

Veterans Day Remarks  
Delivered by Selectman Margot Fleischman  
November 11, 2014

Every generation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has sent some of its young men and women to war, many to die on foreign soil, but many others to return. Through the generations, the veterans in our families, in our community, and here today, have embodied the histories of various global conflicts, some still on the front pages of our news, but others receding into faint memory. While the reasons and causes of many of these wars were being written into history, the long-enduring effects of warfare on the men and women who served were living on, as they still do.

Today is Veteran's Day, and we pause to remember all those who have returned from these conflicts. We acknowledge the many ways in which being sent to war changed not only their lives, but the lives of their families, their communities, their country and the world. In our commemoration, we also acknowledge the debt we owe to all who have served – to remember and honor their service, to stand with them as they reintegrate into civilian life, and to care for them not just when they return but as they age.

Last May, on Memorial Day, I invoked my grandfather's generation, and the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the conflict that took him to war. For me, the commemoration of Veteran's Day is inextricably linked to the original meaning of this date – November 11, 1918, Armistice Day, the day one of the most devastating conflicts in the history of humankind ended.

World War 1 was a tragedy on a global scale. Mechanized warfare, poison gas, aerial bombing all made their debut during those four years of carnage. Millions of young lives – 11% of the French population, 9% of the German population, and 8% per cent of the British – simply vanished from the planet.

The American Expeditionary Forces joined the fight late in the war, but eventually 4 million Americans would be mobilized, with 2 million sent "Over There," including my 23-year-old grandfather, who, according to his draft registration card, was not even yet a citizen of the United States.

The battles the AEF fought - Cantigny, St. Mihiel, Meuse-Argonne, Belleau Woods – were as well known to Americans then as today we might recall Falluja, Ramadi and Kandahar. What they accomplished in those last months of the war was heralded and celebrated. And then they came home and faded into obscurity.

I recently read a fascinating book called *The Last of the Doughboys*, which documented the lives of World War 1 veterans still living in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century through interviews with men and women whose ages were in the triple digits, many of whom recalled their service in stark detail, with great pride, and sometimes with tremendous emotion, some 80 years later. The author contended that while the veterans of the Second World War came to be known as the Greatest Generation, those who served in World War 1 were the “Forgotten Generation”.

The Americans forces may have lost fewer men and have suffered less than their European counterparts, only by virtue of not being there as long, but nonetheless the lasting effects of trauma (known then as shell shock or neurasthenia, but now recognized as PTSD), blindness and lingering lung ailments from being gassed, and injuries from bullets and shrapnel were among the life-long consequences of having endured months of trench warfare. So were economic difficulties and underemployment. So was access to higher education, a generation before the introduction of the GI Bill.

Fortunately, my grandfather survived his time in France and returned with mind and body intact. He was proud of his service to his country, and once told his daughter, my mother, that he would have been devastated not to go. He went on to become an American citizen, start his own business, marry, have two daughters, and rarely talk about what happened to him during the war. My mother recalls that when something would remind him of someone with whom he had served, a brief anecdote or funny story would end with my grandfather saying “I buried him....”

My grandfather lived to be 91, long enough for me to know him well, as well as any teenaged granddaughter can, but unfortunately, not long enough for me to ask him the questions posed to the centenarians in the book I read. While I regret never having had a chance to know first-hand what his war experience was like, others of his time spoke for him, in particular, a diary written in verse published in the early 1920s by a member of his Company.

The anonymous author is pretty frank in his assessment of the conditions they endured during those couple of months in the fall of 1918. Even when dressed up in verse, there is no denying that this author conveyed the tension of marching through artillery and sniper fire, the miserable conditions of mud and vermin in the trenches, the desperation of walking into an ambush, the horror of death up close.

On the last page, the author concedes that although he actually felt that the war was, for him at least, a “wonderful experience”, he would never go back, and didn’t, as he put it “thirst for any innocent man’s blood.” The final lines of the diary conclude:

*I sincerely hope that in the future,  
When peace reigns in this World,  
That all Flags will fly in the breeze full mast,  
Cleaned of their blood and unsoiled.  
For what has this World War brought us?  
Nothing but poverty, ruin and discontent,  
And countless graves of dead men,  
To be remembered only by a monument.  
But what is to be, will be,  
And what has happened, is o'er.  
And now let us all pray to God,  
That there'll never be another War.*

To linger for a moment in those last words is to remember a time when the future calamity of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was still to come. It is both sad and sobering, because it forces us to think both about what might have been, as well as what might be – for us and our generation – and what role we might play in fulfilling this hundred-year-old prayer for peace.

This is why my grandfather’s story stays with me. The photos from his war are black and white, and some are grainy, but they clearly show that the men and women who served then look an awful lot like those who have served since, and those who are serving now. To step back in time is to recognize what has changed and what has not. To dwell a while in the history my grandfather embodied is to see more clearly the lives of those who are serving now. And to think back on the nearly 70 years he lived after returning from war is to see how long into the future stretches our responsibility to serve the veterans of this day, who are now young and have futures ahead of them that we must help secure.

To all who have served, of every generation, thank you for all you have done. Today and every day, we remember and honor your service and your sacrifice on behalf of our country.