



BOSTON COLLEGE VETERANS DAY REMARKS NOVEMBER 11, 2019

By Joseph P. Connolly '85

Gratitude to Service-Members, Veterans, and Families

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm honored to be speaking with you on this special day where we pay tribute to those who served our great country.

I want to start by thanking my brother's David's widow, Deb Litke, Deb's family, the Toran's, and the whole Connolly Clan for allowing me to represent our families on this very special day.

Also, thank you to Boston College for hosting today's program. BC has been an integral part of both the Toran and Connolly family's lives. I especially want to thank BC ROTC, the Student Veterans Groups and Veteran's Alumni Association for the great work they do in raising the profile of veterans within the BC community and making BC a "Veteran Friendly" institution.

Overview

I am going to focus my remarks in three areas today - I'd like to share a little of my brother David's story with you; I want to highlight the burden service members like David and their families carry as a result of our wars; and I want to ask each of you to share some of that burden.

Opening – DSC story

How many of you have ever experienced embracing a family member, or loved one, and not knowing if you would ever see them again? In December of 2004, I had that experience as I hugged my brother David in a parking lot near my home in Atlanta GA, as David prepared to deploy to Afghanistan.

A few short months later, on April 6th, 2005, David was killed when the CH-47 helicopter in which he was riding crashed during a sandstorm in Ghazni, Afghanistan. Seventeen other service-members were killed with David.

Many of you were woven into the story line of David's brief, adventurous, mischievous and service-oriented life. For those of you who do not know David's story, please allow me to share a little about David as I think it represents the story of so many of our service members we honor today.

David was a kind souled and opinionated man. Let's just say he always took the unconventional route. Despite being a voracious reader and passionate debater, traditional schools were not designed for learners like David and therefore much of his early schooling was a real challenge. He attended several high schools and eventually earned his GED. He enlisted in the Coast Guard. When his enlistment was up, he returned home to Boston, attended BC and participated in ROTC. I had the privilege of administering David's commission oath on May 1994 right across the way in Gasson.

After serving on active duty, once again he returned home to Boston where he earned his law degree at Suffolk Law School and continued to serve in the reserves. He joined the Suffolk County DAs office as an Assistant DA.

In 2004, after already being deployed once in support of OEF, David volunteered to deploy to Afghanistan with the 7th SF Group out of FT Bragg NC.

David was deploying out of FT Stewart, GA, just a few hours from my home in Atlanta, GA. My wife Jeanne and I planned a family celebration the weekend prior to David's deployment. Deb flew into Atlanta and we had a special weekend. We reluctantly said our good-bye's on Sunday afternoon. It was a magical weekend I will never forget. I still treasure it to this day.

Well, if you know David, that was not to be the "final" going away celebration. David called me during the middle of the week and told me his deployment was delayed. Deb flew back into town and we got to celebrate all over again. Once again, when Sunday afternoon came, we said our good-bye's. Shortly after Dave and Deb left, I got a call from Deb. David had forgotten his wallet or his phone, I don't remember. I jumped in my car and met them down the road in a shopping center parking lot and gave Dave one last hug. It was the last time I would ever see my brother.

Whether you were a relative, a childhood friend, fellow Eagle, someone who served alongside David, all of us felt the significant loss and burden of war because of his sacrifice. David was a "man and woman" for others who led an incredible life of service.

So many good things have come from David's death. Thanks to the generosity of many of you here today, we were able to endow a scholarship to support ROTC and veteran students here at BC. We have supported great groups like Home for our Troops and Mass Fallen Heroes. Most importantly, we have all grown closer and supportive of one another. We are fortunate that we have an incredible network of family and friends that continues to support one another many years after Dave's death. Unfortunately, many service members, veterans, and their families

do not have such a strong support network as they deal with the consequences of the sacrifices they made serving our country.

Purpose

October marked the 18th anniversary of our entry into Afghanistan in response to 9/11. We are officially in our “Longest War.” The truth is that the “War” will continue for generations as veterans and their families deal with the consequences of the disproportionate sacrifices they made fighting our “Longest War.”

Over three million volunteer service members have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001. Over half of them, like Dave, deployed more than once. Many more Americans: the spouses, children, parents, siblings, and friends also carry the burden and, in effect, pay the cost of war as they cope with their loved ones’ absence during deployments, and mourn their deaths, or find themselves challenged to reestablish relationships with the very different person who returns from the war zone.

There are two main challenges service members and their families face:

1. Many veterans have unique health needs and face a life of disability due to physical and psychological injuries. Approximately one third of veterans have some disability as a result of the wars. Countless more live with physical and emotional scars despite lack of official disability status. Veterans experience high rates of post-traumatic-stress-disorder (PTSD), mental illness, drug and alcohol dependence, accidental deaths, homelessness and suicide. (By the end of today’s ceremony, two veterans will have committed suicide).

