

Veterans Day  
November 11, 2009

**The Eleventh Hour**

**By**

**James Theres**

**1<sup>st</sup> Place Pinnacle Award**

**2010 VHA Communications Award**

Good Evening.

My name is Jerry Molnar and I am the Tomah VA Medical Center Director.

I am very honored and humbled to be with you tonight, the Tomah

Veterans Association, on Veterans Day. Armistice Day, as Veterans Day

was originally known, observed the end of World War I in 1918 at the 11<sup>th</sup>

hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month. I've always wondered, "Why 11

o'clock?"

History records that on the morning of November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1918, Allied and

German representatives met in a railroad car in Compiegne (kahm-pee-n),

France. They took eight minutes to sign the armistice. Marshal Ferdinand

Foch, the Allies Supreme Commander, had suggested the official signing

time of 5 am and a cease-fire six hours later. After a German official read a final protest against the treaty's harsh terms, the French general simply replied, "Tres bien" (Tray bee-n) or "Very Well" and left soon after.

Was there some mystical meaning to ending the war at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour?

Marshal Foch never said so. Was a chief diplomat eager to complete the eerie triad of the 11<sup>th</sup> month, 11<sup>th</sup> day and the 11<sup>th</sup> hour? That significance is lost to history.

What's not lost to history is that ninety-one years later, we continue to honor those who have served our Nation in uniform; some 48 million men and women-- from the Revolutionary War to Iraq and Afghanistan.

On this Veterans Day 2009, we honor not only those who fought in our Nation's wars, but all who took that solemn oath to "support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies" as members of America's armed forces. And as I reflect on those words, I can't help but acknowledge the impact of such an oath on the families of our Veterans. Because behind those words are real people, real families.

Since the Revolutionary War, 1.1 million Americans have died while in military service to our country. Another 24 million Veterans have passed on since their service. Every single one with a story, every single one with a family. And so tonight I would like to honor all Veterans and their families by sharing the story of one.

A few months ago, a WWII Veteran was admitted to our VA hospital. Although he rarely spoke of it, he had had a distinguished career in the Marines as a member of the famed 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Raider Battalion or “Carlson’s Raiders.” He fought on Guadalacanal and was wounded on Iwo Jima. After his discharge from the Marines, he did what most folks do — return home, go to work, get married, have children, then grandchildren. He hunted and he fished and he restored old cars and airplanes. He passed on these passions to his family.

When he came to us, he was not in the best of health and was admitted into our Hospice program. When a Veteran is admitted into a Hospice program it means he doesn’t have long to live—less than six months. It was at this time, at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of his life, we entered. We comforted him and his family. We attended to his needs as best as we possibly could.

We showed him the honor, dignity and respect that he had deserved and that he had displayed to others throughout his life. And then, as we knew would soon happen, he died. Not alone, but with his family beside him.

As the Medical Center Director, I think often of the impact of a loved one's death. I hope and pray that we have done all we could possibly do to care for him and his family. Often I never know, however sometimes I do. I would like to share with you an excerpt of the letter I received from the granddaughter of this Veteran on August 17<sup>th</sup> about a month before he passed:

*“My grandfather is a very independent World War II Veteran. When he was placed temporarily into a local nursing home a few weeks ago, he did not stay for a full day and checked himself out within a few hours. He was horrified at some of the conditions in nursing homes that our elderly people face each day.*

*A couple of weeks later, it became apparent that home health care was not going to be a good long-term option for him. My grandfather and other relatives explored whether he could enter the Tomah VA Medical Center.*

*He was admitted to Tomah VA's hospice program about a month ago. When my grandfather needed help the most, the Tomah VA staff and programs were there for him.*

*My grandfather was very sick and not focused on the future when he entered hospice care. I was not sure what to expect when I visited him the first time at the Tomah VA, but found out that the unit he was in, 402A, is welcoming, immaculately clean and has staff that are responsive and available for the patients. Instead of being warehoused and waiting to die, the Tomah VA staff has treated him with dignity, as a Veteran and strives to make him as comfortable as possible.*

*Over the last month, he was sized for and received a new wheelchair. The staff also ordered a pocket talker for him to facilitate communication since he is hard of hearing and patiently showed him how to use it. My uncle brings up his pet dog to visit almost every day. I have been there at meal times, and it is so neat to hear how great and flavorful the food is. What has impressed me the most is that the staff on the unit really focuses on taking excellent care of the veterans.*

*The staff on 402A and in the Recreation Department has gone out of their way to get my grandfather involved with the numerous activities they have each day, and he even gets to go fishing in the pond on site. At the Tomah VA, Veterans have the opportunity to enjoy karaoke, game days, bingo games, dances, movies and are active instead of just sitting in their rooms. No one in my family could have handpicked a better care setting for my grandfather.”*

Then, just last week, we received another note from the granddaughter.

*“Dear Hospice Unit employees,*

*Thank you for all of the care that my grandfather received while he was a resident of the hospice unit. It was hard as a family member to know that there was no hope of recovery when he was admitted, but over the summer you gave him the experience of a lifetime. He was treated with dignity, respect and had the chance to live each day to the fullest. The fishing stories he shared will be one thing I will always remember.*

*I cannot even imagine what your jobs are like and how challenging it must be to work every day with individuals who are dying, but your efforts make a difference.*

I get great comfort in reading the granddaughter's words not as confirmation we're doing the right thing, but that our Veterans are getting the right care. It is truly a privilege to be able to serve these Veterans and Veterans just like you right here in this room.

So on this Veterans Day, I am proud to represent all VA employees and volunteers who are as committed as ever to ensure that every Veteran will receive the very best care possible right through their eleventh hour.

On this Veterans Day, I join you in honoring the sacrifices made by Veteran's families and their loved ones.

On this Veterans Day, may God bless America's men and women in uniform serving throughout the world and may God bless our Veterans.

Thank you!