

November 11, 2021

Celebrating our Veterans

The Freedom Week
at Michigan Technological University
Organized by the Young Americans for Freedom

Address to the participants

As many of us know, Veterans Day originated as Armistice Day and was meant to remember Soldiers who lost their lives fighting in WWI and as a day dedicated to the cause of world peace. Some of you might remember when Michigan Tech commemorated the centennial of this “war to end all wars” in 2018.

Fast forward 21 years and we’re looking the Second World War square in the eye. During this time, our entire country essentially deployed as a nation, fulfilling what everyone knew was their mission at the time – to support the Service Member overseas.

For me, it’s sometimes hard to think of a time like that when you rarely hear of national unified efforts anymore, but one thing remains and that’s the **sacrifice** of our Nation’s Veterans, which there are almost 19 million living today.

You probably can’t read the words on my shirt, but it says, “Freedom wasn’t free. Honor their **sacrifice**. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends, John 15:13” and I’ll provide a few examples of that now:

My late grandfather, John Kovachich served with Company F, 107th Engineers in WWII during the Battle of the Bulge. This is actually the same unit just redesignated that Jonathan French served in who you’ll hear from shortly.

So as a Sergeant and a young man probably scared to death, my Grandfather secured a nearby vehicle and organized a platoon of clerks and cooks who were located in the rear to help his battalion that was becoming overrun. As a result, Grandpa was given his battlefield commission to 2nd Lieutenant, received five bronze stars, and sadly, was the only member of his platoon to survive.

Definitely a story of **sacrifice** and having a profound mission far bigger than himself. If it weren’t for my Grandfather’s survival, I wouldn’t be here today with a last name many can’t pronounce. As I try to grasp my Grandpa’s experience and how frightening it must have been, I recall General Patton’s quote, “No sane man is unafraid in battle, but discipline produces in him a form of vicarious courage.”

I think back to my own military service, which is nowhere near as courageous and I’ll sometimes explain it as one of the best and one of the worst things I could have ever done for myself, but I’d do it all over again in an instant if necessary.

It started when I graduated from Michigan Tech in the Army ROTC program in 2005 as the first female battalion commander and was immediately disheartened when I learned I was getting a branch assignment I didn’t desire due to “needs of the Army.” Shortly thereafter, I learned I’d be stationed in Anchorage Alaska in a recently created Airborne unit, which meant Airborne School

was on the horizon. Jumping out of a “perfectly good airplane” was probably one of my biggest hurdles to clear, but I did it and felt invincible until a deployment to Iraq rolled around the Fall of 2006.

As a motorpool supervisor, my role was to oversee the repair of everything from night vision goggles to up-armored HMMWV’s, which were damaged by improvised explosive devices. Considering we were rocketed and mortared on a nightly basis, I coped by telling myself, chances are if something bad happens, hopefully it’ll be so quick I won’t even know about it.

As a bit of a reprieve, mid-tour leave gave you the opportunity to travel to any destination you’d like on Uncle Sam’s dollar. I chose Italy to visit my best friend Ben Hall who also graduated from Michigan Tech’s Army ROTC program and was with the 173rd Airborne Brigade. We had the time of our lives until reality loomed and I headed back to Iraq while Ben deployed to Afghanistan two months later. Ben was killed in action on 7/31/2007. That was his **ultimate sacrifice**. Learning about Ben’s death while simultaneously serving in Iraq was earth shattering, however in war you have no choice, but to continue with the mission and keep working.

I returned to Anchorage after 15 months in Iraq and attempted to make sense of what just happened and feeling much older than I really was. Approximately one year later, word came down that we’d be deploying to Afghanistan so the Fall of 2008 myself and about a dozen others completed a pre-deployment site survey to “recon” our future area of operations.

In early 2009, I deployed for 13 months to Afghanistan and found a lot of purpose in planning the movement of supplies throughout Eastern Afghanistan for our brigade and later helping two corps of Afghan National Army learn better logistical practices.

I became close friends with MAJ Ramatullah who was in charge of the ANA’s maintenance program. He called me for two years after that deployment and each time, his English got better and better. I often wonder what became of him now.

After this deployment, I decided to exit the military for a chance at a way of life my childhood friends were experiencing at home and because I felt wired to serve and help others a different way and to find the purpose I often felt while on deployment. I remember walking in Kincaid Park in Anchorage in 2011 becoming emotional and begging God to help me find this purpose.

The opportunity came in 2016 after grad school when I was hired by the Escanaba Vet Center to be a readjustment counselor helping those who have also deployed readjust to the civilian world and find some semblance of peace. As a mental health therapist, you hear of the good, the bad and the ugly that happens during military service from both the Veterans themselves and their family, but again, one thing remains the same, and that’s their willingness to **sacrifice** and rise to a challenge.

A few minutes ago I mentioned the start of WWII and considering this hard working generation is almost gone, I find it important to continue to tell their stories especially on Veteran’s Day.

So as a readjustment counselor, I met a WWII Veteran a couple years back who found himself in Germany in 1945. A German shell exploded approximately 35 feet in front of him from which the Veteran was knocked on his back and didn’t recall how long he was unconscious. He said, "I remember waking up and was totally deaf. The blast knocked my ears out. I opened my left eye and saw a flash. I opened my right eye and saw blue. I thought I was deaf and blind, but I kept going. Five feet closer and it would have blown my head off." He recalls waving at the huge crater that was left behind and said, "You didn’t get me this time."

This man put all fear aside and continued to **sacrifice** and by the way, you didn't get the two weeks of mid-tour leave back then. Regarding expectations, he thought he was going to have a different kind of life. This was his "next phase" where he would get married and have children.

Sadly enough and due to WWII, this Veteran believes his life wasn't as good as he once thought it would be. He said, "my perspective on life changed. I have never gotten over it. Sometimes I get mad at myself, but it was inflicted on me."

I hear examples of **sacrifice** such as this on a daily basis and on occasion I have to push back the tears of being so honored to be in the same room as many of my clients. There's no other population I would rather work for. Another WWII-era Veteran I continue to see once told me, "I wake up each morning and ask God to continue to keep me useful." It's still his mission to be of service to others and it's what keeps him going. Just like smiles and laughter are seemingly contagious, so is giving of oneself.

You might have seen the recent Veterans United Home Loans commercial with Rob Riggle the American actor, comedian and former Marine Corps officer who says, "*Communities are made better because of Veterans.*"

This is true and we cannot forget the **sacrifice** of the family members who were called upon to serve in their own way. These families often share the common thread of trial and tribulation alongside the Veteran and Service Member, but offer a channel to peace or a conduit for healing.

November 11th can mean many things to many people and spark differing emotions based on individual experiences. To me, it means never forgetting those who committed to something other than personal interest, uncertain of what **sacrifices** would be required. Like the Wounded Warriors motto, *the greatest casualty is being forgotten.*

I'd like to leave you with a quote from Gary Senise, or Lieutenant Dan from Forest Gump: "Freedom and security are precious gifts that we, as Americans, should never take for granted. We must do all we can to extend our hand in times of need to those who willingly **sacrifice** each day to provide that freedom and security. While we can never do enough to show gratitude to our nation's defenders, we can always do a little more."

Thank you for your time and attention.

Michelle Kovachich
Retired US Army Captain