Let me share, with permission, one of those stories. My cousin Steven Basilici is here with us today. Steve is a US Army Special Forces Officer, a Green Beret, one of our finest warriors. Steven has seven combat deployments, with five of those deployments to Afghanistan where he has spent over three years of his life! Steve has been married to his amazing wife, Mia, for thirty-one years. They have three grown, incredible, children: John, Kate, and Connor and one beautiful three-month old grandson named Daniel.

Steve is currently working through medical support and treatment for traumatic brain injury from a significant number of head and body injuries **and** post-traumatic-stress-disorder from the constant strain, physical, emotional, and spiritual cost of over thirty years of service. Steve will carry the burden his entire life.

But again, this is not just about Steve. Mia and the children have coped with numerous deployments and the very real fear and anxiety of not knowing if Steven would come home. They have also experienced a lot of tears over the years as part of a special

community that takes care of its own through countless deployments, memorial services, hospital visits and delivering meals to families dealing with loss and brokenness. Mia, John, Kate, and Connor will carry the burden their entire lives.

Steve did not consent to sharing his story to generate pity – far from it, but to generate a sense of real purpose and personal responsibility for supporting our service members, veterans and their families.

2. While Steve is getting support while still on active duty, for hundreds of thousands of veterans, life after the military presents many challenges to them and their family members. For some, returning to civilian life feels like another battle that poses a variety of difficulties that must not only be properly identified and dealt with, but understood both consciously and emotionally.

In the military you wake up every day with a purpose and a mission as a member of a high-performing team. When you transition, you suddenly find yourself “starting over” in society. You experience a loss of identity, purpose, and self-worth. Veterans often feel isolated and are forced to reassess their life goals and ambitions as well as re-establishing and even re-evaluating relationships with family and friends.

Navigating a society with cultures, values, and norms different from those of the military is extremely difficult, especially when one’s military service becomes such a powerful and integral part of their identity. The reality is the civilian world abides by many standards that are in stark contrast to those of the military. In the civilian world, veterans find an emphasis on the individual, a fragmented social structure, and seemingly limitless range of morals and values compared to the military which stresses unit cohesion and uniform morals/values.

Let me share a story that highlights these challenges. I am part of an amazing organization called Afterburner. Afterburner is a consulting firm that works with clients around the globe helping them define and execute their strategy. Our firm is unique in that all team members are former military professionals. One of the many ways we give back to our brothers and sisters who serve, is to run a workshop that helps transitioning service members and their spouses develop a clear and compelling plan for the next chapter of their lives. We help them understand that the military was a great chapter, but it doesn’t have to be the only chapter! On three occasions, service members have approached our team and shared that they were contemplating suicide before attending the workshop. A simple one-day workshop helped them gain clarity and confidence in defining purpose and a plan for their life after the military!

Conclusion/Call to Action

My question to you is: are we doing enough to support those who have served and sacrificed so much on our behalf? The honest answer is no. Most Americans pay very little attention to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – a passing glance at a CNN story on a TV monitor walking through an airport or watching a sporting event where we witness the sheer joy of a family as their loved one unexpectedly returns home from a war zone. We have a reverent but disengaged attitude toward the military. In many ways we, the American people, have asked our armed services to carry the incredible burden of years of combat solely on their shoulders. The fact is that we are not carrying our part of the load, our part of the very real moral burden that is the actual cost of war for every American, not just for those who volunteer to serve.

My ask of each one of you today is to help shoulder some of the often-crushing weight and find a way to help veterans and their families. Commit to becoming, and staying, aware and engaged in supporting our veterans. There are many great organizations out there that need our support - no one agency, government or nonprofit group has the capacity to meet the mounting needs of our veterans and their families. I hope you find that organization and step up.

A great place to start is right here at The Heights. Let's commit to making BC one of the top veteran- friendly universities in the country! Consider supporting one of the veteran's groups on campus - ROTC, the collective student veterans' or the veteran's alumni network. Each of these groups does great work to making BC a more veteran-friendly institution. If you are interested in helping, please connect with any of the Veteran Alumni Network Board members or contact the BC Alumni Association for ways to help.

In closing, I know my brother David would be actively involved in supporting the veteran's groups here at BC. In his own words I call you to action, "Can you do more – can you do better - can you make a difference? Can you do more – can you do better – can you make a difference?" The answer to all of David's questions are the same... yes you can.

God bless all those that have and are currently serving our country, God bless all of you, and God bless America.