

AFTER THEIR LAST BATTLE

On Nov. 11, nations around the world take a moment of silence to honor the sacrifices of those who served. **BY EMILY BEERS**

He also said some recent Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have a sense that their country isn't taking care of them the way it promised. For one, Sanders' tuition assistance was recently stripped away.

"Tuition assistance always seems to be the first thing dropped when there is even a possibility of a fiscal worry," he said.

Indeed, tuition-assistance programs have been discontinued twice this year: once in March and also during the October U.S. government shutdown. But Sanders is one of the outspoken ones. He fought to have his tuition assistance restored, and he was successful, but he says he is still owed US\$2,500—for a combination of things like travel and housing allowance, as well as for unpaid workdays—and he blames "inept organizations" for this.

Sanders hopes civilians and members of the military will continue to connect beyond Veterans Day, and he believes Nov. 11 is a good time to start the relationship.

Two days after he turned 17, Richard Sanders joined the United States Army.

"It was just always something I wanted to do," said Sanders, now 23.

Three years later, he went on to serve in Afghanistan from March 2010 to March 2011.

For Sanders, Veterans Day is a time to form a connection between veterans and civilians. Last year, he did this by participating in the Goruck Challenge, a 12-hour team endurance event that mimics Special Operations training.

"It's a great way to bridge the gap between military and civilians. It's about people pushing themselves, and it raises money for the military," said Sanders, of New Jersey.

Sanders hopes civilians and members of the military will continue to connect beyond Veterans Day, and he believes Nov. 11 is a good time to start the relationship.

"When soldiers come home (from war), there's a very large cultural gap between military and civilians, especially lately with government shutdowns and how they're looking at cutting payouts to military," Sanders said.

He knows he's not alone. His fellow Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are having similar problems receiving the money and veteran benefits that were promised to them. As reported on [CNN.com](#) and elsewhere, the government shutdown threatened to cause a host of problems for many veterans who rely on benefits payments.

"This isn't us feeling entitled like the rest of our generation. We just want what was contractually promised to us," Sanders said.

The biggest obstacle Sanders sees is organizational. There is so much "red tape" involved in order for a veteran to even gain access to benefits, and it can be tough to navigate the system. For instance, [Marketwatch.com](#) reported that the majority of veterans are not well informed about the choices they can make to maximize Social Security benefits.

"Paperwork seems to 'get lost' a lot," added Sanders, who also blames outdated processes for system inefficiencies. "Most of us, we're in our 20s. They want us to fax things to them. Who faxes anymore?" he said with a laugh.



Sanders (top, in red) during the 12-hour Goruck Challenge in 2012, and with his new wife (below).



In short, Sanders doesn't feel the system is set up to help veterans; instead it brings them more challenges.

That said, paperwork challenges pale in comparison to the emotional baggage many veterans endure. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and suicide are two of these challenges.

"Twenty-two American veterans are killing themselves every day ... primarily Afghanistan and Iraq veterans," said Sanders, who suffers from PTSD.

"And most people have no clue," he added.

The Dept. of Veteran's Affairs' **Suicide Data Report, 2012** estimated that more than 20 veterans a day committed suicide in 2008, 2009 and 2010. From 1999 to 2007, the estimates were between 18 and 20 veteran suicides per day.

*The Dept. of Veteran's Affairs' **Suicide Data Report, 2012** estimated that more than 20 veterans a day committed suicide in 2008, 2009 and 2010.*

The report, which mined data from 21 states and estimated national numbers, stated, "Among cases where history of U.S. military service was reported, Veterans comprised approximately 22.2% of all suicides reported during the project period. If this prevalence estimate is assumed to be constant across all U.S. states, an estimated 22 Veterans will have died from suicide each day in the calendar year 2010."

Sanders doesn't expect civilians to understand what it's like to be shot at, and he doesn't expect everyone to be inclined to join the military or be willing to go to war, but he believes civilians can show real support, they can help raise money, and they can learn about what it's like to be in the military.

This Veterans Day, Sanders is participating in an event called Ruck for the Fallen. It will involve wearing a pack and participating in a 12-hour ruck march. He's hoping as many non-military people as possible will participate on a day he knows will be rough for many veterans.



