

Those “called to the colors” --- The Greatest Fraternity on Earth

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As members of the American Legion we belong to one of the greatest fraternity on earth. Outside of our brother and sister Veteran groups, no other organization, no other club, requires so steep a prerequisite for membership. From our ranks come the finest examples of American citizenship. The American Legion has always met its challenges head-on, be it the fight for the original GI Bill in 1944 to replenishing our ranks with today’s new Veterans. The Legion has always found a way, in the words of fellow Veteran Clint Eastwood, to “improvise, adapt and overcome,” and to make lemonade out of lemons. There is no greater example of this than from our founder, Brigadier General Teddy Roosevelt, Jr, whose 4th Infantry Division was brought to the wrong site on Utah Beach on D. Day. He assessed the situation and boldly proclaimed, “We’ll start the war from here.”

But within our culture, within our country, Veterans have had their share of critics. These individuals resent the honored place that Veterans hold in society, they resent Veterans’ rights, Veterans’ benefits, and even Veterans’ preference in

hiring for federal employment. They will say things like, “How can four years in a particular job (they mean our military service!!!!!!) be that important? Yet, these are the same individuals who see no contradiction for any special treatment later in life from their college alumni organizations, or from their fraternity membership. The truth be told, we were the ones who stood our watch while they slept soundly.

And yet Veterans have always personified regular guys and ladies, the kind you would want to sit down and have a sandwich or a beer with. This quality, this humility of spirit, is something that Veterans naturally exhibit, and the American Legion has always done its job as an advocate of what it means to represent this great nation of ours. A century has passed since our founding, but we continue to strive to honor the first Legionnaires and their devotion and stellar example of duty to “God and Country” by doing likewise today in order to pass on that torch to a new generation of Veterans.

The American Veteran has been handed the greatest of legacies, and it is our charge to maintain this prize. No less a figure than Winston Churchill once said that “in America the torch of liberty will always burn unvarnished and undismayed.” That torch is fueled by the bravery and sense duty by our Service Members.

Americans are a dynamic people. I believe that our greatness is rooted in the fact that we are hybrids. Hybrids are superior to that which came before it. Our swagger, our ingenuity, our indomitable spirit are all a result of this. Neville Chamberlain, Churchill's immediate predecessor, was no fan of America. In William Manchester and Paul Reid's *The Last Lion, Winston Spencer Churchill, Defender of the Realm 1940-1965*, the authors write of how "Chamberlain had referred to the United States with amusement and contempt, and called Americans 'creatures.'" But it was those creatures that ultimately saved England from defeat. President Reagan would call America, "the most generous and humane society that has ever been created."

The late Pat Conroy, author of *The Great Santini*, wrote of his one regret of not having served in the Marine Corps. He was a Citadel graduate, and the son of a Marine pilot, who during the late 1960s and early 1970s demonstrated against the Vietnam War and the military in general. But not long before his death, after reconnecting with fellow Citadel classmates and reflecting on his own life, he wrote, "I wish that I had entered into the Marine Corps and lead a platoon of Marines....but my eyes looked onto the headlights of the sixties and took me afield of the man I was supposed to be." Conroy recognized that singular quality that only Veterans know of---We few, we happy few, we band of brothers and sisters.

It is that “singular quality” that the American Legion will always protect as one of this nation’s great treasures. Teddy Roosevelt, Jr. simply referred to us as those “called to the colors.” Legionnaires will always rise to the occasion, no matter the challenge. When we look at our declining numbers for instance, we should not loose heart, but listen to our Founder, who would have said to us, “we’ll start the war from here.”