



## WAR MEMORIAL CENTER EDUCATION PROGRAM

### How To Talk To A Veteran Or Current Military Member

Many veterans and military members enjoy sharing their service stories with others. Remember there are many types of military service! Not all veterans served overseas or in combat, for example – and that does not make their service any less important. In all cases, be respectful of a veteran's experience and what they want to talk about.

#### **How to Talk to a Veteran**

By Lt. Gen. David Barno and Nora Bensahel, Ph.D.

##### Questions to Avoid

*“Did you ever kill anyone?”* This question is inappropriate, insensitive and highly personal. Few veterans who have lived through that experience will want to talk about it, even with close family or friends. Those who ask this make themselves look thoughtless, ignorant, and extremely disrespectful. In sum: Never, ever, ever.

*“Did you see any dead bodies?”* This is another example of insensitivity. Many veterans have not had this experience, but for the vast majority of those who have, it is something that will never be forgotten, regardless of whether the war dead were Americans, enemy soldiers, or innocent civilians.

*“What was the worst thing you ever saw?”* This is guaranteed to bring back memories that a veteran may be trying hard to forget. Images of dead comrades, the wounded suffering in pain, and the inevitable human carnage of war are pictures and sounds the mind works hard to erase. Asking about them brings these sensations immediately back to the forefront.

*“Do you have PTS?”* Post traumatic stress is a mental health condition triggered by a terrifying event, in war or otherwise. Although many veterans do not have PTS, it is insensitive to ask such a personal question and can seem to be dismissive of that person's service, focusing only on the negative.

*“[Insert your politics here.]”* Do not use this as an opportunity to express your opinions on whether the United States should have gone to war in Vietnam, Iraq or Afghanistan, or about other foreign policy issues. Veterans were either drafted or signed up to serve their country and the politics of war is irrelevant to their service experience.

##### Questions to Ask

*“What service were you in? Why did you choose that one?”* Veterans often appreciate the opportunity to talk about their decision to serve, and every veteran identifies with their specific service branch. The Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard each has its own culture, history and customs.

*“Are you still in the military? What are you doing now? What are your friends doing now?”* These are terrific questions to find out more about the current lives of veterans and how their service affected their lives after their service.

*“What inspired you to join?”* This is a subtle but important salute to veterans. It is a question that recognizes that each one felt some spark, some impulse that brought them into the recruiting station to embark upon a very different path than most of their fellow citizens. Let them tell you why.

*“What was your job? What was the most rewarding part of doing it?”* Most veterans take pride in their military jobs and like talking about the parts that they found most fulfilling. But this is also important because many people believe that all members of the military, especially those in the Army and Marines, directly fight the enemy. Just like civilian society, the military encompasses many diverse specialties, from welders to dog handlers to musicians. Asking a veteran about the job he or she had in uniform may open a surprising new conversation.

*“What surprised you the most about being overseas?”* For most veterans, an overseas deployment was the first time in their life that they visited a part of the world outside of the United States. This is a great opportunity to learn about what that felt like — and you might be surprised by these stories as well.

This text was edited for length. Lt. Gen. David W. Barno, USA (Ret.), graduated from West Point and was senior American commander of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan from 2003–05. He is Distinguished Practitioner in Residence, School of International Service at American University. Dr. Nora Bensahel is Distinguished Scholar in Residence, School of International Service at American University.

### **Ways to show veterans you appreciate their service:**

Sometimes it's hard to tell who has served in the military, but they can be a man or woman of age 18 or above. If you see someone in their uniform or they are wearing something that designates them as a veteran, thank them for their service. If you have more time, ask them some questions about their service.

- Say “thank you.” If you have extra time, ask them about their service.
- Attend a Veterans Day parade or ceremony. (Veterans Day is on November 11 every year.)
- Listen to their service stories.
- Interview a veteran or military member for a school assignment.
- Interview a veteran for the Library of Congress Veteran History Project.
- Make a thank-you card.
- Send a letter to a soldier serving overseas (you can find many organizations online that deliver letters to deployed service members).