

Our Forgotten Privilege Protectors

*Written by Joey Sarno, Concord Academy
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While last Friday was simply just another day for many students at Concord Academy, Veterans Day, for me, was a unique day to commemorate and celebrate those who put their lives on the line to preserve our freedom. That morning, I proudly got dressed, wearing a shirt that bore the mantra “Land of the Free Because of the Brave;” however, I was among few to show solidarity for our troops. CA began the day with a speech by our headmaster—one which barely referenced veterans. The day went on just like any other: classes, work, and only a few mentions to the significance of the day. This was not the first time in my life where I thought veterans and those who paid the ultimate sacrifice did not get the appreciation they deserve. In fact, over the years, I have seen more and more examples of intentional ignorance and apathy toward those who fight and die for us everyday, both within my community at CA and in the northeast.

Before I begin, I must admit that I am biased. Over the past two years, I have met many veterans and members of the military, some only a year older than me. It’s only natural that I get upset every time I see someone show a blatant lack of respect to our veterans. But I do not dwell on it. As I walked home last Friday, I saw a homeless veteran, and I gave him everything I had in my wallet: 50 cents. This was the first time I felt true angry at how our veterans get treated once they return from the front lines, and I have not stopped thinking about it since. However, based on my experiences within the CA community, it seems that most students do not think about the sacrifices and suffering of our veterans.

When I was in eighth grade, like many other middle schoolers, my class went to D.C.. The last stop in the trip was the Pentagon memorial. I went around and quietly took it in to try to understand the events of 9/11 as best as an eighth grader could. However, some other kids thought it would be a better idea to run around and talk loudly. In fact, many of the boys in my grade somehow deemed it appropriate to ask out girls to the prom at this memorial. After this, most students walked around excitedly, hardly remembering where they were. They did not honor in the slightest way the men and women who died on 9/11, especially those who were in the military or retired. You could argue it was because we were in the eighth grade, but I think that’s as much as a cop out as the saying “boys will be boys”. This, sadly, was only the beginning of this pattern of disrespect to the soldiers of this country that I have witnessed.

Last year, I was with a group of students for a program, and one Saturday we went to Antietam. For those who don’t know, Antietam was the site of a fierce battle during the Civil War in which 22,000 men died. The second I stepped on that hallowed ground, I was dumbfounded; I could barely picture 22,000 people, let alone fathom such a mass scale of death. However, some of my classmates were not as moved as I was. One person thought it would be a good idea to barrel roll down a hill—a hill where men died for their country. I was shocked. I could not believe how

much privilege this kid must feel to be able to be so joyful at a place where thousands of men died to overthrow the institution of slavery. I talked to him later that day, and he told me he didn't feel the place was anything of importance and thought his actions were a perfect reaction to a fun looking hill.

My experience of these instances led me to last Friday: Veterans Day. We gathered in chapel for an "announcement" about Veterans Day. Our headmaster went up to the podium to speak. But rather than veterans of war, he spoke about other veterans who did not fight, such as diplomats, social activists, and conscientious observers, and described how their contributions to society were also important. He mentioned soldiers and veterans for a total of three sentences. Nothing else was mentioned about veterans for the rest of the day. No one seemed to care. I was horrified but not surprised.

I do not think those other veterans my headmaster spoke of are unimportant. They are important, but on a day about veterans, I believe these sentiments were out of place. His remarks reminded me of the "Black Lives Matter, All Lives Matter" debate. We don't say "All Lives Matter," because it devalues the issues faced by African Americans throughout the country. Similarly, I think that, on Veterans Day, we should focus specifically on the veterans of war, not all of those who have served the nation in different, though still crucial roles. Veterans Day commemorates those who have served the nation in the Armed Forces. Let us not dilute the meaning of this day.

The stories I have recounted share a common theme; people refuse to confront their privilege. The United States is unique because service is voluntary, not mandatory. As a result, very few of my classmates have a relative in the military or know anyone currently serving. War is nowhere in the minds of the kids I go to school with. We are so privileged that most of us never worry about those overseas. We don't need to go to bed worrying about close family members fighting a war in another part of the world, and because of our failure to understand this privilege, we do not care about Veterans Day or Veterans issues today.

There is also the issue that many of us consider military service to be a waste of time. Personally, I want to go into the service, and these are common responses I receive: "Why would you waste your time, your life?" or "Your parents spent so much money on your education for you to get shot." This alone demonstrates the silent privilege we don't admit to in our lives. Our Armed Forces preserve liberty and freedom both in America and around the globe; risking death in pursuit of global justice is not only an honorable task to partake in, but extremely important to people around the world. I do not think that simply because our parents are able to afford a prep school, we should be exempt from serving. So, no, it is not a "waste of time," or a "waste of my parents' resources." Serving for our country is an honorable and imperative task, regardless of your class or upbringing.

Our soldiers deserve better than this. If you truly want to “check your privilege,” then think about all the men and women who died to protect your safety and freedom. Think about the people who died so you can protest. Think about the people who laid down their lives so you can criticize your government. Think about the families who will never see their loved ones again because they died for us, and for our liberty, so you can wake up and learn. Maybe if you reflect on these issues next year, you will give more than five minutes of your time to Veterans Day.