Good morning. I want to make sure you all understand the importance of this day, Veteran’s Day, November 11, a date chosen because it was the day that WWI came to an end – on the 11th hour of the 11 day in 1918 – a day chosen to honor those who serve our country in uniform.

In my installation speech I referenced the importance of optimism, not simply having a rosy outlook, but the importance of engaging with the world; of seeking to understand others through empathy and compassion; and of actively serving others to make the world a better place.

There are many ways to do your part, but serving in our nation’s armed forces is an especially noble, worthy, and selfless way to do it.

I only met my father in law once, and just briefly, but his story is one that I admire. Over 71 years ago, on the eve of D-Day, my father-in-law, a lieutenant in the 101st Airborne, was preparing his platoon for action. A graduate of Harvard, class of 1940, and a classmate of John F. Kennedy, he enlisted when America entered World War II.

In the late afternoon of June 5, 1944, he was preparing his men to parachute behind enemy lines in the early hours before dawn, before the main assault hit the beaches at first light.

As he walked out onto the airfield in England, he described in letters home to my mother-in-law how puny he felt walking toward the plane, under “dull leaden clouds”, feeling the crushing weight of world events spinning out of control. The idea he expressed was a kind of disbelief that a plan, a human endeavor, could ever reel it all back in, could ever make things right again.

“It was a strange feeling,” he wrote, “to be a part of that long, quiet, shuffling, ferocious column of brown and green clad men. To see the other soldiers, and even civilians, who were watching us from the edge of the road. I thought how secure they must feel in their detachment from the grim thing which is happening - and I wondered if, looking at us, they had any sense of history being made. […] Airports are always so huge, flat, windswept and desolate and our thin columns seemed to be made up of such tiny humans.”

He went on to say that as he tried to convey messages from General Eisenhower to his men on the plane, intended to encourage and inspire them, - his voice, reading the prepared words, only made him feel punier:

“The last few minutes before take-off were rendered a trifle absurd by my effort to read or distribute copies of the various inspirational messages which had been printed for our consumption at the last moment.”

He went on to participate in the low altitude, night time parachute drop, in the rain, behind enemy lines that was the inspiration for Saving Private Ryan and the documentary Band of Brothers. It was a mission he volunteered for although he was affadi of heights and had only one practice jump.

His unit was an artillery unit, and the chutes did not open up on their field pieces, and so when they hit
the soft, wet ground, they sank up to their hubs and could not be retrieved from the mud. It was absolute chaos. He did not talk a whole about it, but I do get glimpses of what he must have experienced when I watch Band of Brothers. He ultimately survived the ordeal, but most of his platoon did not.

In writing about the United States entry into WWII, Tom Brokaw wrote in this book, The Greatest Generation:

“In America, young men were enlisting in the military by the hundreds of thousands. Farm kids from the Great Plains who never expected to see the ocean in their lifetimes signed up for the Navy; brothers followed brothers into the Marines; young daredevils who were fascinated by the new frontiers of flight volunteered for pilot training.

Single young women poured into Washington to fill the exploding needs for clerical help as the political capital mobilized for war. Other women, their husbands or boyfriends off to basic training, learned to drive trucks or handle welding torches. The old rules of gender and expectation changed radically with what was now expected of this generation.”

WWII was an extraordinary example of a nation coming together to face a crisis. An extraordinary story of service to the country and defense of freedom, individual liberty, and the rule of law.

More recently, as a country, we have had countless challenges in the world, and our armed forces have been there.

I heard a tremendous speaker a few years ago describing the integrity and value system of our military. She was a professor of military ethics from the Naval Academy, Dr. Shannon French.

She was referring to the Iraq war, during a particularly tough period of roadside bombs and surprise attacks on our soldiers coming from civilians.

She talked about the protocols our soldiers were required to follow at civilian checkpoints. She described the degree to which our soldiers put their own lives at risk in order to make absolutely certain they did not make an error with a civilian life.

When there was any uncertainty about an approaching vehicle, they had a whole series of warnings that had to be issued, a whole series of rules that had to be followed that ultimately made them quite vulnerable, but were designed to save Iraqi lives.

Of course there were very occasional mistakes, she went on to say, and those were tragic. Her point was, when you have a 19-year old kid who is making split second decisions with lives on the line, it is possible to make an error. But she went on to fault the press for their coverage of these moments.

The story that should be printing, she felt, was the courage and selflessness of these young soldiers who over and over put themselves in harm’s way to prevent civilian losses. One case in 10,000 of a soldier making an error in judgment shouldn’t be front page news. The story should be the 9,999 times that soldier risked his life.

I tend to agree with her.
So today is a day when we are especially invited to remember those who have served us, those who have shown a special degree of selflessness and who have served in the United States military. We owe each and every one an enormous debt of gratitude.

I would like to take a moment right now to recognize those among us in this community who have served our country in uniform – when I call your name, please come to the stage.

Thanks to all of you.