

Mayor's Column  
November 13, 2017

This past weekend I attended several events to commemorate Veterans Day and the beauty and solemnity of these ceremonies prompted me to delve into the history of this day of remembrance.

First celebrated at Buckingham Palace in 1919, the armistice signaling the cessation of hostilities between France, Britain and Germany, was signed at 5am on November 11, 1917 bringing four years of fierce fighting in Europe to an end. (Actual peace negotiations were not finalized “to end the war to end all wars” until the signing of the Treaty of Versailles on June 28, 1919.)

To achieve an armistice, representatives met in French Commander Ferdinand Foch's railroad car in the Forest of Compiègne, 38 miles north of Paris chosen for its remote and discreet location. The first term negotiated was to end fighting at 11am. (During the six hour period between signing and actual cessation of hostilities, 3,000 Allied troops lost their lives).

Hence, the poignant significance of the two minute moment of silence observed at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month – Our Country went wild upon hearing the news in 1917. Lower Manhattan became impassable, flags waved, church bells tolled and thousands of pounds of confetti were tossed. The same was true in every direction from the White House – all meant to celebrate world peace.

In 1919, Woodrow Wilson spoke of Armistice Day as a, “time of reflections filled with solemn pride in the heroism of those who died in this country's service and with gratitude for the victory both because of the things from which it freed us and because of the opportunity it has given America to show her sympathy with peace and justice in the Councils of the Nations.”

In 1926, Congress requested that all future Presidents issue annual proclamations calling for the observance of November 11 with appropriate ceremonies. An Act of Congress made it a legal holiday in 1938. Originally thought of as a celebration of the cessation of World War I, World War II veterans petitioned Congress to

expand its significance with all Veterans being recognized for their service at the 1947 commemorations.

In 1954, it was officially renamed Veterans Day from Armistice Day. The Uniform Holiday Bill of 1968 dictated that federal holidays be observed on the Monday closest to their actual date. Realizing that this caused a dilution of the significance of November 11<sup>th</sup>, President Gerald Ford moved the holiday back to its original date in 1976.

The holiday is celebrated in the U.S., Canada, Belgium, France, New Zealand, Australia and Great Britain as Armistice Day, Veterans Day or Day of Remembrance. Since 1947, it has been televised in Britain and attended by every major political figure and royal on the grounds of Buckingham Palace.

In his 2012 Veterans Day speech, President Obama stated, “We take care of our Veterans not just by saluting you on one day once a year but by fighting for you and your families every day of every year. That’s our obligation, our sacred obligation to all of you.”

One could dispute whether we are meeting this obligation:

- After the submission of a 23 page document, 600,000 Veterans are currently waiting for a disability determination.
- There is currently a two year medical consultation delay at some Veterans hospitals when diseases have proven to cross medical expertise.
- Unlike our Senior Citizens who receive a government issued card that entitles them to receive medical care from any participating doctor or hospital, Veterans must travel upwards of 100 miles to seek treatment at VA facilities.
- 20% of our active duty force has been deployed to the front lines in Iraq and Afghanistan three or more times. Over half of these Veterans report medical difficulties upon return.
- The unemployment rate is digits higher than the national average.
- Returning Veterans are two times more likely to become chronically homeless as fellow Americans. It is estimated 50,000 Vets sleep on the streets every night.

Senator Bernie Sanders spoke eloquently of the plight of our Vets. Noting that the cost of war encompasses so much more than the cost of weaponry, salaries and transportation equipment, he noted that the human cost is lasting and virtually incalculable – traumatic brain injuries and PTSD that can lead to unemployability, depression, violence and suicide; the lifelong pain and hardship of children, families and spouses who have lost a loved one and the difficulty of transition and job opportunities upon successful return.

Our country currently has 22 million Veterans. At one ceremony this weekend, it was said, “We certainly don’t know them all, but we owe them all.”

There are many wonderful charities trying to supplement the care of our Veterans but sadly there are equal numbers who fraudulently prey on the generosity of the American people.

Veterans request that before making a donation, check if the organization is registered with the state and federal government by typing in on Google: New York State – Charity List.

Even if legitimate, by checking with Charity Navigator, Charity Watch or Guidestar, one can discern the percentage of a donation that is going directly to Veterans vs absorbed in overhead and staff expenses.

As a rule, never give by phone or send cash. On a very local level, many residents think they have donated to our wonderful men and women in blue via a very persuasive phone solicitation when in fact our police department never sees a penny of it. Our PBA only asks for your assistance once a year via their Memorial Day raffle.

As Bernard Malamud said, “Without heroes we are all plain people and don’t know how far we can go.” Thank you to all our Veterans, everyone a hero.