

Afterword

The Service Continues

Whether serving for 4 years or 4 decades, those who have honorably worn the cloth of the Nation as invested members of the Profession of Arms are eternally associated with this battle-proven, dynamic, and highly respected organization known as the United States Armed Forces.

Those who make this commitment are the protectors of their fellow citizens and the defenders of freedom and liberty. For over 200 years, they have come from all walks of life—from big cities, small towns, suburbia, and rural communities—and are all bound together by duty to pursue a common purpose: the safety, security, and freedom of their nation. These men and women view the American flag not only as an emblem of geographical vastness and diversity, but also as the symbol of what the United States of America stands for, what its values and ideals are, and what it considers worth fighting and dying for. They *have stood the watch* in an uncertain world with vigilance, devotion, and courage. Their commitment to their fellow Servicemembers is exemplified by *never leaving a fallen comrade*. Their lives are enriched by discipline, obedience, comradeship, and teamwork and by the sure knowledge that they are a part of something that is above and beyond their individual lives. Not that long ago it was common to hear a veteran say, “I was in the service”—meaning *in service to the Nation*.

A lifelong loyalty often comes with this commitment to serve the Nation—a conscious and free choice to continue to serve even after returning to civilian life. This loyalty stems from one’s personal experience performing a demanding duty to which few have obligated

themselves—the larger, deeper, and meaningful duty of service and sacrifice for the welfare of others.

For some, service continues as soon as they return to civilian life. For others, the call to continue to serve comes later. In either case, that service may take many forms. Most who have served and have departed the ranks and files of the Armed Forces reintegrate back into American society and choose to serve in new ways. Some choose to continue to serve by taking civilian jobs in government service at the Federal, state, or local level. Some offer themselves as candidates for elective office. Many join veterans' organizations to maintain those precious bonds with others who have worn the cloth of the Nation or civic organizations that help sustain and nurture local communities. Others work with young people as teachers, coaches, or Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps instructors, guiding a younger generation toward lives of service. Some obligate themselves to direct military support organizations as leaders or volunteers. Others visit wounded warriors to provide strength and encouragement or volunteer at Veterans Administration hospitals or homeless shelters. Still others volunteer to serve in details that render military honors at veterans' funerals, provide escort services for fallen comrades, or routinely mow the lawn of a deployed Servicemember's home. No matter the particulars, what these and other forms of continuing service have in common is the idea of "service before self."

Yet veterans who do not choose to continue service in such visible ways still stand out. They are often family members or neighbors who, because of their experience and discipline, are sought out for leadership when an emergency arises. They can also be a source of "Civics 101." They can explain how and why some things are not free—that the few serve the many. They participate in national days of recognition and patriotism and attend their Services' birthday celebrations, singing their Services' songs loudly and proudly. They are the ones who respect Old Glory as the flag parades by. For them, it is more than a bumper sticker on a vehicle or a unit patch on a ball cap that denotes time of service. It is a manifestation of pride in the sacrifice that is required as a member of the Profession of Arms in times of peace and war.

Those who "stood the watch" before today's Servicemembers provide an enduring example of patriotism and service. The Marine Corps

motto of *Semper Fidelis* (Latin for “always faithful”) can speak to every member of the Profession of Arms. Those who have worn the uniform of the Nation should never tarnish the reputation or the legacy that was paid for with the blood of so many for the future of so many more. “Soldier for Life” means exactly what it says. And there is no more patriotic optic for America to witness than the 85-year-old retired NCO Ranger who is propping himself up in his wheelchair as the national colors march by. He does not do it for a photograph; he does it because he still *feels* Army.

The most quoted portion of President John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address exemplifies the service to one’s country that continues to inspire the members of the Armed Forces, while in uniform and after they return to civilian life: “Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.”¹ Veterans set an example of a higher calling, and they demonstrate tangibly and proudly that, even though they have departed a Service, *service* has not departed them. This sense of service exemplifies the loyalty and lifelong commitment of those who were willing, if necessary, to give the “last full measure of devotion” in the service of a grateful nation. This is yet another reason why the United States Armed Forces is America’s most respected and honored profession.

Note

¹ John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, Washington, DC, January 20, 1961, available at <www.jfklibrary.org/>.