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COMMENTARY

Palaima: Remembering origins of Veterans Day

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How many Americans know why we observe what we now call Veterans Day on November 11th? How many know what this national holiday originally commemorated? How many read the presidential proclamations issued yearly to guide our remembrance?

World War II veteran Paul Fussell wrote in his award-winning 1975 study of the human significance of World War I, "The Great War and Modern Memory," "Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected." The supreme irony is how easy it is for those of us who are not veterans or do not know veterans to hold onto unrealistic expectations about war.

On Oct. 8, 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed Proclamation 3071. It informs us that on June 4, 1926, Congress passed a resolution that Americans should observe the anniversary of the end of World War I, Nov. 11, 1918, with appropriate ceremonies. In 1938, Congress made Nov. 11 a legal holiday called Armistice Day.

Eisenhower changed Armistice Day into Veterans Day because of "two other great military conflicts in the intervening years," World War II and the Korean War. Eisenhower declared these wars necessary "to preserve our heritage of freedom." He called upon us as American citizens "to reconsecrate ourselves to the task of promoting an enduring peace so that (the) efforts (of veterans) shall not have been in vain."

Ironically, two years later we began promoting enduring peace with 58,178 official American military casualty deaths in the Vietnam War between June 8, 1956, and May 15, 1975. The start is ironically hard to pinpoint because there was no formal declaration of war. The last casualties occurred two weeks after the war ended with the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975.

As our troops pull out of Iraq, there will be ironic deaths like these and like British soldier-poet Wilfred Owen's. Owen voluntarily returned to the fighting in France in July 1918 so that he could write about the realities of trench warfare. He was killed on Nov. 4, a week before the armistice. In the preface to his poems, Owen wrote, "My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity." Their realism strips away the lofty sentiments about noble sacrifices in most presidential Veterans Day proclamations. His poems and his death remind us instead how long it takes and how much it costs to stop wars once we start them.

The very word "armistice" offers a strong warning. It means "a temporary cessation of the use of weapons by mutual agreement." It reminds us that no war will end all wars.

Indeed, Kurt Vonnegut, who as an American POW survived the firebombing of Dresden, Germany, grasped the irony of doing away with Armistice Day. Born Nov. 11, 1922, he recalled that, when he was a boy, "all the people of all the nations which had fought in the First World War were silent during the 11th minute of the 11th hour of Armistice Day," the moment when "millions upon millions of human beings stopped butchering one another." Veterans told him that on the battlefield, "the sudden silence was the Voice of God." So it must have seemed.

Obscenely ironic was that, after the armistice had been generally announced at 5 a.m., generals still ordered soldiers into battle. The 11,000 casualties suffered in the war's final six hours exceeded those on D-Day. Henry Gunther, a U.S. Army private from Baltimore, was killed at 10:59 a.m.

These stories don't tell us everything about what makes war so traumatic for veterans. But they continue a long tradition of soldiers trying to tell us. At the start of this tradition, Homer and the Greek tragedians distilled the essence of what veterans have to say: Owen's pity, Fussell's irony, Vonnegut's deep feelings of senseless absurdity and Eisenhower's sincere longing for an enduring peace.

On Thursday from 7 p.m. to 9:30 p.m., noted director and translator Peter Meineck will bring his national initiative, Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives, to the University of Texas at Austin with a free program of readings from ancient texts about war designed for veterans and the concerned public. A dialogue discussion will follow with Sharon Wills, Team Leader for the Posttraumatic Stress Disorders Clinical Team at the Austin VA Outpatient Clinic.

See <http://www.utexas.edu/cola/depts/classics/events/20475> for details.

At 11 a.m. Friday, the opening of the University of Texas at Austin's Student Veteran Center is scheduled.

See <http://www.texvet.org/event/2011-11/grand-opening-university-texas-austins-student-veteran-center>.

Make Veterans Day meaningful wherever you are.

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