Nov. 11, and Sanders' moment of silence, is what he calls "a double-edged sword."

"It's good to know that we're honoring their lives, raising awareness," he said.

But on the flip side, there is the belief that veterans aren't always cared for properly, and there are painful memories.

"November as a whole is rough and bumpy. One of my closest friends, my mentor, was killed in action in November. I wear him on a bracelet around my wrist," said Sanders.

Ideally what Sanders would like to see is for more people to be like Greg Killian and Amy Yuschak of CrossFit Killfit in New Jersey. They offer free memberships to anyone who was deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq.

"Greg's actually putting his money where his mouth is. I know he actually cares. He's not doing it just for cool points," Sanders said of Killian. "I can see it in his eyes; he's very grateful for what I've done serving this country."

In short, action like this is what Sanders is after.

Killian decided to act after he saw a Wounded Warriors commercial on TV.

"I wanted to donate but funds are low. So I thought, 'How can I give back to these guys and girls who are willing to sacrifice life and limb for our freedom?' Then I thought, 'I can't donate money, but I can give my time, energy and expertise,'" Killian said of his decision to provide free memberships to war veterans.

Currently, Killian has eight veterans taking advantage of his offer.

"It's working out great. These guys come back home not knowing what they're going to do, and it gives them a positive outlet where they can release endorphins, have a sense of accomplishment and be a part of something positive," he said.

Sanders is one of the eight veterans.

"The biggest thing I can hope for is for people to be informed. It is our civic duty to be informed You can make a donation or write a letter to Congress. You can give to a laundry list of charities. Or if you can't afford to give your money, you can give your time," he said.

He added: "Be willing to make a sacrifice beyond just putting up a yellow ribbon."



JOHN'S STORY

Two years ago, John Sorrelli's children gave him a hat that says "WWII United States Navy" on it.

"I've been wearing it for two years now, and whenever I go places people approach me," said the 88-year-old veteran. "Even last week, I was wearing the hat in a coffee shop, and the owner came up to me and said, 'Thank you for your services. And then I wanted to pay my bill, but the owner wouldn't let me.'"

"People haven't forgotten. They just have to be reminded sometimes," he said.

Sorrelli certainly hasn't forgotten his stint with the U.S. military; he served with the Navy in the South Pacific from 1943 to 1944.

"I was a carpenter at the time. But there weren't any openings for carpenters or electricians, but there was an opening for a cook. And I thought, 'If I'm a cook, then at least I know I'm going to get to eat.' And I didn't want to be a deckhand," Sorrelli said of how he ended up being a cook on board the USS Inaugural AM-242 minesweeper at the age of 17.



For those who served, Veterans Day is a chance to connect with the public and remember fallen comrades.

Sorrelli didn't know it at the time, but the USS Inaugural would become one of the most successful U.S. mine-sweepers of WWII. And after the war, the ship became a floating museum in St. Louis. Sorrelli had no idea that his wartime ship had been turned into a museum until he visited St. Louis years after the war and happened to walk by.

"I saw the number and said, 'That's my ship.' We ran over there and met the owners," Sorrelli said.

After that, the owners invited Sorrelli's old World War II crew onboard.

"We had a convention on there, on our old ship. All the old fellows got together," he said.

After surviving the War in the Pacific, the ship met its end in 1993, when the Mississippi River flooded and the ship broke loose from her moorings, floated downstream and took on too much water. The Inaugural remains partially submerged in the Mississippi. But when Sorrelli thinks of his ship, he remembers the way she was during the war—full of vitality.

A resident of New York, he explained what it was like for a Navy cook in the Pacific Fleet: "We cooked everything from chicken to Spam—you name it. Most of the people on my ship were from the south so they taught me to cook meals they like. I never had a complaint. Nobody said they weren't happy Every time it was someone's birthday, I would cook a big cake. It worked out pretty well."

Although Sorrelli said that he generally felt safe aboard his ship in the middle of the war zone, it was at least somewhat of an illusion.

"We didn't know if we were going to hit a torpedo, and then there were the kamikazes, you know, the Japanese suicide planes that would come down. Our job was to shoot them down," he said.

