than any other citizen who goes to work each day and otherwise does his or her part.

It's a fair question: Why do we celebrate Veterans Day? First, the U.S. Constitution grants citizens the right to assemble peaceably and the freedom to speak our minds. Many Americans in 1994 take such rights for granted.

But we have only to look at the many trouble spots around the world, some very close to home, to know how fragile and rare are the freedoms that we enjoy.

Second, because of the tremendous contribution America's veterans have made to the defense of our nation, it's important to honor these individuals. Nov. 11, the date of which World War I was officially concluded, has been designated for this purpose.

Third, veterans do recognize the contributions of all Americans who pitched in and did their part on the home front during wartime.

General Douglas MacArthur described America's citizen-soldier as "one of the world's noblest figures."

Recalling two world wars, MacArthur said:

*"In memory's eye I could see those staggering columns of the First World War, bending under soggy packs on many a weary march, from dripping dusk to drizzling dawn, slogging ankle-deep through the mire of shell-pocked roads; to form grimly for the attack, blue-lipped, covered with sludge and mud, chilled by the wind and rain, driving home to their objective and, for many, to the judgment seat of God."*

*"And 20 years after, on the other side of the globe, again the filth of murky foxholes, the stench of ghostly trenches, the slime of dripping dugouts, those boiling suns of relentless heat, those torrential rains of devastating storms...the bitterness of long separation from those they loved and cherished, the deadly pestilence of tropical disease, the horror of stricken areas of war."*

Author James Brady, a Marine during the Korean War, has written this about his experiences:

*"We stayed on the line once through January and February for 46 days. Never washed, never changed clothes, and we ate from tin cans. No fresh fruit, no milk, no bread. Our faces were pitted with pustules and blackheads and in the cold, mucus froze solid on our nostrils and upper lips and our eyes were bloodshot...and twitched from fatigue."*

*"And you try to keep it hanging together when a friend of yours is killed or loses an eye or his hands and try to forget what dead men look like hanging on barbed wire in the morning and you have fought again through the night."*

Here's how Marsha Young, a Desert Storm veteran, described her experiences:

*"The monsoon rains flooded us, the Scuds attacked us, and the locals harassed the American women."*

*"Water made our chemical suits ineffective against any agents in the Scud warheads. We had no showers for 11 days. With water and toilet paper rationing, constant sand storms, 100-plus degree weather, no tampons, no laundry, Scud attacks and sniper fire, I took, became the animal within..."*

*"I live today with what is called the Saudi Syndrome. My utmost respect goes to the combat veterans whatever the war, whatever the gender."*

Indeed. In war after war, America's veterans have returned home in need of medical help, an education and a job. Yet time and time again, veterans have had to fight for these things, too—for benefits that a grateful nation should bestow upon its defenders like a crown of laurel.

With their blood, their sweat and their tears, America's veterans have earned their place at the table.

William M. Detweiler is national commander of the American Legion.

## Worth Repeating...

■ I am a Shawnee. My forefathers were warriors. Their son is a warrior. From them I take only my existence. From my tribe I take nothing. I am the maker of my own fortune. And oh, that I might make the fortunes of my red people, and of my country, as great as the conceptions of my mind, when I think of the Great Spirit that rules this universe.  
 —Tecumseh

■ A fanatic is one who can't change his mind and won't change the subject.  
 —Sir Winston Churchill

■ In anguish we uplift! A new unhallowed song  
 The race is to the swift; The battle to the strong.  
 —John Davidson

■ No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is; and as to superstition, beliefs and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze.  
 —Joseph Conrad

# I'm Dreaming Of A Revised Christmas

Overheard (verbatim) in the housewares section of a local department store during the second week of October:

"Y'all got your tree up yet?"  
 "Naw, I done all my other decoratin', but I ain't put up my tree yet."

I'm wondering how one adorns a Halloween tree when it becomes clear to me that the Joyous Holiday Season has oozed backward from December, through November, and has broken into the line in front of Halloween.

More comfortable with denial than epiphany, I shake it off and tip-toe my shopping cart on past those two silly women. I do not make eye contact.

I then cruise to the Outdoor Fun Department to pick up a new grill brush and a sack of hickory chips where I discover that those items have been prematurely yanked from the shelves to make space for gift wrap and bows, strings of lights, reasonable facsimiles of trees, cans of synthetic evergreen scent, and cheesy four-foot plastic candles.

