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What it Means to be a Veteran

President Ronald Reagan's tribute to veterans echo in the hearts of many on Veterans Day when he said, " We remember those who were called upon to give all a person can give, and we remember those who were prepared to make that sacrifice if it were demanded of them ... though it never was." Every year since 1919 when President Woodrow Wilson declared Armistice Day, people across this nation have come together on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month to celebrate and honor veterans for their sacrifices, their patriotism, and their willingness to protect and serve this country.

I have always looked up top and admired the people who have made sacrifices for the country they hold so fondly in their heart. But when my cousin, Army Sgt. Brian Tuten, died in Salah ad Din, Iraq on Christmas Day, 2007, I realized how great the risk was to the selfless men and women who fight for our freedom. These brave people are our finest protection from all enemies, foreign and domestic, who may wish harm upon us or to rid us of the freedom we hold dearly. The soldiers are selfless people who sacrifice so much to give us our liberties, and some, like my cousin, sacrificed everything.

There are many types of sacrifices that service members have made while defending the USA and other countries. Having had the opportunity to talk to several veterans, one sacrifice they all mentioned was their limited time with their families and leaving their families behind when they were deployed. Many times, the families wouldn't know where they were or when and even if they would return home. Another sacrifice the veterans may endure is a serious injury. One interviewee fought in Korea and Vietnam and was injured in a mortar attack and still has lingering effects. Vets also sacrifice their lives for the United States of America, dying a hero's death, like my cousin. Those who make any of these sacrifices should be respected for giving a part of themselves and allowing citizens to have the liberties that we enjoy today.

While sacrifices are something every veterans has had to make, so is patriotism which is usually the thing that gets the veterans into the armed forces and leaves them with pride of having served the country after retiring or being discharged. While some were drafted into one of the branches, many chose to serve because they felt it was their duty. Others chose to enlist because of their love for this country or to carry on a family tradition. The pride of service is common among those that were interviewed. As one veteran stated, "For me, being a veteran means to show respect to your country without question, serving for the future of our children."

Despite their sacrifices, veterans I spoke with found that the armed forces helped them in some way. For example, some of them earned a college fund to get a good job after they served. Some veterans found out what length they would go to face a challenge. Some got to travel the world.

One felt that his service had even kept Russians from invading Germany after WWII and helped stop the spread of communism into Western Europe. Can you imagine the pride of someone who stood at the foot of the Iron Curtain? Most importantly, veterans wanted to set an example, they all find satisfaction in having protected their country.

Ultimately, being a veteran means to have made sacrifices for their country, to have patriotism, and to benefit their country. People May not realize what veterans have gone through when they see them, but each veterans has his or her own story. Retired or active, everyone who has served is a veteran and deserves to be honored with utmost response. When was the last time you thanked a veteran?