

Passing on the Soldier's Duty: A Look at New York's Veterans Day Parade

By Shannon Liao, Epoch Times | November 11, 2014

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NEW YORK—Every year on a day in November, veterans are honored for their service—for any kind of service, in any kind of war.

The biggest parade in the country, New York's Veterans Day Parade Tuesday saw diverse groups ranging from the military, schools, and marching bands to supportive government officials. It also honored the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War.

Crowds of people, including families with small children, leaned over the barricades, waving hands, flags, and signs.

"Thank you for your service!" some of them shouted. Veterans shouted back to soldiers in the crowd, "Thank you for your service!"

Many soldiers spoke of the shift in public attitude toward the military since the days of Nam: Decades ago, people would come out to protest America's participation in the Vietnam War, and they lumped soldiers in as targets of their loathing.



"The war is not a pleasant place to see or be."

John Rezin, retired veteran,
Vietnam War

Today, a crowd of over 500,000 cheered on Vietnam veterans and many other soldiers participating in the parade.

Even some who disagree with the war overseas were there to offer support.

"I think at a time like this in this country, when people are being dragged back into war, it's important to differentiate between the fighters who are forced. They're not making a decision where we fight," said Laura Limuli, 64, of the Coalition for Darfur and Marginalized Sudan.

"She's right," said John Rezin, 67, a retired Vietnam War veteran. "The war is not a pleasant place to see or be. And thank God they are supporting the veterans, who are doing their job, and what they're meant to be and trained to do."

Inheritance

Airman 1st Class Sarah Moses, 25, originally from Texas, but now stationed at McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey, has only been with the military for eight months.

“The experience was an eye-opener,” she said. “I literally went into survival mode.”

Still, her rough start is a common experience of many veterans, a bond that they share.

“They were instilling things that soldiers from fifty years ago had to learn,” said Moses, who joined because her father, father-in-law, husband, and cousin had all joined.

“There is a strong bond between old and new,” she said, expressing her gratitude that the Vietnam veterans still come out every year.

Her fellow soldier, 23-year-old Senior Airman John Cody said, “It kind of gives you a sense of what the military is really about and what we’ve been through as a whole.”

Cody joined up after seeing the devastation left by the Sept. 11 attacks. He was deployed to Afghanistan once as a medic and works in ambulance services at McGuire.



“You’re not forgotten. It’s a tough feeling to be forgotten.”

Clark Peña, veteran, Panama Invasion and Gulf War

Cody and Moses stood at 52nd Street Tuesday, looking on at the groups flooding in to greet them.

“We were chosen to hold the ground zero flags,” explained Moses. “So now we’re just waiting for our unit.”

A Moment in Time

Veteran Jesse Williams, 32, described a unique moment during the parade, when the past collided with the present.

He served in the 82nd Airborne Division. An older gentleman called out to him in the crowd, “Hey! Airborne!” and they made eye contact. Sparks flew.

“You have that moment where you kind of look and exchange greetings, and there’s definitely a bridge there between you and the past,” said Williams, who now works at a digital leadership program that helps startups. “I hope that in 20 or 30 years, I’ll be able to do that for someone else as well.”

Passing It On

“You feel proud. It’s like one huge party,” said Clark Peña, 48, who served during the Panama invasion and the Gulf War. “You get emotional, you feel really good. It shows that people really acknowledge the work that the veterans do for this country.”

“It’s a good feeling. You’re not forgotten. It’s a tough feeling to be forgotten,” said Peña, adding, “People forget. You have this parade today, they’ll forget about us tomorrow.”

Even after leaving the military, he continues his service in New York in another form, with the Harlem Youth Marine Cadets, a program he saved when The Armory was being renovated.

“Not only did we fight the war overseas, but we’re fighting the war here at home, by saving our kids from gang violence and the daily bullying that’s going on in schools,” he said. “These kids have nothing else.”

Wounded Warriors

Veterans traversing the iconic avenue were joined by aid groups that supported veterans of all walks of life—disabled, wounded, and otherwise.

Robert Williamson, 28, who served in the army in Iraq for eight years and is now a nursing student in Chicago, shared his experiences being a patient of Operation Mend, a program at the University of California–Los Angeles (UCLA) that offers care to wounded soldiers.

While on active duty, Williamson suffered traumatic brain injuries from roadside bomb blasts. To treat his migraines and other symptoms, the program staff flew him to Los Angeles and gave him cognitive testing and kept his brain from deteriorating.

“They take care of everything so that we don’t have to worry about anything,” said Williamson, “They gave us a buddy family; someone to show us around L.A., take us out to dinner, make us feel at home.”

A Vast Feeling

Walking down Fifth Avenue can be invigorating, but it can also be overwhelming.

Williamson’s wife, Tiffany, joked, “A lot of veterans are not good at receiving compliments.”

Williamson replied, “The ones and twos, we can take. But when it’s such a big group ...”

And the parade can also serve as a chance to enjoy New York City a little. For Williamson, it’s his first time in 10 years he’s back in the city that never sleeps.

He plans to take his wife ice-skating in Rockefeller Center, he said, as his wife beamed.