

A Day of Remembrance

Veterans Day, November 11th

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A few years ago, I took a personal day off from work to do something that I had never done before. At the time, I was not exactly sure why, but it did seem quite important that I do this; I had been thinking about it for a very long time.¹ So let me share with you a short narrative about a rather enlightening and ultimately delightful sojourn. It was a cool, damp, and drizzly day, as I walked through Arlington National Cemetery in the direction of the open-air Pavilion where the ceremonies were to be held on Veterans Day, November 11th.



Initially, I was all alone, it was a rather long walk, and I meandered along slowly. I stopped periodically and casually read the names and dates on some of the tombstones, which was almost a short history lesson in of it self. The atmosphere was solemn, quiet, and serene, and I thoroughly enjoyed the moment.

I carried my trusty SLR Canon camera which has been my norm when exploring the environs around and about Washington, DC; and enclosed herein are the results of my amateur photographic skills.

As I walked along the paved pathway, passing by other visitors to our National Cemetery and numerous tombstones, I felt somewhat melancholy; and I wondered why I felt it was so important for me to make my first visit to our National Cemetery, even though I had lived in northern Virginia for over 18 years.

¹ By way of introduction, I am a Colonel, USAF-Retired. I am a Vietnam Veteran and I worked as a staff officer in the Pentagon, 1984-87 (as a senior logistician and systems acquisition officer). I retired in 1990 with 27+ year's service as the Dean of Administration and Resources and Chief of Staff of the Air Force Chair at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces (ICAF), Ft. McNair, DC. I am a Certified Association Executive (CAE) through the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE)

Earlier in the week in preparation for my outing (and as an amateur historian), I had researched a brief history of Veteran's Day. For example, I learned that in 1919, President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed November 11th as Armistice Day to remind Americans

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of the tragedies of war. In 1921, an unknown World War I American soldier was buried in Arlington National Cemetery. This site, on a hillside overlooking the Potomac River and the city of Washington, DC, became the focal point of reverence for America's veterans.

Similar ceremonies occurred in England and France at about the same time, where an unknown soldier was buried in each nation's highest place of honor (in England, Westminster Abbey; in France, the *Arc de Triomphe*). These memorial gestures all took place on November 11th, giving universal recognition to the celebrated ending of World War I at 11 a.m., November 11, 1918 (the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month). The day became known as "Armistice Day."



Armistice Day officially received its name in America in 1926 through a Congressional resolution. It became a national holiday 12 years later by similar Congressional action. If the idealistic hope had been realized

that World War I was "the War to end all Wars", November 11th might still be called Armistice Day. However, only a few years after the holiday was proclaimed, World War II broke out in Europe. Sixteen and one-half million Americans took part. Four hundred and seven thousand of them died in service, more than 292,000 in battle.

A bill drafted by Representative Edwin K. Rees of Kansas proposed changing Armistice Day to Veterans Day, and make it a special occasion to honor those veterans who have served America in all wars. In 1954, President Eisenhower signed a bill proclaiming November 11th as Veterans Day.²

Allow me to digress briefly to note the other very important memorial that I visited on my "Day of Remembrance" of US veterans who died in service to the United States of America—the US Marine Corps Memorial.

On February 23, 1945, Mr. Joe Rosenthal took the photograph (this page) that won the 1945 Pulitzer Prize showing five Marines and a Navy hospital corpsman planting the Stars and Stripes atop Mount Suribachi, Iwo Jima, during one of the

² A law passed in 1968 changed the national commemoration of Veterans Day to the fourth Monday in October. It soon became apparent, however, that November 11th was a date of historic significance to many Americans. Therefore, in 1978 Congress returned the observance to its traditional date.

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fiercest battles of the Pacific during World War II. The photo was perhaps the most famous photo of World War II.³ The photo's likeness appeared on the 3-cent stamp and on millions of posters for the war-bond drive, bringing Mr. Rosenthal immediate celebrity. Erection of the USMC Memorial, which was designed by Horace W. Peaslee, was begun in September 1954. It was officially dedicated by President Dwight D. Eisenhower on November 10, 1954, the 179th anniversary of the US Marine Corps (photo this page).

The Rosenthal photograph, for all of its patriotic grandeur, remains a product of the past, and marked a victory in a cause everyone agreed was just. That was not a sentiment that the nation would carry through subsequent wars.

A unique foot note in history that coincidentally occurred also on the same day, February 23, 1945, and save for the Iwo Jima photograph, might have been more widely reported throughout the US. At Los Baños POW

Internment Camp, Laguna Province, on Luzon, in the Philippines, on February 23, 1945, the United States Army's 11th Airborne Division, assisted by Philippine guerrilla forces, carried out a lightning-swift raid forty kilometers behind Japanese lines, via land, sea, and air, and rescued 2,147 American and Allied civilian prisoners of war, men, women, and children. Most of the Japanese garrison were killed; the rest scattered. Not one prisoner was killed or seriously wounded; all were transported safely behind American lines. Not one paratrooper of the battalion directly involved was killed.



³ The Marine Corps War Memorial stands nearby Arlington Cemetery as a symbol of a grateful Nation's esteem for the honored dead of the U.S. Marine Corps. While the statue depicts one of the most famous incidents of World War II, the memorial is dedicated to all Marines who have given their lives in the defense of the United States since 1775. On the morning of February 19, 1945, the USMC invaded Iwo Jima. The 28th Regiment, 5th Division, was ordered to capture Mount Suribachi. On the morning of February 23rd, men all over the island were thrilled by the sight of a American flag flying from atop Mount Suribachi, raised by five Marines and a Navy hospital corpsman.

