Veteran’s Day

November 10, 11

Good afternoon fellow veterans and members of the Ithaca College community. I’d like to thank the Veteran’s Day Committee for inviting me to share with you my thoughts on this day that has been set aside to remember all veterans.

When I was asked to speak at this event, it was easy to accept the invitation. But then, I had to consider what I would say. Today, I’ll be sharing with you how I ended up serving in the Army, some of my military experiences and end by reflecting on the theme that, in the Army, as in life, everyone matters.

I am proud to be a veteran and have no regret for the many years I served my country. However, my story did not begin with service to my country as a goal, no my military service was born out of a need for survival.

At the age of 16, I had enough credits to graduate from high school. But I had no plan for life. At 17, I graduated and still had no plan. However, what I did have was a drive for greater independence.

While many of my peers were heading off to college, college wasn’t an option my family could afford…keeping my sister in school was difficult enough. Besides, I wasn’t interested in college…I was barely interested in high school. At that age, I knew I would not land a job that would enable me to live independently. So I made other plans. I joined the Army.

Joining the Army was the best option I could see at the time, and it gave me something positive to do with my life while I figured out what I would do later.

Right away, the Army seemed like a good fit. You see, I came from a home where authority was not questioned…at least not directly, and in the Army, things went well for those who were good followers and listened to those in authority. I like to think of the Army as having reinforced what my mother had already instilled, obedience, integrity, and other character building stuff parents try to instill. And that is just what the Army did; I learned to be a good and obedient soldier with character.

One of my first acts of obedience was to memorize Article 1 of the Code of Conduct. In 1979, it read: “I am an American fighting man. I serve in the forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense.” Well, I wasn’t interested in giving my life in anyone’s defense; I was simply being obedient. I did what I was told to do…because that’s what good soldiers do…or they do push-ups!

When I did ask questions, it was not to challenge authority. It was to figure out how to get an edge so I could get ahead. For me, success in the military was easy…there was a plan and all I had to do was follow it. For me, the seeds of obedience were sown early in life, and there was a price to pay for disobedience. The price to pay for disobedience in the Army could be steep…loss of pay, rank, confinement and/or dishonorable discharge.

I think I might be one of the few people to have served in the Army that liked Basic Training. Sure, it was challenging, but challenging in the kind of way that I knew I would survive it all. And it was there, in Basic Training, that my military identity began to form. We were a team, as strong as our weakest link. And you can be sure there was motivation for that weak link to get strong.

I remember Private Sweeney, Private Goldberg, Private Gooden, Private Rafferty…names to you, but members of my first military family…and it was in connection with them, and with those of future units of assignment that the transformation from civilian to soldier began and continued.

I entered the Army with the expectation of becoming a Morse Code intercept operator after Basic Training. On the first day of class, we were encouraged to look around, because by the time graduation would come, 70% of the class would have been dismissed from the course. I remember looking around with the arrogance of a 17 year old, wondering who would not be at graduation. And as you might have imagined, I was one of the 70%.

But, in failure I found something good and meaningful! I went on to become a Dental Specialist in the Army, which is a modern day dental assistant. I worked in every area of dentistry, learned to be a hygienist, and even had the opportunity to serves as the interim manager of a dental clinic at a rank and age uncommon for the position.

I took advantage of opportunities that opened up before me. I accompanied a dentist to a zoo to provide dental care for a bear (and yes, that was a pretty cool experience, partly because the bear was heavily sedated!). I served with a multinational Peacekeeping force in the Sinai Desert, enjoying opportunities to walk off base and swim in the Red Sea, and one time while out on a hike, had tea with Bedouins. I lived in Germany and The Netherlands, traveled in Europe and had the opportunity to experience different peoples and cultures. And I also began taking college courses…you see, I became interested in college when I learned course credit counted toward promotion points. I excelled in leadership courses and am proud of the many decorations awarded me.

Several other memories of my time in the military stand out for me: learning to drive a stick-shift in a 2 ½ ton truck; training others to shoot an M16 rifle one year for their annual qualification, and failing to qualify myself; obtaining a perfect score for running two miles for a physical fitness test in 12:05… in combat boots!

Well, I could go on and on. But what really made the experience meaningful was the personal growth I experienced and the many people I met over the years. I met a lot of Americans while serving abroad who are still friends. Some of those friendships are nearly three decades old and represent some of my closest attachments…people I now call family.

Well, that might all sound nice, but there was another story unfolding. It is the story of the soldier who does not get to experience the freedoms other Americans take for granted. Back in 1987, I was working as a dental assistant in what was then the FRG. I recall listening to the Armed Forces Radio station and hearing reports of what we now know to be HIV and AIDS. Being the obedient soldier, I could not have an honest conversation with my comrades about my same-sex attraction. I was sure doing so would have meant taking a risk of being dishonorably discharged. But as I reflect on that time, what stands out is the contradiction between the policy and the practice. Depending on the attitude of the commanding officer, some realities were simply ignored. I was closeted about my same-sex attraction (or so I thought), but I knew people who were gay. And I knew some others who I believed to be gay or lesbian, but that didn’t matter to me. We all had jobs to do, we did them, and we looked out for each other. That is what mattered.

About two months ago, DADT was repealed after being U.S. policy for nearly 18 years. During that time, a host of LGBT identified people served our country…defending our unalienable rights, which include Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness. They defended America while America denied them their pursuit of happiness and way of life. And so, today, when we celebrate those who have served our country and defended our freedom, let us also remember those we failed to protect.

Yes, obedience was good for me, but with it comes responsibility, a responsibility to know the difference between when I should lead and when I should follow. A responsibility to know when I should speak up and when I should keep quiet. For it was in the military, within that culture of order, and yes, a culture that has historically been homophobic and sexist, and yes, it even has its racist past…it was in the order of that culture that I learned everyone matters. Everyone. That what we do, or don’t do, matters and affects us all.

Thank You