The Inaugural was awarded two Battle Stars and spent a great deal of time in dangerous Japanese waters during the 1945 Battle of Okinawa. The battle was one of the bloodiest of the Pacific War, and the Inaugural spent its time sweeping for mines and fending off kamikaze attacks as the U.S. forces worked to take Okinawa in advance of an

attack on the Japanese mainland. The U.S. lost 28 ships, and more than 4,900 sailors were killed.

"Were we scared? For sure," Sorrelli said. "You never knew what these guys were going to do coming down with their planes. Twice, they missed us. One time, we picked up two American pilots. Unfortunately, one of them was already dead. It was heartbreaking, but we were just doing our jobs."

It was a tough job, but Sorrelli didn't feel like he had a choice.

"People haven't forgotten. They just have to be reminded sometimes."

—JOHN SORRELLI

"I couldn't stay home. All my buddies were going to war. I thought, 'What am I going to do here?' My mother was upset when I joined, but I tell you the truth: it was the best thing that ever happened to me," he said.

Almost 70 years after the war, Sorrelli is matter-of-fact about his country's role dropping nuclear bombs on Japan on Aug. 6 and 9, 1945. Japan surrendered on Aug. 15, though the official end of the war came when Japan signed the Instrument of Surrender on Sept. 2.

"When we dropped the atom bomb, we had to cover our eyes to make sure we wouldn't get splashed. But I don't know of anyone in my group that was affected by the bomb. But you could feel the vibrations because we were right near Japan," he said.

"It was sad to see, but it happened, and it had to be done. It had to be done or else we would have lost another 200,000 men. But it was war I look back and think, 'Why did we do it?' But we had to do it. We were losing too many young boys. Men were dropping like flies."

Today, Sorrelli feels much the same as his fellow servicemen grow older and pass on.

"There aren't very many of us left," he said. "I'm very fortunate. I'm one of the only fellows left from WWII. God has been good to me."

Sorrelli will take a moment this Veterans Day to appreciate this fact, and to remember the great friends he met through the military.

As usual, he'll head over to watch the Veterans Day parade, and he might even check out the party at the Legion. He will, of course, be wearing his hat.

THE NATURE OF WAR

In a waterfront apartment on the shores of the Pacific Ocean, two large modern upholstered couches surround a contemporary glass coffee table in the living room.

A large flat-screen TV is mounted on the wall, while an iPad sits on the large dining-room table in the next room. Nothing about this apartment looks like it would be home to a 93-year-old man.

And when you talk to the apartment's tenant, Walter Tyler, he hardly seems 93.

"I cook all my meals still. I'll make shepherd's pie, or fry some fish, or a steak with salad," Tyler says of some of his favorite meals.

Tyler does all his grocery shopping, and he doesn't hesitate to attack the highway and drive to visit one of his two daughters and his grandchildren in White Rock, 40 miles away from his home in the prime neighborhood of West Vancouver, B.C.

"And I drive to New Westminster every Tuesday to volunteer at the museum at the (Royal Westminster) Regiment," adds Tyler, whose wife of 66 years passed away one year ago at the age of 90.

Tyler stands up with ease for a man of his age, leaves the room for a moment, and returns with a photo album.

"These are my great-grandchildren. They live in the United States," he says pointing to three children with white-blond hair, his wrinkled finger shaking a little bit as he turns the pages.

He puts the photo album down and picks up another book. This one is a large hard-covered copy of the history of Canada's Royal Westminster Regiment, in which he served. He opens it up and points to a picture of himself as a young man in military uniform escorting the future Queen Elizabeth II on her first visit to Canada back in 1951.

"She was actually still a princess back then," Tyler says.

At that moment, Tyler suddenly seems 93 years old. His modern apartment, his iPad, his flat-screen TV, his good

health and his perfect hearing hide his long, rich life, a life that included serving with the Canadian Army in World War II.

Tyler, whose family immigrated to Canada from England when he was just four years old, joined the military in 1938 at the age of 18. It was a good option for many young men of his generation.

“Life was a lot different back then. We were just coming out of the Great Depression. There weren’t a lot of sports activities or clubs to join. And I wasn’t that great at sports anyway,” Tyler says.

When he first joined the military, he was part of a machine-gun battalion, but when hostilities broke out, his battalion was re-designated and became a motor battalion, meaning they were essentially in charge of protecting 100 vehicles and tanks.

