

Honoring our Vets Year-Round

One of my favorite actors is Jimmy Stewart. I thought he was great in *Rear Window*, and of course *It's a Wonderful Life*. He won a Best Actor Oscar for the *Philadelphia Story*, and over the next few weeks millions will get reacquainted with *George Bailey*. But I think Stewart's greatest achievements were not what he did on film, but rather what he did out of love for his country.

Coming from a military family, Stewart loved to fly, flying privately in the 1930s, logging 400-plus hours in the air before World War II. In the time leading up to the war, he helped build a pilot training school where more than 10,000 pilots would train during World War II. But Stewart wasn't content to just write a check.

In 1940, he would be drafted into the army. But there was a problem. He was too thin. He needed to weigh 148, and was 143 pounds. And so he hooked up with Don Loomis, the "muscle man" of MGM who helped actors gain or lose weight. He worked hard, and tried to enlist again into the Air Corps of the Army, but again was underweight. Lobbying for and getting a third test, he made it and went into the army as a pilot. He was a lieutenant by 1942. Shortly after this he would do flight instruction, and make public appearances, be on the radio to support the war effort, and starred in a film to help encourage recruits. But Stewart wanted to do even more.

He heard a rumor that he'd be taken off flying status and be used for his acting, meaning making public appearances to sell war bonds. It was then he decided to act decisively. He appealed to his commander and was allowed to go overseas in the summer of 1943. He was in a bomber group, flying in a B-24. And he wanted to inspire his men, so he was in the lead plane. These were missions deep into Nazi-occupied Europe. He asked though that his missions go uncounted, but he was known to have flown at least 20, probably many more than that. At his funeral, retired Air Force Colonel John Regan wrote: "There were many celebrities at that time who wanted to be able to say that they served in combat for their country. The majority did the bare minimum to earn an award. Not Stewart. He did not seek special treatment. He did not pick and chose his missions. He flew them as they were scheduled—all were tough, some more than others."

I find his story remarkable for a couple of reasons. For one, here's a guy who is a star by 1940. He's disqualified from the draft, and he could easily go back to Hollywood, and no one would have questioned him. He could have done his part by making ads and movies. Then, he gets in the Air Corps, and he can sit behind a desk, or play it safe. But inside of him is something that says there is something greater that I need to do.

That same drive is in the women and men that our nation honored this past Thursday, our veterans. I, of course, never had the chance to interview Stewart, but I found it fascinating that after the war, he didn't talk much about what he did. He made no effort to "cash in" on his service, and instead continued to serve and make pictures. He saw himself as part of a family of soldiers who had a job to do out of love for country.

Stewart, and all of our veterans, have so much to teach and to show us about service and gratitude.

We are so fortunate to live in a country founded upon freedom. But it's so easy to take what we are given for granted. We must never forget that evil is a real presence in the world, and since our country's inception, people have wanted to see our country perish. Others have worked hard crush freedom, which is why people in the world are still persecuted for their faith. But right now at this very moment are men and women who, by their own choice, decided to go off to far away lands to serve our country to preserve freedom. These people, just like Jimmy Stewart, don't seek glory for themselves. Rather, they simply serve and do their job because they have a love for our nation and for what America stands for.

I've been honored to know so many of these unsung heroes, and I am thankful to them every day for preserving the liberties that I enjoy as an American. It's so important though that we never take them, or our country, for granted.

As I mentioned at Mass last weekend, a group of Veterans from our parish got together to create the honor wall for veterans. Anyone from our parish who has served in the military is welcome to have their name on a plaque in it, and if you are interested please let us know at the parish.

Of course all of us can honor veterans too throughout the year.

With that in mind, I'd like to share a list that is posted on the website of the U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs. It was developed by the Behavioral Health staff at the Spokane VA Medical Center. These are simple things we can do all year, and not just on November 11th. To those of you who have served so that I can have the freedom to pray, to write this column, and to live in this amazing land, thank you!

1. Attend a Veteran's Day event.
2. Ask a Veteran about their time in the military, and really listen to the answer.
3. Hang a flag in your yard.
4. Ask an aging Veteran to share with you the song that most takes them back.
5. Visit the gravesite of a Veteran.
6. Visit a homebound Veteran in their home, talk with them, and thank them for their service.
7. Visit a homeless Veteran under a bridge, and do the same.
8. Take a Veteran out to dinner.
9. Take dinner in to a Veteran.
10. Tell someone (your family, a friend, a neighbor) about an experience you had serving a Veteran at the VA.
11. Take flowers to a Veterans memorial.
12. Write and send a letter to someone who's currently serving in the military .
13. Ask a neighbor about their deployment.

14. Call a Veteran family member.
15. Thank a Veteran co-worker for their service.
16. Take a private moment to be proud of your country.
17. Teach someone (a child, a friend, a neighbor) what it means to be a Veteran.
18. Share pictures of a Veteran with someone.
19. Say a silent prayer for those who are serving.
20. Learn about a current or past war/conflict (this will make you a better helper).
21. Look up your ancestry and learn about someone in your family who was a Veteran.
22. Hug your family, and tell them that it's thanks to Veterans that you get to.
23. Observe a moment of silence with family and friends.
24. Read something a Veteran wrote about their experience.
25. Wear your favorite "Pro-Vet" T-Shirt. (Examples: Free Hugs for Vets; Remember Our Fallen Veterans; Freedom is not FREE...; Thank a VETERAN; I Heart Veterans!).
26. Buy a Buddy Poppy. Wear it all day, attach it to your purse or bag and keep it there until it falls apart. When people ask what it is, tell them.
27. Read and share the poem "In Flanders Field the poppies grow".
28. Make sure your children and grandchildren know who the Veterans are within their own family, and share the family stories with them.
29. Do a project about Veterans with young children or grandchildren. For example, let them make their own Veteran flag and plant it in a pot of flowers in front of the house.
30. Write on your blog about your appreciation for Veterans.
31. Help young children or grandchildren make a thank you card, and post them in the window or at a grocery store bulletin board or library or some other public place.
32. (Good for any day:) Stand out in front of the VA greet Veterans as they are being dropped off at the door. Some older folks even need a hand getting out of the car.
33. Tell a loved one why you enjoy serving Veterans.
34. Buy a homeless Veteran a cup of coffee.
35. Donate time or money or supplies to local Veterans Day drives.
36. Volunteer to help a Veteran's Service Organization (there are lots!).
37. Take a moment to reflect on what it means to live in America.
38. Gather with friends and family and watch a patriotic movie.
39. Go to a Veterans Day parade.
40. Write in your journal how thankful you are for the service of Veterans.
41. Take a quiet moment and imagine hearing "taps" played in your head. Think about what it means.
42. Thank a Veteran of his/her service while doing errands.
43. Shake a Veteran's hand.
44. Send an email that tells a Veteran's story to the people on your contact list.
45. Pick one or two of the activities listed above, and resolve to do them at least one time every month this year when it's NOT Veteran's Day.

Edmund Burke, the Irish politician, famously said: "All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing." Thank God for the men and women who do something to stand up to evil, to fight for truths that matter, and for our great country. May God bless them and keep them in His loving embrace, and may we never forget the great sacrifice all those who serve and have served make.

God bless,

Fr. Paul