Veterans Day Service

All Saints Church

November 11, 2018

One hundred years ago, today, major hostilities of World War I were formally ended at the 11th hour, of the 11th day, of the 11th month of 1918. And this morning, along with other churches in Peterborough at 11:11, our church bells will ring 11 times to commemorate this auspicious occasion. We are honored to host this Veterans Day Service on this 100th Anniversary. Welcome.

Our town of Peterborough in this beautiful Monadnock region of southwest New Hampshire has been the home of the Cheney-Armstrong American Legion Post #5 since 1919.

The Post was named after two men. 1st Lt. William H. Cheney and Navy Lieutenant John Parkhurst “Jock” Armstrong.

1st Lt. William Cheney was the youngest son of Mary Lyon Cheney Schofield, the inspiration, visionary, and benefactor of All Saints Church. Her son was attending Harvard University when he left to join the Army, (urgently). He attended the Military School of Aeronautics at Urban, Illinois, in March 1917 and graduated during the summer of that year. He went to Italy to receive further flight training and was commissioned on November 23, 1917 into the U.S. Army Air Service. On January 20, 1918, just after turning 21, William was killed in a plane crash in Foggia, Italy, just before the war ended. His body, as well as his father, his step-father, and his mother, rests in the crypt just below us.

The first Peterborough resident to die during WW II was Navy Lieutenant Jock Armstrong. Lt. Armstrong was a graduate of Harvard and joined the Naval Reserve in 1940. He survived Pearl Harbor, as well as the Battle of Guadalcanal. Later he transferred to naval aviation, where he became a pilot assigned to a bomber squadron. On November 1st, coincidentally All Saints’ Day, at the age of 26, Lt. Armstrong was killed when his bomber crashed. He is buried at the Pine Hill Cemetery.

These two men, like so many men and women, served their country with dignity and courage and gave their lives to protect our nation and her citizens. We honor them this morning, along with all the other members of our military who have served or who are serving today, protecting the welfare of our country.

We also honor today, our American Legion Posts which can be found throughout the nation, town by town, county by county, state by state. And in those Posts, we find places and people who honor and dignify the service of our military.

People, like Dee and Wayne Thomas who give hours of their time and spirit to support the power of those who have dedicated their lives to service, and to those who currently are serving our country.

And then there’s people, like Dee and Wayne…. people found throughout our country in these American Legion Posts, who ***also*** support those ***who stand behind our service men and women***…. Families, friends, colleagues, children, mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers, aunts and uncles who love their service man or woman. And their joys and burdens are buoyed by the love and care of American Legion Posts found throughout the country. These Posts nation-wide become like family.

Support of our American Legion Posts was not lost on Mary Schofield. The death of her youngest son, far from discouraging her, only intensified Mary’s patriotic activities. Mind you, she had already, after the setting of the cornerstone of All Saints church in 1917, a church which would become a memorial to all those who died in WWI, founded an “Our Boys Club” which formed the nucleus of the American Legion Auxiliary. She was also the National President of the Woman’s Land Army of America. She organized the first training camp in New Hampshire for agricultural workers. And she was named the first woman president of the New Hampshire Electoral College and was delegate-at-large to the Republican Party’s national convention. She continued to support our military by raising funds for the United Service Organizations and as many of you may already know, was one of the major contributors to the Memorial Gate on Grove Street.

After the death of her son, Mary Schofield was asked to address the Gold Star Mothers of America from the Eiffel Tower in Paris. I can only imagine what an honor this was for her, as she addressed mothers of the world who had loved and lost.

What a gift Peterborough had in Mary, our citizen, not only of our town, but a citizen of the world. I bring her to mind today, because Mary reminds me of many of you, who, like Mary, are the friends, families, colleagues, and deep supporters of those you know and love who serve in the military. Mary had set the bar high- we all should be supporting our military in the way she did.

There’s a lot of talk about the 1%- those identified as having so much wealth, so much so, that they represent 1% of our nation. They can be seen as special, as successful, as rich and influential. But there’s another 1%, that we should be identifying with more respect and dignity. And that’s the 1% of our nation who volunteer to defend our country. And the rest of us, the 99% of us, are indebted to them.

And behind those 1% are their loved ones- who witness, encourage, listen, support, defend and embolden those who serve. We are in their debt as well. Mary Schofield knew this. I like to wonder what Mary Schofield said when she addressed the Gold Star Mothers of America from the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

If I may, I’d like to offer a possible image, one provided to me by my cousin who was enlisted with the Seabees and had two tours during the Iraq War.

My cousin and I were together this summer for a family reunion. He doesn’t talk much about his service, but I like to ask questions, and so he shares some, sometimes. He started with a funny story about “slapping” his commanding officer. “How did that happen?”

“Well, we often had drills in defense of the possibility of chemical warfare. Sometimes those drills were labeled as the real thing. There was always the threat of deadly poisons falling from the air, and the drills were intense, often during sand storms to heighten the urgency and the difficulty. We had moon-like suits, with gas masks, we had to put on and then we left our base tent, 2x2 to go to a more secure place underground.

I was paired up with my commanding officer and his zipper was stuck on his moon suit and he motioned for me to fix it. While I was fixing it, he was getting his hands in the way, trying to help me, which was not helpful, and so I slapped his hands, back and forth, and he stopped. I fixed the zipper and we left. Later, he told me, “Thanks, good work Cotter, but never slap me again.” With a wink. “He had been grateful, and now I have a story about slapping my commanding officer and getting away with it!”

We laughed. But then came another story. He told me that one of the most profound experiences of his life came during one of those air raid drills, which had been deemed as not a drill.

“I was last to leave, and I heard over the loudspeaker my commander say, ‘Cotter you need to find a missing mouthpiece as you come over.’ I could hear my buddy freaking out inside the tunnel, sure he was going to die without the essential covering over his mouth. I stood up, well aware of the sand storm, the danger, the fear, and then (and he had me stand up and put a blanket over me) I felt this blanket drape over me as real as you feel this blanket now.

“And it wasn’t as if I was being told that I would be safe- that wasn’t the experience. It was just this powerful understanding of being held in life and death. I was as if I was stripped of every piece of gear, and I only had God’s blanket, and it was perfect.”

I imagine Mary Schofield talking to those Gold Star mothers in Paris about God’s blanket of love and support. During her time of difficulties and loss, when she was held in life and death, she felt nurtured by God’s presence, God’s blanket. And in that supportive love, she could nurture others. Today we remember our gallant men and women who go to war for us, and today we remember their loved ones who give them courage and strength. We pledge our loving support to the 1% who matter.