

Remarks of James G. Huse, Jr.

Boston College Veterans Association Reunion, May 30, 2015

I am honored to be back at Boston College this morning as a veteran ROTC graduate of 50 years ago. The years have gone by so quickly. This phenomenon of time passing surprises me more and every day.

I was commissioned in the Regular Army here on campus on my graduation day, June 7, 1965. Our ROTC commissioning as Reserve Officers had occurred several days before, but my swearing in as a Regular had to occur after graduation. I wore my Army green officer's uniform under my graduation gown and the heat temperature that day reached record levels - so much so - that the late and beloved Cardinal Cushing, scheduled to give the commencement address that day, came to the podium in Alumni Stadium and said in his inimitable style, "It would be a sin against charity for me to speak today" then blessed us and wished us good fortune to a standing ovation.

In those days, BC had a sizable ROTC cadet brigade and on drill days during the school year the stretch of the roadway from the Roberts Center to Saint Ignatius Church would resound with shouted orders, staccato drum beats and the tramp of hundreds of cadets as the companies, and battalions of the brigade learned drill and ceremonies.

Those Boston College memories and many others have stayed with me these past 50 years, and like the soldier's reflections in Thomas Heath's evocative poem they truly "meant my life to me."

The Boston College Veterans' Alumni Network is a marvelous organization in sustaining that connection to our beloved alma mater and to all those BC alumni who share the pride and the bond of military service, and especially to those Veteran Alumni who died in fulfilling it.

Nothing more embodies the core value of commitment to service that is such a paramount dimension of a BC education than military service in the Armed Forces. The sublime expression of that commitment to service is the names of those inscribed on the beautiful Veteran's Memorial behind me.

We are here today to reflect on those sacrifices by these BC alumni who share our heritage as well as the bond we all share as BC veterans answering that call to service by our Nation.

This remembering is a responsibility and a trust that we have to sustain. Like most veterans, I live every day with my personal memories of war -- of friends I lost and miss --and with the private emotions that are the product of both.

Like most veterans I feel an intense obligation to validate these sacrifices in any way I can, and yet at the same time, I feel my efforts are not enough.

I am truly awed by this responsibility to honor our fallen, and yet I find it difficult to find the exact words to express my feelings about Memorial Day without resorting to the tired ceremonial rhetoric that we've all heard before. Because of this I thought I would try to tell you how I feel with some personal reflections:

I am also the son of a veteran. My late father was a Navy submariner in World War II. When he came home from the war he returned to his high school teaching career. He never talked to us about his wartime experiences. On Memorial Day my mother would take my sisters and brothers and me to the corner of our street to watch our local Memorial Day parade.

I can remember standing there (with great pride) watching my Dad march by in his faded Navy officer's uniform, with all of his pals and colleagues in their ill-fitting military regalia, heading up the street to the city wall memorial to pay tribute to their missing comrades.

I was deeply impressed then, and I am today, by what I've come to understand was the intensity of the emotion of these self-effacing men as they performed this solemn ritual of memory. These quiet men -- all with great stories of battle danger, and valor -- who each returned to their vastly different civilian lives, and yet men who kept their own counsel about their war experiences except in this one public ceremony year after year.

I remember too that as a child my elementary school would have a Memorial Day assembly on the grounds of a cemetery that was adjacent to our school. We children would sing patriotic songs and recite poems about Memorial Day. Each year. Near the end of the assembly a 6th grade student in a tentative voice would recite Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. The ceremony would then conclude with an elderly man in a tattered American Legion cap, an old "Doughboy" from the 1st World War singing the plaintive ballad, "My Buddy," without musical accompaniment or any other remarks. Even now I marvel at the faith of that old soldier, in his cracking voice, giving this most personal heartfelt testament to his absent comrades-in-arms. He was a true witness to their lives.

A few years ago I was traveling in Texas on Memorial Day, and on a rainy morning in a small town east of Austin, I came across a small gathering on a patch of green in the town square. Because of the weather there were only a dozen people standing in front of what was the town honor roll. What struck me then was that most of the gathered were elderly women adorned in the blue capes and white caps of the Gold Star Mothers organization. These were mothers; their children were killed-in-action. This scene was about love, pain and loss, of wartime sacrifices, and pride.

These vignettes are revealing. They reflect our collective responsibility to go beyond the despair of the British poet Robert Graves reflected on in his poem, "Armistice Day, 1918" where he said:

"When the days of rejoicing are over,

When the flags are stowed safely away,

They will dream of another wild "War to End Wars"

And another wild Armistice Day.

But the boys who were killed in the trenches,

Who fought with no rage and no rant,

We left them stretched out on their pallets of mud

Low down with the worm and the ant."

You see avoiding this oblivion must be our solemn Alumni Veterans Reunion obligation and trust. We have to give true witness. All wars involve sacrifice and loss and these outcomes only have meaning in the act of public remembrance. How can we do less?

I realize that it has become a cliché to say that we live in complex times.

The speed and noise of everyday existence buffet all of us. We are drowned by the surfeit of information and self-absorption brought on by the new media. Modern life crowds out reflection and meditation. Today our attention is drawn to frivolous celebrity rather than substantive and meaningful achievements.

We spend so much effort embracing daily concerns and distractions that there is little motivation to look back. Part of this phenomenon too is that our young have little opportunity to find emotional connection to the past, to understand the cost and the value of the sacrifices made. Let us be honest, we have devalued the designation "hero" to the point that it obscures true valor and sacrifice and has been diluted to mean "good performance" in so many lesser contexts. Media overstatements (or blather) have much to do with why this has happened.

In times past, the idea of sacrifice and public service had far more respect and meaning for most Americans than it does today.

I personally believe that when President Nixon ended the draft in 1973, much more disappeared than just the idea of universal military service. What also occurred was that many Americans became disconnected from (and unfortunately even disinterested about) their individual stake, in not only the present state of affairs, but also the history of this Country. This non-participation and lack-of-interest issue has far broader implications than honoring veterans alone but is instructive about concerns we all should have about apathy and the failure to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship

Caring for and respecting veterans is about all of us. Not just the fallen citizen soldiers, sailors, marines, airmen, and coast guardsmen brave but also about their families, spouses and friends, and in our act of remembering to affirm that these solemn contributions of lives and limbs, of dreams and possibilities have enduring value.

We have to care about and give comfort to our veterans. We have to insure that they have the support they need by our own acts, and contributions to the veterans support programs that help them. We need to care about our federal government and state agencies that serve veterans, especially the Department of Veterans Affairs, and involve ourselves as citizens and veterans in its oversight and effectiveness.

Remember the VA motto that is taken from Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address: "...to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan..."

This certainly is our BC Veterans Alumni Association's mission, as well.

As a part of that long ago elementary school Memorial Day memory I told you about a moment ago, I remember that my 6th Grade teacher, Miss Fowler, had our whole class participate in the antiphonal singing of a poem she had written and put to music entitled "Why We Have Memorial Day?"

The answering chorus of that song - a simple but clear affirmation - is a good way for me to end this address. Standing in that cemetery in West Medford, so long ago, gathered under our classroom flag and foil covered cans of lilacs, we 6th graders, with our strong and sincere children`s voices, we proudly sang:

"Long ago our soldiers brave fought to make us free."

Fought and died to make this land safe for you and me."

Please join me in the effort to honor the spirit and profound commitment embodied in that simple song, to remember our Boston College veteran`s -and all veterans - today and every day. Thank you very much.