SHEESH! How can it be Christmastime when last night the mosquito truck sprayed past our house?

I should have paid attention to the foreshadowing. In September I heard the year's first commercial for a Christmas album. And recently, sandwiched in among the many televised political advertisements (is



that Charlie Rose an adorable scamp or what?) you'd occasionally see a Salad Shooter commercial, the true harbinger of the modern Season of Charging—I mean Giving.

One of the life lessons handed down from my father during my formative years was that it's not Christmas until Santa buzzes in over the snow on the floating heads of a cordless rechargeable electric shaver. And that's not supposed to happen until the Thanksgiving dishes are done.

I have nothing against Christmas, but I don't appreciate its interfering with Thanksgiving. In fact, my lost faith in the goodness of the human spirit would be restored if Americans revolted against the crass commercialism of the Yuletide once and for all.

If I had my way, adults wouldn't give each other storebought Christmas presents. Spending on kids would be limited to \$10 apiece un-

less you were giving them bicycles or pianos or something similarly worthwhile. (Nothing that runs off batteries or has "joy sticks" would qualify.)

And there would be no trace of holiday madness until at least the middle of December.

A very funny writer named Calvin Trillin (*American Fried*, *Alice Let's Eat* and *Third Helping*) once proposed a similar revamping of the Thanksgiving tradition. It didn't catch on, but have a bite of his story anyway:

*In England, a long time ago, there were people called Pilgrims who were very strict about making sure everyone observed the Sabbath and cooked food without any flavor and that sort of thing, and they decided to go to America where they could enjoy Freedom to Nag. The other people in England said, "Glad to see the back of them."*

*In America, the Pilgrims tried farming, but they couldn't get much done because they were always putting their farmers in the stocks for crimes like Suspicion of Cheerfulness. The Indians took pity on the Pilgrims, and helped them with their farming, even though the Indians thought the Pilgrims were about as much fun as teenage circumcision.*

*The Pilgrims were so grateful that at the end of their first year in*

*America they invited the Indians over for a Thanksgiving meal. The Indians, having had some experience with Pilgrim cuisine during the year, took the precaution of taking along one dish of their own. They brought a dish that their ancestors had learned many generations before from none other than Christopher Columbus, who was known to the Indians as "the big Italian fellow." The dish was spaghetti carbonara—made with pancetta bacon and fontina and the best imported prosciutto.*

*The Pilgrims hated it. They said it was "heretically tasty" and "the work of the devil" and "the sort of thing foreigners eat." The Indians were so disgusted that on the way back to their village after dinner one of them made a remark about the Pilgrims that was repeated down through the years and unfortunately caused confusion among historians about the first Thanksgiving meal. He said, "What a bunch of turkeys!"*

Every now and then you have to stir the stew or all the good bites will sink, stick and start to stink. That's lame alliteration intended to mean Tradition Be Darned.

Spaghetti carbonara instead of turkey? Wouldn't hurt my feelings. A Christmas season that doesn't begin until Dec. 20? A girl can dream, can't she?



## We Were Soldiers And Protesters...And Young

"He told the world that Americans would 'pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship' in the defense of freedom. We were the down payment on that costly contract. But the man who signed it was not there when we fulfilled his promise. John F. Kennedy waited for us on a hill in Arlington National Cemetery, and in time we came by the thousands to fill those slopes with our white marble markers and to ask on the murmur of the wind if that was truly the future he had envisioned for us."

—From *We Were Soldiers Once...and Young*, by Lt. Gen. Harold G. Moore (Ret.) and Joseph Galloway.

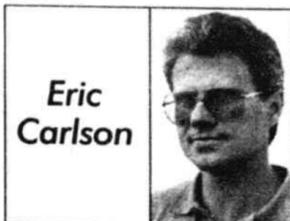
Ap Bac... Arc light... Air Cav... Arvin... boo-coo... boonierat... cherry... Claymore... DEROS... dew... di-di mau... dust off... H & I... bootch... Hue... I Corps... Ia Drang... Jolly Green Giant... Khe Sanh... LAWS... LRRPs... LZ... MACV... mad minute... Montagnard... PAVN... Phoenix... Plain of Reeds... Pleiku... riki tik... ruff puff... slick... tee-tee... thumper... Victor Charlie... white mice... Willie Peter... The World...

