Reclaim Armistice Day and Honor the Real Heroes

by Arnold Oliver

More than a few veterans, Veterans For Peace among them, are troubled by the way Americans observe Veterans Day on November 11th

It was originally called Armistice Day, and established by Congress in 1926 to "perpetuate peace through good will and mutual understanding between nations, (and later) a day dedicated to the cause of world peace." For years, many churches rang their bells on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month - the time that the guns fell silent on the Western Front by which time sixteen million had died.

To put it bluntly, in 1954 Armistice Day was hijacked by a militaristic congress, and today few Americans understand the original purpose of the occasion, or even remember it. The message of peace seeking has vanished. Now known as Veterans Day, it has devolved into a hyper-nationalistic worship ceremony for war and the putatively valiant warriors who wage it.

Here is a news flash. Most of what goes on during wartime is decidedly unheroic, and heroes in war are few and far between.

I have to tell you that when I was in Vietnam, I was no hero, and I didn't witness any heroism during the year I spent there, first as a U.S. Army private and then as a sergeant.

Yes, there was heroism in the Vietnam War. On both sides of the conflict there were notable acts of self-sacrifice and bravery. Troops in my unit wondered how the North Vietnamese troops could persevere for years in the face of daunting U.S. firepower. U.S. medical corpsmen performed incredible acts of valor rescuing the wounded under fire.

But I also witnessed a considerable amount of bad behavior, some of it my own. There were widespread incidents of disrespect and abuse of Vietnamese civilians including many war crimes. Further, all units had, and still have, their share of criminals, con artists and thugs. Most unheroic of all were the U.S. military and civilian leaders who planned, orchestrated, and profited greatly from that avoidable war.

The cold truth is that the U.S. invasion and occupation of Vietnam had next to nothing to do with protecting American peace and freedom. On the contrary, the Vietnam War bitterly

divided the United States, and was fought it to forestall Vietnamese independence, not defend it.

Unfortunately, Vietnam wasn't an isolated example. Many American wars — including the 1846 Mexican-American War, the Spanish-American War in 1898, and the Iraq War (this list is by no means exhaustive) — were waged under false pretexts against countries that didn't threaten the United States. It's hard to see how, if a war is unjust, it can be heroic to wage it.

But if the vast majority of wars are not fought for noble reasons, and few soldiers are heroic, have there been any actual heroes out there defending peace and freedom? And if so, who are they?

Well, there are many, from Jesus down to the present. I'd put Gandhi, Tolstoy, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the list along with many Quakers and Mennonites. And don't forget General Smedley Butler, who wrote that "War is a Racket", and even Robert McNamara who came around in the end.

In Vietnam, Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson stopped the My Lai massacre from being even worse.

Another candidate is former U.S. Army specialist [Josh Stieber who sent this message](#) to the people of Iraq: "Our heavy hearts still hold hope that we can restore inside our country the acknowledgment of your humanity, that we were taught to deny." Ponder a million Iraqi deaths. Chelsea Manning sits behind bars for exposing those and other truths.

The real heroes are those who resist war and militarism, often at great personal cost.

Because militarism has been around for such a long time, at least since Gilgamesh came up with his protection racket in Sumeria going on 5,000 years ago, people argue that it will always be with us.

But many also thought that slavery and the subjugation of women would last forever, and they're being proven wrong. We understand that while militarism will not disappear overnight, disappear it must if we are to avoid economic as well as moral bankruptcy.

As Civil War General W.T. Sherman said at West Point, "I confess without shame that I am tired and sick of war." We're with you, bro.

This year on November 11th, Veterans For Peace will bring back the original Armistice Day traditions. Join them and let those bells ring out.

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