

Being a UU in the Military

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Duty, Courage, Honor, Service, Commitment, Respect and Integrity. These words collectively make up the composite definition of the five military services core values. The core values of an organization are those attributes we hold that form the foundation on which we perform work and conduct ourselves. It is loosely defined as a 'condition of employment,' yet at the same time can also be interpreted as elements of guiding principles in fostering a work ethic as well as a moral compass. These words represent the character of a military servicemember. It also closely aligns with the words of our UU Guiding Principles.

In 1972, I had the privilege of joining our nation's fifth armed service, the U. S. Coast Guard. Although most people, myself included at the time, did not know that the Coast Guard is indeed a military service – it had the uniqueness of being the only service that did not fall under the Department of Defense. This is due to its special authority to make searches, seizures and arrests within our nation's 93 million square miles of territorial waters.

While the Coast Guard principally operated as a peacetime service performing such humanitarian missions as search and rescue, disaster response, environmental protection, maritime safety and law enforcement, under the Department of Transportation at the time I joined in 1972, and is now part of the Department of Homeland Security. The service nonetheless fulfilled its military readiness responsibilities operating as a component under the Navy in every major war since 1790. Even today, harbor security in the Iraq's lone port, Umm Qasar is patrolled by 350 Coastguardsmen.

Although during my 30 year career from 1972 to 2002 did not involve me serving directly in a war zone, nonetheless, I fulfilled my military duties as a qualified law enforcement boarding officer, enforcing the United Nation imposed maritime fisheries sanctions to then Communist-block countries in the 70's and 80's, to migrant interdiction in the Caribbean waters in the late 80s, and well into the 90's.

It was to me, indeed a noble cause to serve my country, and be in a service that closely reflected the compassionated definition of my faith as a UU and its guiding principles. In the words of the Greek philosopher, Epictetus: "You are a citizen of the world and a part of it." I am often reminded of this from a poster that hangs in my office, of an actual photograph I had taken with one of those disposable cameras in 1994 during my deployment to Haiti during the military operation "Support Democracy," bringing that tiny troubled nation to sovereignty. The picture shows a young Coastguardsman preciously holding a little Haitian baby while bringing dozens of that stricken country citizens who were fleeing in makeshift rafts, oversized boats, and anything that floated, as they attempted their dangerous journey to America. [\[show the picture\]](#)

As a fourth generation UU, I have followed in the footsteps of my father, as well as my two brothers, in wearing the uniform in service to our nation. Each of them served in different military services, my father having served in three wars, World War II, Korea and Vietnam in the Army, and my two brothers, both Vietnam veterans Navy and Marine Corps respectively. While they too served with distinction and fulfilled military careers in their own right, at times they, as have I experienced great difficulties of celebrating our faith in an environment that seemed to often favor a fundamentalist way of life as a connection to the service's core values.

But we served honorably, proud and with our own compassion of our faith in spite of it. We each found how our service to our country also translated to service to humanity. Keeping close with those you serve with, providing guidance, leadership, and sharing of compassion and even spirituality. Military service became a living opportunity for us to learn from others, and expand our knowledge of cultural understanding with our service colleagues, as well as those we served in foreign lands.

Because my father and brothers have served during periods of war, they have witnessed visually of death and destruction up close, and often times personal. Each of them wore the blood of a fellow servicemember felled by an enemy bullet. These are indeed devastating memories that has remained with them for the rest of their lives.

As a child, I recall how my first understanding of the true meaning of Memorial Day, where it is necessary to take time out of the day to devote to reflection of the lives of millions who had served and laid their lives on the line in defense of this country. My father made it clear to each of my siblings that Memorial Day is not a day of celebration, for there are scores of men and women who rest peacefully in the gardens of stone, here in this country and around the world and the oceans deep. Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, Airmen and Coastguardsmen, who answered the call to service, some voluntarily, many reluctantly. Serve they did, and in the name of selfless service they died.

On Memorial Day, it is a time to put aside any personal and political grievances on the discussion of war, likes or dislikes of elected leaders, or debating views of issues on national security. It is a time to devote some periods of reflection for those who served and lost their lives in the service to our country. It is a time to closely examine within ourselves just how precious life really is. It is a time to remind ourselves that our chosen faith defines specifically the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. Blessed be.