“Motorcycles, jeeps, small trucks, large trucks—we worked with the armored division to protect the tanks,” says Tyler, who was deployed to Italy during the war.

“The thing was most people couldn’t even drive back then,” he adds with a laugh.

“Back then, people were away from home for five years. I left in 1941 and I didn’t come home again until 1945.”

—WALTER TYLER

“We didn’t expect much in those days. Today is much different. People go to Afghanistan for two or three months. Back then, people were away from home for five years. I left in 1941 and I didn’t come home again until 1945.”

“We had nothing. The entire Canadian military had 23 Bren Guns—23 for the whole Canadian Army You need more than 23 to outfit just one company. And there are five companies to one regiment,” he says, shaking his head with a laugh.

“And we didn’t talk about post-traumatic stress back then. The closest we came to talking about it was—” he says, pausing for a moment to think. “What did they call it? Kind of like a nervous breakdown. Some people just couldn’t take it anymore, and they had nervous breakdowns.”



Tyler still remembers World War II, both the friendships he made and the hardships he endured.

Like many other veterans, Tyler said returning to civilian life was challenging.

Kim Bellavance



Kim Bellavance

Tyler escorting the future Queen Elizabeth II in 1951.

Tyler admits that returning to civilian life after the war was difficult, but he was one of the lucky ones who managed to carry on and live a long, fulfilling life.

When Tyler did return home, he remained part of the military as a reserve member, and he also spent some time working for the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Almost seven decades since his return from European battlefields, Tyler says the military is still a part of his life today. He volunteers once a week at the Regiment museum, talking and giving tours to young, eager grade-school students.

“Kids are funny. They always ask, ‘What was it like? What was it like?’ And I always tell them, ‘In your school studies, you’re going to read a book called *A Tale of Two Cities*. It takes place during the time of the French Revolution. The first sentence in the book says, ‘It was the best of times, It was the worst of times.’ And you know, the war was kind of like that.”

But as time passed, he began remembering more of the good.

“Your mind plays tricks on you. You always remember and think about the good things that happened,” he says, pointing to the friendships, the traveling he got to do and the many responsibilities he was given in the military.

“There aren’t many of us left, but when we used to get together, it was always a good time with lots of laughs,” he says.

Laughs aside, Tyler hasn’t forgotten the other side of the war. And when he digs deep enough, he remembers—clearly.

He remembers the hot summers sleeping uncomfortably in fields. And he remembers the cold, muddy, snowy, wet winters and the scarcity of food.

“When I think about it, I spent a year and a half without sleeping in a bed,” he says.

And he remembers the loss.

“It was Dec. 11, 1944. My sergeant and I were standing at the corner of a building deciding how we were going to take the tanks out. We were just standing there and we were attacked from another direction. A shell just came out of nowhere. When I came to, I was 40 feet from where I had been standing,” says Tyler, whose leg, hand and arm were wounded by the blast. He spent six weeks recovering in General Hospital Number One.

“My sergeant was killed. Thrasher was his name. He was a good man,” Tyler says.

He looks out toward the ocean, takes a moment to catch his breath and continues:

“Being in a war is no fun. It’s not glamorous in any way, shape or form. I don’t give a darn what anyone says.

“And people ask if I was scared. Of course. Everyone was scared. You’re always dealing with the unknown. You could be in a cozy area, but there were always shells coming out of the blue. People would be resting and could get killed. You’re on your toes all the time. You never can let your guard down.”

Even today, Tyler believes this.

“I’m not a warmonger. But even today, we can never let our guard down. In the last 1,000 years, there have been about 990 years where there is a war taking place somewhere. You don’t get away from it,” he says.

“We have peace movements, and that’s fine, but we can’t get away from war. I don’t think we’ll ever get away from war,” he adds. “It’s just people.”

And it takes courageous people to fight those wars and serve their countries in uniform. Veterans Day in the United States—Remembrance Day in the Commonwealth countries—is an opportunity to honor those people, both alive and dead, for their sacrifices. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily Beers is a *CrossFit Journal* staff writer and editor. She competed in the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games on CrossFit Vancouver’s team, and she finished third at the Canada West Regional in 2012. In 2013, she finished second in the Open in Canada West.