

Understanding the Difference Between Memorial Day vs. Veterans Day

By *Samira Hedayat* Monday, May 22, 2023



Flag Day. Armed Forces Day. Independence Day. As Americans, we celebrate dozens of patriotic holidays throughout the year. However, two of these days — Memorial Day and Veterans Day — are often confused for the other and can be easily misunderstood.

Understanding the nuances of **Memorial Day vs. Veterans Day** might seem confusing at first – they do both honor the military community – but a quick Google search (or a quick four-minute read of this story) will show you that these two federal holidays couldn't be more different.



Family, friends, and visitors honor the fallen in Section 60 of Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington, Virginia, May 26, 2019.

Memorial Day: Honoring Those Who Died in Military Service

Memorial Day, which is celebrated on the last Monday in May, **honors service members who have died in military service to the nation.** The holiday has roots dating back to the post-Civil War era, when citizens would informally place spring flower memorials on the graves of fallen soldiers.

On May 5, 1866, the town of Waterloo, New York, formalized this ritual and hosted a city-wide “Decoration Day,” encouraging its citizens to create memorials on soldiers’ graves with flags and flowers. A few years later in 1868, Gen. John A. Logan declared that the first-ever national Decoration Day should take place on May 30, as the date was a neutral day for both sides of the Civil War to honor their fallen soldiers.

On May 20, 1868, over 5,000 first-ever National Decoration Day participants decorated the graves of the 20,000 Union and Confederate soldiers buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia. By the late 1800s, cities and communities across the United States began to observe the day and several states declared it a legal holiday.

Over the next few decades, the day transitioned from being called Decoration Day to its current name of **Memorial Day.**

In 1968, Congress passed the Uniform Monday Holiday Act, which established Memorial Day as the last Monday in May instead of a set calendar day. By 1971, the three-day weekend for federal employees went into full effect.



Staff Sgt. Jeffrey Hotz, leads the 338th Army Band as the drum major during the Memorial Day parade in Blue Ash, Ohio on May 27, 2019. | Photo credit DVIDS/ Sgt. 1st Class Joel Quebec

Today, Memorial Day is often associated with the start of summer, discount sales and cookouts with friends. But **you have the power to educate those around you** and take a few moments to pay tribute to the fallen while still enjoying the sunshine and outdoors. Here are a few ideas:

- 1) Participate in the National Moment of Remembrance at 3:00pm
- 2) Visit a military cemetery or memorial
- 3) Display the U.S. flag at your home
- 4) Watch the National Memorial Day Concert



Photo credit U.S. Air Force/Mauricio Campino

Josie Donithan, USO Delaware volunteer, serves food to Honor Guard team members and mortuary staff prior to a dignified transfer on Jan. 24, 2019, at Dover Air Force Base, Del.

5) You can also learn more about the USO's support of Gold Star Families – also known as Families of the Fallen. Since 1991, the USO has been present at every single dignified transfer at Dover Air Force Base, Delaware.

A dignified transfer is the process in which the remains of a fallen service member, upon return from the theater of operations to the United States, are transferred from the aircraft to an awaiting vehicle. It is a solemn occasion that allows the family of the fallen service member, as well as other service members in attendance, to honor their life and service to this country.

The USO supports Gold Star Spouses and Gold Star Families alike, from being alongside them on their journey to Dover to the process of the dignified transfer of the remains of their loved one who died in service. The USO also provides support to the service members facilitating the transfer and serving in the military Honor Guard, as undertaking such an emotional and solemn mission can obviously take its toll on service members, many of whom have also traveled from home to Dover to be in attendance.

It is important to remember the true reason behind the holiday weekend – Memorial Day is a time to reflect on the lives of the men and women of this country who were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice to ensure our freedoms.



Over 1000 flags wave in the wind for a Veterans Day weekend event on Nov. 9, 2018 in Hermitage, Tennessee.

Veterans Day: Honoring All Those Who Served in the Military

Veterans Day, a federal holiday that falls on November 11, is designated as a day to honor the more than 19 million men and women who have served in the U.S. military.

It was first observed on November 11, 1919, as Armistice Day in honor of the first anniversary of the end of World War I, which officially ended on the “eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month” in 1918. In 1926, Congress called for an annual observance of the anniversary and by 1938 it was an official federal holiday. A few decades later, in 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower officially changed the name of the holiday from Armistice Day to Veterans Day, as it is currently known today.



U.S. Air Force Kadena Air Base honor guard members march in the Veteran’s Day Parade, Nov. 11, 2018 | Photo credit DVIDS/ Senior Airman Kristan Campbell

Thanks to the Uniform Holiday Act of 1968, the holiday was moved from its November 11 date to a less defined “fourth Monday in October” so workers could enjoy a long weekend. However, this move didn’t last long. In 1975, President Gerald Ford returned the solemn day back to its original November 11 to honor the global historical significance of the day.

While it is important to thank all those who have served or are serving on a regular basis, on Veterans Day it’s *especially* important to take an extra moment to show military members gratitude for their sacrifice. Here are some ideas, beyond simply saying “thank you for your service:”

- 1) Attend a Veterans Day event
- 2) Ask a veteran about their time in the military
- 3) Display the U.S. flag in your home
- 4) Volunteer for, or donate to, a military support nonprofit like the USO
- 5) Read a book or watch a movie about U.S. military history



Photo credit USO Photo

A service member and a military spouse meet with a USO Transition Specialist to discuss next steps in their career searches beyond the military.

You can also learn more about the USO Pathfinder Transition® Program, which supports the success of American veterans of tomorrow.

Essentially, through the USO Pathfinder Transition Program, **service members (and their spouses) have access to professional, educational, financial, and personal development services that can help prepare them for civilian life after they separate from the military.** Once enrolled in the program, they are assigned a USO Transition Specialist who works with them one-on-one to develop a personalized Action Plan that is best suited for their goals. USO Transition Specialists tailor each USO Pathfinder experience to each client so they can thrive as a veteran or military spouse, both personally and professionally.

This can include everything from learning how to translate military experience to a civilian resume, to assisting a military spouse in earning a degree that they can use in remote jobs from one duty station to the next, to organizing personal finances, to even learning how to tie a tie.

Transitioning from a military life to a civilian one can undoubtedly be challenging. It is important that service members and military spouses know that even as they transition from the military, the USO and our supporters stand ready to support them as they find their way.

-This article was originally published in 2019. It has been updated in 2023.

Every day, America's service members selflessly put their lives on the line to keep us safe and free. Please take a moment to let our troops know how much we appreciate their service and sacrifice.