

*On Veterans Day, the Hoover Institution's Annenberg Distinguished Fellow, Admiral James O. Ellis Jr. (US Navy, ret.), extended greetings to military veterans at a ceremony at Stanford University. Honored guests included members of Hoover's Bochnowski Family Veteran Fellowship Program, the Robert and Marion Oster National Security Affairs Fellows Program, and a veterans group at Stanford's Graduate School of Business.*

As I considered what I might contribute this evening, a single word came to mind. That word, of course, is “service.” My dad was a naval aviator, demobilized after the adventure of World War II, who then found his small Southern hometown a bit confining and went back in the Navy for a twenty-five-year career. When we would visit his South Carolina family on our periodic change-of-station moves, the language the family used struck me. He was not “in the Navy,” or “in the military,” or even “in the armed forces,” but rather “in the service”—a term, I suspect, born of earlier generations and now echoed appropriately once again in the phrase “thank you for your service,” which today is often heard from a grateful public by those privileged to wear the cloth of this nation.

And so, my theme in the few minutes allotted me on this grand occasion is simply the word service. For those of us gathered today in celebration, the word has likely been a part of all our lives for as long as we can remember. Dr. Martin Luther King defined “service” as “the rent we pay for the space we occupy,” but I’d wager that most of us gathered here would urge us not to think of service as a cost, or a price, or a sacrifice, but as a gift that, if freely and honestly given, will be repaid to us many times over. As Albert Schweitzer once advised: “I don’t know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.”

Service is often thought of in grand, if abstract, terms such as service to the nation or service to mankind; some of those gathered here may have been fortunate enough to have had those opportunities in abundance. But your service reminds the rest of us that all of us can serve wherever we find ourselves, in ways large and small, in or out of uniform, while defining our personal leadership style along the way. That is because true, honest, and selfless service, in my view, is the essence of leadership.

As I wrote some of these words, my thoughts strayed, as they often do, to the walls of my study. As with many who have served in or out of uniform, there on the walls hang the old plaques, memorabilia, and faded photos that tangibly recall, in my case, my lifelong love affair with naval aviation. While many of the mementos are of things—squadrons now gone, ships decommissioned, and aircraft now obsolete—I find the few photos I treasure most are those with people in them. I find myself staring at once-familiar faces crouched behind a row of flight helmets, squinting into a Southeast Asian

sun in front of a freshly painted jet fighter. It is a moment frozen in time of fresh faces, palpable excitement, and unspoken bonds.

Many of your experiences and stories are more powerful than mine. Yet there is a common thread we all share: whether we serve for three years or for thirty; whether in time of wars, hot or cold, or at a time when the difference between the two was largely a matter of semantics; whether your service was marked by months of tedium or minutes of sheer terror; whether you were a part of something monumental or served quietly far from the public spotlight; what we share is the deepest admiration for those with whom we served. The bonds of loyalty, friendship and, yes, love, forged in those times we shared are stronger than steel and can and do last a lifetime. It is said that one serves one's country, but the service, your real service, has been to those who stood with you or beside you, or followed you through it all. For those who have not experienced it, it can seem unfathomable. But it is real, it is priceless, and it is forever ours.

It has always been so. It can be seen in the words Shakespeare gives to Henry the Fifth, rallying his troops before the Battle of Agincourt, when he speaks of “we few, we happy few, we band of brothers.”

Steven Ambrose borrowed the term in his classic work *Band of Brothers*, which chronicles the storied exploits of Easy Company from their initial training in Toccoa, Georgia, not a hundred miles from where I used to live, to their Normandy parachute jump and their march through Europe to the fall of Germany. One of the aging Easy Company veterans, in only a bit of an overreach, says: “There is not a day that has passed since that I do not thank Adolf Hitler for allowing me to be associated with the most talented and inspiring group of men I have ever known.”

I hope you can appreciate my emotions, which probably mirror your own on occasions such as this, as I remember walking around the square of my small Georgia hometown in the lengthening shadows of a long-ago summer evening before I left for the Navy at the age of seventeen—and how lucky I felt to return thirty-nine years later, certainly older, hopefully wiser, and forever grateful for the experiences and the people that shaped me.

Steven Ambrose ends his story of the men of Easy Company with a question asked of one of the World War II paratroopers by a grandson. I have stolen the veteran's answer to use if one of my own grandchildren ever asks. I bring it out today because it seems remarkably apt in our acknowledgment of the veterans among us. The question, appropriate to my wrinkled face and balding head, was: “Grandpa, were you a hero in the war?” My answer, through six wars—if you count the cold one—will be: “No, I was not. But I served in the company of heroes.”

And that, of course, includes all of you. Thank you all for joining us as we share that opportunity again tonight.

Happy Veterans Day!