

The American Legion



For God and country

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Editor – The following guest editorial by the national commander of The American Legion for use on or about Veterans Day, Nov. 11, 2008 is offered for your publication consideration.

Guest Editorial – 630 Words

We owe veterans our appreciation

By David K. Rehbein

John C. Villepigue was a 22-year-old Army corporal from Camden, S.C. On a mid-October day, Villepigue and two comrades were on a scouting mission when they were ambushed and bombarded with enemy machine gun fire. One of Villepigue's fellow scouts was instantly killed and the other seriously wounded, but Villepigue charged on. Advancing another 500 yards, he killed four enemy soldiers, captured six more and secured the two enemy machine guns, while sustaining serious injuries of his own.

Villepigue was not a veteran of Iraq or Afghanistan, although similar brave acts have occurred there. He was a veteran of World War I and he succumbed to his wounds six months after the ambush. For his actions at Vaux-Adigny, France, he received the Medal of Honor. He passed away on April 18, 1919, one month after a group of his fellow World War I veterans in Paris founded a veterans organization called The American Legion.

The new Legionnaires vowed to “preserve the memories and incidents of our associations in the Great Wars.” As the current head of that same organization, I can attest that it is a promise that The American Legion lives up to everyday. While Veterans Day is intended to honor all of the great men and women who have served in the U.S. military, Americans should remember that every moment that we spend in freedom is due to the sacrifices that generations of heroes have made on our behalf.

America is what it is *because* of our veterans. Historian Stephen Ambrose once wrote, “America's wars have been like rungs on a ladder by which it rose to greatness. No other country has triumphed so long, so consistently or on such a vast scale through force of arms.”

Nobody hates wars more than those who have had to fight them, but let us never forget that wars

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have maintained our freedom, liberated slaves, stopped genocide and toppled terrorists. It is insufficient to simply say that we support the troops but not follow up on that commitment with deeds. The White House and Congress need to ensure that the VA health system is always fully funded and accessible to all veterans. The new GI Bill needs to be user-friendly and sufficiently cover the high cost of education. Americans should assist family members of those deployed overseas by offering friendship and neighborly assistance in their communities. Most of all, Americans should never blame the soldier for decisions made by politicians.

Not all veterans have seen war, but they have all taken oaths in which they expressed their willingness to die defending this nation. This loyalty and devotion should be rewarded by the would-be employer considering a qualified job applicant who has worn the uniform of our great nation. It should be remembered by the landlord frustrated that the family of one of his deployed tenants has fallen a little behind on the rent. It should be understood by the college professor whose student had to miss a few classes to receive medical treatment at the VA hospital.

Veterans are proud. Many are successful business leaders, police officers, teachers, and other pillars of the community. While some may have struggled through tough times, they ask for neither hand-outs nor pity. There are far easier ways to receive government assistance than to crawl around in the dirt and get shot at. Simply put, veterans just want what we all owe them – the thanks of a grateful nation.

George Washington had it right when he said, “The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive veterans of early wars were treated and appreciated by our nation.”

The American Legion appreciates their service. We owe them no less.

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David K. Rehbein of Ames, Iowa, is national commander of the 2.6 million-member American Legion, the nation’s largest wartime veterans organization. A high resolution photo of Cmdr. Rehbein is available at www.legion.org.