

WE SHOULD NEVER FORGET

I write this month's column with the memory of Redlands' most recent Veteran's Day ceremony still vivid in my mind. Every year, on the 11th hour, of the 11th day of the 11th month, our great town takes time to remember and honor the service and sacrifices made by past and present members of America's armed services. Their contributions have helped make America the great country it is.

This year, the event's organizers - American Legion Posts 106 and 650 - chose to honor Redlands police officers and firefighters along with our country's soldiers. These everyday heroes work to ensure that our community is safe and deserve recognition similar to military personnel.

The recent wildfires underscored the heroism displayed by firefighters throughout California. The death of a Rialto police officer during the service of a search warrant a few weeks ago underscores the danger police officers face daily. And local news reports and the Redlands Daily Facts' recap of local police calls-for-service serve to underscore, that, as wonderful as Redlands is, it's not Disneyland and there are significant public safety issues to which we must attend.

What makes people become police officers or firefighters, what one leadership study recently referred to as "willing heroes"? Why would seemingly normal individuals drive as fast as they could to the report of an armed robbery or shooting, or a hazardous material spill or structure fire? Why don't they do what just about everyone else does in those situations - run AWAY from the obvious danger?

I believe it is a sense of duty. A sense that, if we don't save innocent people from crime or disaster, then who will?

When I signed up to be a cop, I know that all I wanted to do was protect those who couldn't protect themselves. It certainly wasn't for the money or the benefits! When I received my first paycheck as a Redlands police officer I didn't have any sense that risking my life while working for little more than minimum wage and minimal benefits might not be the brightest thing I'd ever done. But what I did know was that I was going to do everything in my power to keep bad guys away from good people and protect the town that had helped raise me.

At the Redlands Police Department, we recruit employees in what the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services once referred to as "the spirit of service." This framework for hiring employees differs radically from the predominant model of "recruiting in the spirit of adventure" that so many police agencies use to drive their hiring practices.

In this context, the "spirit of adventure" is about the excitement of chasing crooks, driving fast with red lights and sirens, "running and shooting" and leaping tall buildings in a single bound! It's similar to the Army's "be all you can be" recruiting message. This stands in contrast to the hiring model of "in the spirit of service" which focuses on the notion that police officer candidates feel a "calling" to serve their communities via police work (but still have the capacity to act in dangerous situations).

Inherent in this spirit of service model is the notion of "duty" to the community. Duty is also embodied in the Peace Officer's Code of Ethics which states, in part, "... my

fundamental duty is to serve mankind; to safeguard lives and property; to protect the innocent against deception, the weak against oppression or intimidation, and the peaceful against violence or disorder; and to respect the constitutional rights of all persons to liberty, equality and justice.”

All RPD police officers take this oath. They do so with the knowledge that they may someday be making the ultimate sacrifice for their community. More American cops have been murdered by gunfire this year than in any recent time. According to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, so far this year, 63 American police officers have been shot to death in the line of duty. This represents an alarming 40 percent increase over last year.

“Duty to one’s community” is what drives the brave men and women at the RPD. They literally represent that “thin blue line” which separates criminals from law abiding citizens. These heroes go where no one else will, and do things others will not. Just this last weekend, I had my police radio on and was listening to our officers handle a burglary suspect at a large local retailer. This guy had been seen by the store’s loss prevention officers concealing merchandise under his shirt. Because he was also seen with three large knives the store security personnel were prohibited by policy from contacting him.

Two RPD officers (that’s all we had available at the time) developed a plan to confront him outside the store so innocent shoppers would not be endangered. The dispatchers radioed to the officers that the suspect was exiting the store. Several tense minutes elapsed with complete radio silence. The dispatcher, with obvious concern in her voice, eventually asked the officers if they were OK. They radioed that the suspect was finally in custody and no one got hurt in the process.

This is just one example of how, every day, RPD officers risk their lives for people they do not know. Why do they knowingly risk their lives for strangers? It’s the same sense of duty and heroism exhibited by American soldiers.

I am unabashedly proud of the members of the Redlands Police Department. It galls me to hear some of the same people our officers have unselfishly risked their lives to protect, complain about the cost of maintaining a high level of community safety. It reminds me of the criticism leveled by some at our returning servicemen and women.

How shameful.

These people ask not what their community can do for them, rather, what they can do for their community. The least we can do is recognize, in meaningful ways, their willingness to die for each us of and provide them with the tools they need to ensure our safety.

Please, never forget the sacrifices made by the members of our military, and never forget the similar sacrifices your police officers and firefighters make for you every day.

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