Now, back to Arlington Cemetery, as I walked toward the open-air Pavilion I began to anticipate my first opportunity to observe the Veterans Day ceremonies held annually at Arlington National Cemetery. I took a seat near the middle of the crowded Pavilion. I sat next to some out-of-town tourists, who were quite impressed with the solemnity of the occasion. I was able to later answer

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their questions about the best tourist sites to visit locally. I also sat among 50-plus high school students in military uniforms and they were prideful, quiet, and respectful.

Just prior to the Pavilion ceremonies, special services are held at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier; they begin with two minutes of silence, then after the playing of taps, a wreath is placed at the tomb which houses the graves of three unknown Americans who fought in World War I, World War II, and the Korean War. To honor these men, symbolic of all Americans who gave their lives in all wars, an Army Honor Guard, the 3rd U.S. Infantry (The Old Guard), keeps vigil, day and night.

I was pleasantly surprised by the grandeur and pageantry of the event. The flags and colors were striking (as you can see from the color photo shown on this page). I have visited only one other cemetery that had a similar emotional impact on me; and that was when I had the opportunity to visit the D-Day Normandy Beach and the adjacent US military cemetery in France.⁴

All of the Veterans associations were properly represented at Arlington Cemetery and they marched in line into the Pavilion with their organizational flags flying high. The

US Army Band and Choir provided the appropriate music and pageantry to the ceremonies. The President gave a moving address acknowledging the contributions to the nation by the many past and current members of our armed forces.



Beneath the ancient oaks and delicate cherry trees are presidents, and poets, explorers, politicians, men who walked on the moon, and regular soldiers, sailors, and airmen. It is staggering to think of how many men and women have given their lives in service to our country; and many more have been placed in harms way again this year. It was very emotional for me to see the thousands and thousands of tombstones, aligned so perfectly.

I was reminded of the 405,399 who lost their lives in World War II, the 136,516 in WW I, the 57,000 dead in seven years of the Vietnam War and 43,500 dead in just three days at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, in July 1-3, 1863. I was also reminded of what

⁴ For more information:
<http://www.abmc.gov/no.htm>.

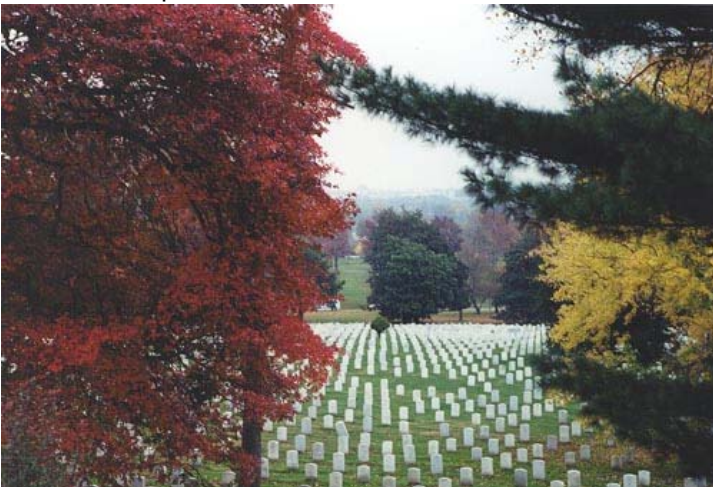
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President Lincoln said at the Gettysburg cemetery on November 19, 1863. The Gettysburg ceremonies were in remembrance of our veteran's "last full measure of devotion...that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain..."

A Proclamation, November 11, 2002, by the then President of the United States of America, George W. Bush:

"America was founded on the principles of liberty, opportunity, and justice for all, and on Veterans Day we recognize the men and women of our Armed Forces who have valiantly defended these values throughout our Nation's history. These remarkable individuals have helped to make our Nation secure and to advance the cause of freedom worldwide. By answering the call of duty and risking their lives to protect their fellow countrymen, these patriots have inspired our Nation with their courage, compassion, and dedication".



At the end of the day, I finally understood why it was important for me to visit Arlington National Cemetery. First, I visited Arlington on November 11th to acknowledge

and recognize the contribution of our many service men and women to our nation. The second reason, however, was much more personal. As this was past my sixtieth year, this visit caused me to think of my own mortality.

As a retired regular officer, with 27 years commissioned service, I too am authorized to be buried in Arlington with full military honors. This is a military benefit I now believe I will take advantage of some day for my family and myself.

This day, this November 11th, was truly a grand day, a day to be long remembered. The flags, the uniforms, the pageantry, the music, the voices, the fall foliage colors, the speeches, and the resulting atmosphere made me proud to be an American, a veteran, and I am proud to be a citizen of this great country. I encourage you to visit Arlington National Cemetery and the USMC Memorial on November 11th, perhaps next year. I assure you that it will be a day you too will long remember.

God bless America.⁵

⁵ An extract of this article was published in the professional publication: the *Journal of Electronic Defense*, November 2003, Vol. 26, Number 11, pages, 74, 42, publisher, Horizon House Publications, Inc., Norwood, Massachusetts. All the color photographs herein were taken by the author.