

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Veterans Past, Present and Future

Why is Veterans Day receiving so much attention this year? Is it because of the Iraq military actions and the news of continuing casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan? Is it because we have friends and co-workers who have been called to active duty from Reserves or the National Guard? Is it our desire to honor once again the veterans from the Greatest Generation? The combination of these and other reasons led to a busy week of activities to honor those who serve or have served our nation's military services.

The legislature played a part in the increased activity, beginning when the presiding speaker at last Thursday's session introduced the son of a staff member to the membership. Representatives always greet visitors with a round of applause, but we were particularly enthusiastic to welcome the young sergeant who recently returned home from Iraq.

After that introduction, we addressed the legislative agenda for the day, including a bill to assist employees who have been called to service from their state jobs. In addition to the stress of having a husband or wife absent for military service, many families have experienced financial hardship from a significant reduction in income. We voted to "fill the gap" between military wages and the state salaries of workers.

Another accommodation for those service personnel came with our approval of an extension to the state's early retirement offer. Eligible state workers should not be excluded from the opportunity given to their colleagues in state government for missing the calendar deadline because of their military duty. Municipalities will have the option to offer such benefits. The bill should soon be on the way to the governor's desk.

The Monson Senior Center also played a part in honoring veterans, holding a luncheon last week for the senior veterans in the town. Monson has an active group of veterans, and on Friday they were invited to wear their military uniforms to lunch. Several men and one woman showed up in their well-pressed uniforms, and one sailor could still wear the bell-bottom trousers he was issued in 1942. When I asked how many had served in World War II, most of the men and a good number of women raised their hands. Seeing the significant number of military women in the room reminded me that the gender integration of the armed forces arrived well before the last decade.

The Holyoke Soldiers Home had its own event on Friday. Lieutenant Governor Kerry Healey appeared at the facility bringing good news from Boston. The 50 year-old compound provides excellent care for veterans, but it lacks one amenity that has become a 21st century necessity – central air conditioning. Next time you see the Soldiers Home from the highway, just imagine the August temperatures on the top floor of the brick structure. The Lieutenant Governor brought news that \$17 million has been approved to install the service throughout the buildings before summer comes again.

East Longmeadow marked the holiday at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. Veterans, civic officials and onlookers came together to mark the hour and day that ended World War I and now honors all veterans. I was proud to have a part in the ceremony of laying wreathes at the town center, thanking veterans for their service and reminding the families who attended the cold outdoor event of the debt we owe to those who have served and fought to keep our nation free.