Remarks by Mike Rosenberg

Delivered at Bedford, Massachusetts

Memorial Day ~ May, 30 2016

Every year we gather at this sacred time for a meaningful tribute to deceased veterans.

One challenge is: how can we extend the gratitude and respect engendered by from these ceremonies throughout the year, and without being overwhelmed by a constant sense of loss?

During the past generation, we could look around every day and see the men – and a few women as well -- who built this community, and know with some certainty that their resumes included military service time.

These are the names that populate our roster of deceased veterans. A couple of dozen died in combat. Thousands served.

After World War II, American boys continued to register with the selective service system at age 18, and for the 25 years they expected to get called. Some opted to enlist for a three-year hitch to give themselves more flexibility on assignments and service branch. It was a rite of passage. It was an obligation and it was a sacrifice, made by virtually all. It was one you did as an American.

(Even professional athletes were not exempt – and I don't mean war heroes like Ted Williams. I can show you the cumulative records on the back of baseball cards from the 50s and 60s, with a horizontal bar covering one or two years with the words IN MILITARY SERVICE.)

I knew these people. They bought houses here, brought up families, volunteered in the ballfields and Scout troops and town hall. They were the backbone that every city and town needs to be defined as a community in the fullest sense.

Today many or most of them populate our roster of deceased veterans. Almost 34,000 servicemen lost their lives in Korea, but thousands more did not see combat.

Many of them were stateside or in Europe. They were not war heroes in the Hollywood sense, but they were all roll models. And they didn't think it was something to be brandished like a banner. Indeed, the families I spoke with had only biographical fragments.

Don Pfeiifer, town clerk for many years, was an army sergeant stationed at Forts Knox, Belvoir and Devens during the Korean period. Bill Aldorisio wanted to be a pilot but missed his chance because he had to care for a sick parent. So he ended up in the new USAF for four years working with aircraft maintenance. Kevin Waldron worked for the DPW after serving as a military police officer in the Air Force during the Vietnam era.

Jim Blasi's enlisted in the Army and served in Korea. But he didn't share any details with his family.

Another friend who served in Korea was Charlie Carter. He was commissioned through the ROTC at MIT and assigned as a warrant officer with an engineering battalion not far from the 38th parallel, shortly before the armistice in 1953. They took some shelling at night before the sides stopped firing, then remained for another year and a half building roads and other infrastructure. In Bedford he always wore the watch he was wearing at the signing of the armistice.

Bill Hennrikus grew up in an Army family and enlisted in 1952, serving Stateside in the intelligence field for three years. Later, for more than 20 years, he was veterans' agent for the town of Bedford, addressing individual issues and concerns from an office in Town Hall. "He was very proud and always wanted that to be part of his legacy," his daughter told me.

Today we have an all volunteer military. The men and women who serve have our admiration and respect. But the concept of a universal sacrifice, an obligation of citizenship, is no longer a common denominator among Americans – indeed, it has been more than 40 years.

We are thankful that fewer men and women are in harm's way. But have we lost the assumption that part of citizenship is sacrifice? I think I can speak for Bedford – the ethos is alive and well. Bedford is truly a community – replete with volunteers of all ages who enrich all aspects of civic life.

This, perhaps, is the formula for future citizenship. May we be blessed with leaders who inspire it.