The Memorial Day holiday honors the men and women who have paid the ultimate sacrifice to their country, so I wanted to share some thoughts with American Association of Nurse Anesthetists (AANA) members about life as a military nurse anesthetist. My own experience was through a career that spanned nearly 3 decades in the US Army including more than 22 years as an Army Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist (CRNA). It was a privilege to serve my country and to take an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. And although it was a privilege to serve, there was also sacrifice, as military service is exactly that, "selfless service" to one’s country. These sacrifices are borne not only by the service members but also their family and friends, who are often the unsung heroes who keep the home fires burning during the service member’s long work hours and deployments away from home.

In many ways the AANA is like a devoted family for the military CRNA, because the association has been a strong advocate for our practice and compensation. As an example, one of the first tasks that the AANA Federal Government Affairs office undertook shortly after opening in 1990 was to lobby Congress for incentive specialty pay for military CRNAs to help with retention and recruitment. The military was struggling to recruit and retain enough nurse anesthetists to meet their workforce demands as the first Gulf War, code-named Operation Desert Shield, got under way. As a result, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Years 1990 and 1991 authorized the first incentive special pay for nurse anesthetists.

The AANA continues to advocate on behalf of military members and veterans. As the United States is still involved in the longest war in its history and other campaigns across the globe, the AANA is the voice to legislators and policymakers to ensure full practice and fair compensation for the work of military and veteran CRNAs. That is why the recent ruling from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that excluded CRNAs from the full practice authority granted other advanced registered nurses was so disappointing to me personally. I know many CRNAs who leave the military are looking for work that continues to care for a population that they care so much about—our fellow comrades-in-arms—but most military CRNAs are not likely going to work for a healthcare system such as the VA that does not allow them to practice at their full scope, as they did while in uniform. Although the battle for full scope of practice may appear lost for now, the AANA will continue the fight to eliminate practice discriminations wherever they occur.

In addition, the AANA is capturing important history as it relates to military service. The association is seeking to record the histories of CRNAs who served in Vietnam. The AANA hopes to share these experiences with our membership, legislators, and the general public as a means of reaching back into history so that the many accomplishments and sacrifices of military CRNAs, soldiers, sailors, and airmen and airwomen are not forgotten. (See submission guidelines at www.aana.com/vietnam.)

I am frequently asked “How was the transition from the military to the AANA”? The answer: surprisingly easy! First, through my volunteer work with the AANA and the AANA Foundation while I was
on active duty, I already had many friendships with members and also with several AANA staff members. The previous executive director, John Garde, MS, CRNA, FAAN, was a friend of mine, and those of you who knew John are aware that it was easy to make friends just by mentioning his name. The transition also was eased because the mission, vision, and values of the AANA, which include “Quality, Professionalism, Compassion, Collaboration, Wellness, and Diversity,” aligned with my personal belief system, which had been grounded in the military value system for such a long time.

Coming from a value-based culture like the military to another value-based workplace culture like the AANA helped make the transition easy for me. The AANA elected officers, staff, and more importantly our volunteers make the work meaningful and rewarding. I am always amazed at the entrepreneurial spirit of CRNAs across the country and the focus on service and quality to their patients and the communities they serve. One other factor that made the transition easy was the “fit” of the position as senior director for Education and Professional Development. This position was a great opportunity to serve at the national level. Most of my military career was grounded in education serving as faculty at the US Army Graduate Program in Anesthesia Nursing and the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences. Early in my career as a CRNA, mentors like Major Mike Mehlhaff, MSN, CRNA, encouraged me to become an educator. They saw something in me that I did not see in myself and allowed me the opportunity to teach.

Finally, there is the leadership aspect of my military career that is continuing to serve me well at the AANA. During my Army career I was taught about leadership at every level, culminating with a yearlong academic experience at the National War College in Washington, DC. At the National War College I was taught about leadership at the strategic level and how to incorporate my leadership style into large organizations.

Following the National War College I was assigned as the commander of the US Army Medical Research Institute of Chemical Defense, the nation’s laboratory in Maryland that develops antidotes against chemical weapons. It was such a privilege to serve alongside career scientists in the Department of Defense who have dedicated their lives to the science of countering weapons of mass destruction. My education as a nurse anesthetist served me extremely well in this position because many of the biological systems, such as acetylcholine and the enzyme responsible for its metabolism, acetylcholinesterase, that are manipulated for the provision of anesthesia care are also used in chemical nerve agents that have been weaponized. My background as a CRNA allowed me to speak the language of the scientists engaged in this important work and to lead them with some amount of “street credibility.” Now, after my retirement from the Army, these valuable skills and experiences continue to serve me as I serve the AANA membership.

On behalf of a grateful nation that enjoys “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” in the unique experience of being an American and remembering those who have given their lives to ensure our way of life for future generations, I encourage my fellow CRNAs to be involved in your profession. And for those interested in serving their country, there are many opportunities to serve in the military, including as an active-duty member or civilian, and the National Guard and Reserves. Now more than ever, the AANA and the country need their “citizens” to get involved and to participate in the process.

REFERENCE

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