

The Complexity of “Happy Veterans Day”

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“Happy Veterans Day.”

When people say that to me, I usually just say “Thanks” or “You’re welcome” and move on pretty quickly. Truth is, I don’t really



know how to respond to it.

I was commissioned in the US Navy in 2002, about 6 months after the attacks on 9/11. Nearly immediately I deployed to Europe and the Middle East in support Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and ultimately what became known as the Global War on Terrorism. I didn’t join the Navy because of 9/11 like so many others did. Rather, it was always the plan. From the time I was five and riding in the back of my dad’s Army Jeep at Ft. Meade, Maryland, until I went to Michigan on a Navy ROTC scholarship, there was never a change in course. Laser focused on an idea and a dream, I did exactly what I set out to do. I joined. I served. I persevered. I had the experience of a lifetime. I was lucky. And then I got out. Walking down the pier one last time after the last bell had been rung and the last “hip, hip, hooray” had been cheered, I was filled with enthusiasm for what was next, but also sad that the dream I had as a 5 year old was now suddenly over and would be replaced with fading memories and “Happy Veterans Day.”

There are more veterans from the Gulf War era than all previous eras combined. That’s obviously due to the age of those veterans that came before, but it also reflects the burden that comes with fighting the longest war in American history. Close to 10 million Americans are Gulf War era veterans, many of whom spent an entire career and the best years of their lives supporting efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. For many, their military service and identity are not just intertwined but they are one and the same. Their physical scars are reminders of their commitment, but their mental scars are more difficult to heal.

It’s well documented that returning veterans face a number of challenges when they exit the service—suicide rates higher than any other group, PTSD, homelessness, drug abuse, you name it. In return for their service, they often get a pat on the back, limited transition assistance, and “Happy Veterans Day.” And while most Americans appreciate their sacrifice, and most companies confuse holiday social media posts for action, tangible efforts to repay our veterans for their service is a news story and not a norm. We need to change this.

At Alexion, I am proud to say that we are aiming to make a difference. Through the company’s diversity, inclusion, and belonging efforts, which are extensive, important, impactful, and necessary, we are working to make a real difference in the veteran community. Supported by our senior leaders who also recognize the importance of supporting our veterans, we are working with talent acquisition to improve our veteran recruitment and hiring. We are working with management training and executives to help them understand the value that veterans bring to the organization. We’re holding coffee chats to let people discuss evolving events around the world. We’re educating. We’re volunteering. We’re not just saying “Happy Veterans Day.” We’re making a difference to the men, women, and families who have sacrificed so much.

This Veterans Day don't just say "Happy Veterans Day." Join us in the mission to make a real difference to those who deserve more than our thanks. If you're not sure how, let's talk.