To most people, those words represent total gibberish.

To some, they conjure indelible memories; of heat, dust, stench, jungle, boredom, homesickness, confusion, terror, bravery, friendship and coming home...from The Nam.

Others will recognize the vocabulary of an unforgettable era; of draft cards, call ups, crowds, banners, bull horns, tear gas, riot gear, billy clubs, paddy wagons and friends who never came home...from The Nam.

Friday is Veterans Day. A time to pause and reflect on the sacrifices made by men and women who gave a portion, if not all, of their lives to



defend the United States of America.

For anyone who lived through the World Wars, the reflections are positive and unambiguous. Their veterans fought and died in a conflict that was clearly a struggle for survival between "us" and "them."

But for we of the Vietnam era, Veterans Day stirs up old animosities and confusion about who "us" and "them" really were.

There is a deeply rooted, perhaps unshakable belief among many Vietnam era veterans that "them"—the enemy—included anyone who actively opposed the policies that got us into Southeast Asia and kept us there for nearly 20 years.

The feeling is understandable, but also saddening. Because we—the ones who went to war and the ones who tried to stop it—will someday be the only Americans to remember or understand or care about what happened during that tumultuous time.

Contrary to revisionist belief, most of us who demonstrated against the Vietnam war maintained a great respect for the soldiers who were sent there. They were our brothers and sisters and cousins and uncles and fathers and friends who went to war and sometimes didn't come back. The ones who did return were forever changed.

We did not hate them. We hated what was happening to them. We hated watching their bloodied bodies dragged through the grass toward

medevac helicopters. We hated seeing them in wheelchairs. We hated imagining them in flag-draped coffins.

Anti-war demonstrations were chaotic and loud and full of bombastic pronouncements by would-be "revolutionaries." But I personally don't remember anyone, ever, describing American G.I.s as "baby killers."

I know it happened. I know some returning soldiers were heckled and spit upon by overzealous protesters. I do remember seeing people wrap themselves in the flag of North Vietnam.

And I know it deeply hurt and angered anyone whose comrades were killed by an enemy defending that flag. Veterans have every right to be unforgiving about that.

But such thoughtless incidents were the exception, not the rule. Even so, they have become the images by which the anti-war movement is judged. Which isn't fair. Any more than the peaceful efforts of anti-abortion activists should be judged by the bombing of clinics or the murder of doctors.

At the demonstrations I remember, any vet who wanted to speak was given priority at the microphones. Their words had weight. Members of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War—many on crutches or in wheelchairs—usually led the marches. No one doubted they had earned the right.

It wasn't until later, after much reading and talking with vets, that I began to grasp something of what those soldiers went through in Vietnam. I came to understand why they should be forever proud of their accomplishments.

I hope someday those veterans come to understand what we were trying to accomplish: to bring them safely home. And that some of us still remember. Some of us still care.

In the late 1960s, Life magazine published an issue with a cover story titled, "One Week's Toll." It was like a school yearbook, with page after page of hopeful faces staring out of little black-and-white photographs.

It was a class of about 200. But the students would never graduate. They had all been killed in Vietnam. Not in one year. In just seven days.

Looking at those faces, some not much older than myself, affected me deeply. I began carefully cutting out each photograph. I bought a second copy of the magazine, so I could preserve every face on both sides of each page.

I penciled a large circle on my bedroom wall and carefully taped each face around the perimeter. The remaining photographs were used to transform the circle into a giant peace symbol.

I lived with those faces at the foot of my bed for the remainder of my high school years. They gazed down at me each morning. I looked up at them before turning out the light.

Over time, the empty spaces inside the peace sign were filled with other photographs. These were colorful magazine images of young people, just like those soldiers—just like me—enjoying the benefits of freedom.

They were running through fields of wildflowers. Laughing with girlfriends. Frolicking on the beach. Having fun at rock concerts. Demonstrating against the war.

Exercising freedoms worth fighting for.

I still think about those faces on the wall sometimes. I thought about them as I gazed at the 58,000 names on the wall at the Vietnam War Memorial. I remember seeing my own face reflected in the shiny black granite. I remember a single word entering my mind.

Thanks.