

Knapp: Honor our aging veterans, come to the Newton Memorial Parade

By **Marian L. Knapp/Columnist**

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Newton —

I try to write about what I know and feel personally, hoping to reach people who are thinking about similar things. This article, though, is an exception. It is something about which I have little knowledge but which I am trying to understand. It is about aging Newton veterans and the parade that honors them.

I came to this topic after a Council on Aging meeting at which one of our members, Tom Shoemaker, Past State Commander, American Legion, talked about the upcoming Newton Memorial Parade. He described it as a happy event, with a marching band, floats, and food. It sounded great. "It's fun," he said, "the problem is that very few people come. Maybe it is because fewer and fewer younger veterans participate in the local agencies, maybe people are just apathetic. Other towns around us get great responses but people don't go. I'm not sure why."

I certainly don't know why either but I admit that I am one of the people who doesn't show up. One reason may be that I have seen the destructive aspects of war and its often futile outcomes – especially in Vietnam. But, unfortunately, I have sometimes blocked out the idea that whatever the purpose and outcome of a war, people fought and many died for something they believed in. Another reason why I haven't gone to a memorial parade in Newton for many years is that I have become more and more distant from personal connections to veterans and the wars in which they participated.

My primary remembrances of war are from the few years of my childhood - 1943 through 1945 – when World War II was around me. I lived in Rhode Island, which was filled with naval bases and sailors. Relatives and friends in the military came to visit. I have a picture with my best friend, Harriet, as we sat on the stoop with three of her uncles, each in a different uniform. I remember: sirens going off in air raid drills; my air-raid warden father making night-rounds in the neighborhood to make sure no light shone through windows; tops of car headlights painted black to reflect light downward; my mother rolling bandages to be sent overseas to wrap soldiers' wounds; tokens that allowed us to have butter; and my uncle Eddie who did clerical work in the army because his glasses kept him out of combat. I remember feeling fear and awe seeing the white satin plaques hanging in the windows of Gold Star Mothers showing the number of sons they had lost in battle.

Where I lived, everyone knew the war was happening, everyone was involved in some way, and everyone supported it. There was no question of its validity. It was a conflict that had to happen and military personnel, and their families were honored for their bravery and sacrifices.

Although veterans are of all ages, the majority is getting older, and some are quite old. Vietnam War veterans average 60 -65; Korean War veterans are in their 70s and 80s; and, any remaining Second World War veterans are into their 90s or 100s. “We don’t fight the same kind of wars as in the past,” Tom said. “We go to battle with far fewer people than we used to. Technology has taken over.” This means that there are and will continue to be fewer veterans. Also, as Tom indicates, younger veterans when they return home spend many years getting settled and may only become involved in veterans activities as they age.

Newton’s Memorial Parade is sponsored by the Newton Veteran’s Council with some funding from the city and is also supported by local merchants. Unlike the celebrations for veterans after WWII, our Newton parade is somewhat hidden from broad public view. I wonder if it is also aging. There was an old Newton tradition of two parades – one down Walnut Street that passed by City Hall and another one in Nonantum. When the city no longer held a city-wide parade only the Nonantum one remained; it is still there but not very visible to the rest of our villages. Perhaps more people would come if the parade presented itself as representing all of Newton by traveling a central route or having it in a different neighborhood every year.

In spite of the fewer numbers of veterans and the lack of our awareness, and involvement in war, those who served the U.S. deserve our acknowledgement. “We may or may not agree with our government’s decisions about war but the people who fight really deserve our thoughts and respect,” Tom says. So, think about coming to honor our aging (as well as our younger) veterans: Sunday, May 22, starting at 1:00 p.m., Our Lady’s Church, 573 Washington Street, Newtonville.

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