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Palaima: Remembering those who served

By Tom Palaima

Every four years, Veterans Day in the United States closely follows national election day. This is fitting. Our country was founded through a revolutionary war and kept together through a civil war that cost the most lives of U.S. soldiers by far of any war our soldiers have ever fought. What was happening to soldiers in two wars (Korean and Vietnam) largely influenced the decisions by two incumbent presidents not to run for re-election. Since I was born in 1951, the president's role as commander-in-chief has been a central topic of presidential election campaigns.

In the 13 years I have been writing commentaries for the *Austin American-Statesman*, we have had too many occasions to talk about wars, historical and current, why they are fought, whether they are worth the price paid by American men, women and children, whether the human and psychological costs of fighting are shared equally throughout society, and what those who do the fighting go through when they return to us.

Veterans and their families are concerned that the soldiers of their wars are treated fairly once they return home. As time passes, they and we see the war of our own generation — we are lucky if there was only one — lose contemporary meaning. It is jolting when the war that affected us, as soldiers or civilians, becomes ancient history to new generations, when “our” war is kept alive in movies, songs, books, newspaper clippings (and bookmarked URLs), old letters and objects that tap into deep emotions and memories. Many students who are now graduating from the University of Texas at Austin were not yet born when the active six-month combat phase of Operation Desert Storm had ended in February 1991.

Veterans of the Vietnam War know what it is like to live in the shadow of a great war that was fought with strong support on the home front, clear goals (get to Rome, Berlin and Tokyo) and big symbols of good and evil. All veterans know the personal costs of war and the moral ambiguities they faced while performing their own roles in the fighting or supporting those doing the fighting, no matter how righteous their war is.

It was important for Vietnam veterans to create their own national monument. They took the initiative. Controversially at the time, they chose a monument that downplayed traditional symbols of heroism and glory.

What we call the Vietnam War formally ended in 1975. By 1979 a Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund was incorporated and just after Veterans Day in November 1982 a wall of names cut into polished black granite was dedicated. As of 2011, 58,272 names are commemorated. By contrast, the national World War II Memorial was dedicated in 2004, almost 60 years after the war formally ended. A national memorial to Korean War veterans took 42 years.

The Iraq War and the war in Afghanistan come to our attention most often now surrounding veterans' issues. The high rates of suicide and post-traumatic stress disorder among veterans of these two wars have been called an epidemic. News reports have covered the difficulties recent veterans face finding jobs and receiving services owed them. Such attention and strong support by veterans of past wars led to the dedication of UT's Student Veteran Center on Veterans Day 2011, many wars and 128 years after the university was founded.

On or around Veterans Day, let the veterans you know feel your gratitude and your heartfelt concern for the sacrifices they have made, sometimes well beyond their own choosing. Let them know that while public memorials and government and institutional services might be a long time coming, our human hearts are as resilient and tenacious as their spirits.

A *Statesman* reader proved this recently. He wrote to me: “I remember my dad standing in line with his lunch bucket waiting to vote before the start of the afternoon shift at the steel mill. The union had told him to vote for Adlai Stevenson but he was determined to vote for Ike as it was the Democrats and Truman that had sent his oldest son to freeze in Korea.”

Because of his memory, I have reread UT professor and veteran Rolando Hinojosa-Smith's “Korean Love Songs.” I am now reading Bob Drury's and Tom Clavin's grimly vivid and literally chilling account of Korean War fighting by United States Marines, “The Last Stand of Fox Company.” Sometimes we need to be reminded to remember what we never should forget.