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Veterans want people to remember

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The Herald-Dispatch

HUNTINGTON -- American soldiers continue to serve in wars overseas, but the average citizen gives their sacrifices little thought, says Ed Ashley, a veteran of one of those wars.

"I think a lot of people are forgetting there are still two wars going on. People are dying," he said.

Veterans new and old hope the sacrifices will not be made in vain. This Veterans Day, especially, they hope people will take the time to say "Thanks."

"We must not forget," said Hershel "Woody" Williams, Ona resident and the last surviving West Virginia Medal of Honor recipient.

Williams and four other Medal of Honor recipients recently returned from a three-day visit to a military medical center in Germany where soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan were being treated.

"It was a very emotional visit," Williams said. "Sometimes you were elevated in your emotions by the pride and thanksgiving of what those young people are doing. In the next breath, you were sad and hurt because so many of them are severely injured and their lives are going to be affected from now on."

The World War II veteran said Veterans Day is a special time when citizens can emphasize the contributions of the men and women who have protected and continue to protect America.

Ashley, a 37-year-old Army staff sergeant from Ashland, Ky., retired last year after head and spinal injuries suffered during a roadside bomb explosion. He served in Iraq in 2003 and in 2005 to 2006. He also served in Operation Desert Storm when he was barely old enough to serve. His twin brother is still serving in Afghanistan.

Ashley said people often ignore the war and don't realize that soldiers are keeping problems from reaching the United States.

He also said Americans are lucky. In Iraq, he said people are required to stay inside after dark. He recalled children carrying grenades.

**Lori Wolfe/The Herald-Dispatch**

United States Army veteran Ed Ashley, of Ashland, Ky., received the Purple Heart during his second tour in Iraq in 2005 to 2006. Ashley served multiple tours in Iraq as well as serving in Desert Storm.

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"Everybody has a weapon. It's just a really harsh environment," he said.

Williams said Americans on average do not pay attention to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He said the only people aware are those directly involved or whose loved ones are killed on active duty.

"It's a terrible shame when someone is killed on active duty fighting an enemy and we find his name on page 39 in a newspaper. It ought to be on the front page," he said. "He voluntarily gave his life for us. We must not forget that."

Ashley lost three good friends while serving in Iraq. He was part of a 52-man company whose mission was to get rid of roadside bombs. Twelve soldiers were wounded and three were killed. He was one of at least a dozen injured, and he received the Purple Heart and many other awards and medals.

"The Purple Heart was the only one I didn't want," he said. "I'm reminded every day of why I got the Purple Heart."

Ashley deals daily with chronic pains and memory problems. His spine is held together with rods and screws. He has scars on his back and walks with a slight limp.

But pains aren't the only reminder of the sacrifices he and others made. Ashley also carries the evidence on his cell phone, such as the photo of an explosion of a Humvee after it struck a roadside bomb ahead of Ashley, killing the passengers. Probably 10 to 15 similar explosions occurred each day during Ashley's last tour in Iraq, he said.

Ashley said his friends' parents have to remember the war every day because of the loss of their children.

"I'm lucky to be alive and lucky to be with my family," he said.

Ashley has a wife and 5-year-old son. He said many children, like those in schools at Fort Campbell, Ky., are without one or both parents because they have risked their lives in another country.

Today's veterans do have more access to increased services and more support than many former veterans, though, Ashley said.

He goes to the Huntington VA Medical Center twice a week for doctor's appointments. He's also helped by the center's vocational rehabilitation services. He said he is grateful for the many services, including social assistance, offered today.

"People will take the time to help now," he said.

Ashley hopes services will continue to expand. He wants to see more funds for veterans' health care and educational programs to help veterans re-enter the work force.

Ashley himself wants to teach elementary school children. He has a degree in criminal justice that he earned between tours.

A self-described career soldier who grew up playing with army men, Ashley said he is often asked why he would volunteer to go to war. Each time his answer is the same. Someone has to do it.

"Every day, if you see a veteran, you should thank them for what they've done," he said.

Remembering veterans

The Huntington Veterans Day celebration will be today and include a parade and ceremony sponsored by the Veterans Committee for Civic Improvement and the Huntington Parks and Recreation District.

The ceremony will take place at the Veteran's Memorial Arch at 1301 Memorial Blvd. The parade will start at 10 a.m. Tuesday, Nov. 11, on 14th Street West and continue to Memorial Boulevard at the arch.

The ceremony will follow the parade.

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