

Talk delivered at Veterans Day observance at Ithaca College - Tuesday, November 11, 2003 - Willard Ticknor Daetsch, Ithaca College Faculty, 1965-95.

The entire observance was completed in just about one hour between noon and 1 p.m. Each of the two talks took approximately eight minutes. Dusty Bredbenner, Ithaca College '50 gave the first followed by a musical interlude and then I gave the second. I have tried to put in this version the few things I added while delivering the talk. - Willard - Tuesday night - 11/11/03

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Greetings to fellow veterans and all gathered to celebrate Veterans Day.

I chose to wear my uniform today, not to show that it still fits, but to emphasize the fact that when I wore this uniform in active duty I was about the same age as those of you who are upperclassmen.

I am honored to be with Dusty Bredbenner, Doug Armstrong, Lou Withiam and Charlie Tilton representing the millions of men and women who have served and are serving in the US armed forces.

Dusty has presented a clear picture of the horror of war - especially foot soldiering. I too was in the infantry, the 97th Division, which was in Germany and Czechoslovakia in 1945. We had trained for amphibious landings on Pacific islands (I once knew how to waterproof a jeep, drop into three feet of water and drive ashore.) But we were fighting in Europe because the December, 1944 Battle of the Bulge, which Dusty has described, had shown an urgent need for more men.

I was a "foot soldier" in name but a jeep driver by assignment and also an unofficial translator. Jeep driving was frequently exhausting but was also a blessing because it left me few waking hours to worry about what might happen next or even much time to grieve for wounded and dead comrades. Because I had studied German at college and in the Army Specialized Training Program I was able to obtain some insights into what Germans were thinking when I was interrogating prisoners or clearing housing for our troops.

Our 97th Division, one of the last major units to join combat in Europe, was one of the first to be rushed back through the United States and then shipped out through Seattle for battle in the South Pacific. After a few days at sea the fighting in the East stopped, so instead of island-hopping towards an invasion of Japan we were the first occupation troops there. A courageous Japanese man came to our unit and invited American servicemen to participate in a church choir for Christmas services (the first time I sang the Hallelujah chorus). Because of numerous rehearsals and later visits to his home I came to know one Japanese family quite well and a friendship developed which has endured for fifty eight years.

Now that I've established my credentials as a veteran, I want to give my early views of veterans and war. As a little boy growing up in Western New York my clearest impression of veterans came on May 30 when the Decoration Day parade passed our home - a glorious and thrilling sight with marching bands, veterans, scouts, and women's auxiliaries all led by a few old men riding in cars. They were veterans of the Civil War. I knew one of them, but I never asked him any questions. What a loss for me!

The parade went on a short distance to the cemetery where graves were decorated, volleys shot and taps played; I saw the festivities but did not understand the causes. We school kids were living in a time when "the War to End All Wars" had been fought and we believed that title. I remember one playmate saying: "I hope there is never another war but if there is I hope I can be in it" - a telling comment on our youthful perceptions. War seemed pretty glamorous to some of us. I knew many WWI veterans but cannot remember ever hearing anything about the horror of war. Not until the end of high school, shortly before so many of us were in yet another World War, did anyone ever talk to us about the horrors of war. A lone man using a cane crossed the school stage, sat down and began: "I am going to tell you things which you probably have never heard from your fathers or your uncles." A sobering, eye-opening experience followed.

Probably none of you young people grew up with the idea that the "War to End All Wars" had been fought. Unfortunately you have heard constantly about war, the threat of war, or the necessity of war. You've seen movies, TV shows, news reports about wartime, and have played games in which war is a major part. But I wonder how many of you have talked, really talked personally with someone who has experienced war first hand. You know much from films like "Saving Private Ryan" and "Pearl Harbor", but have such media events taken the place of a first hand discussion? I'm sure, however, that many of you have lost some family member to war, and you may know what the aftermath of war can bring - personal suffering from injuries or post-traumatic stress disorder - to say nothing of family lives torn apart. My own brother died while serving during the Korean War.

Well, what do we do with such memories? How do we honor veterans? Memorial events are important, but my vision of the best tribute to veterans is striving for the best our country can be. Some ways may seem obvious, but do we know their effectiveness? Do we vote in every election for which we are eligible? To do less is like saying that what others did to preserve this country really wasn't very important.

Do we enter into serious discussion about problems - especially the major national and international problems? Or are we satisfied to be "entertained" by the shouting talk shows and the vilifications which the media feature? Do we

read and read critically a really good newspaper? Do we listen to views different from our own and try to give the holders of such views a real chance to speak? Do we take the responsibility of sharing our own views? Do we use some of our time to improve the community in which we live?

When you engage veterans in conversation do so not just to get an old soldier's story but to test your own views. Don't expect veterans to speak with one voice. I hope that all of us veterans are proud of our service, proud of our country. This was certainly true of the WWII veterans I know (including my sister who was in the WAVES). I also hope that you will learn that we have many views, many different views about how we can serve our families and our country best.

Dusty told how close knit his unit was, how the men would do almost anything for each other. I had the same experience. He also talked about the Civilian Conservation Corps and what it meant in the 1930's to people out of work and to the projects they completed. I would promote the honoring of veterans through similar experiences by instituting universal service - not just in the military - service which would enable young people to work together, to meet people from backgrounds very different from their own and to come away with a good feeling about themselves and about the people with whom they worked. An army friend sent me e-mail only last night to state his conviction that the universal service was a country-unifying factor of great significance.

I would follow that service with free higher education - based on the length of service. From personal experience I consider the GI Bill, that enabled veterans to acquire good educations, to be one of the most brilliant and nation-enriching pieces of legislation passed in the 20th century.

Thanks for participating in this observance of Veterans Day. I conclude with the fervent hope that your knowledge of war will remain secondhand.