

By LAURINDA KEYS LONG

In the United States, most national holidays are celebrated not on the actual day of the events they commemorate but on a Monday following a nearby weekend. The result is that, in the excitement of planning a “three-day weekend,” some citizens forget why they have a holiday.

Veterans Day is different. It is always celebrated on November 11. Even though it was included in the 1968 law that moved so many holidays to convenient Mondays, veterans’ organizations and other Americans lobbied their elected representatives and, in 1978, the holiday was returned to its original date by an act of Congress. Now, only if November 11 falls on a Saturday or Sunday, as it does this year, will government offices and banks close on the nearest Friday or Monday.

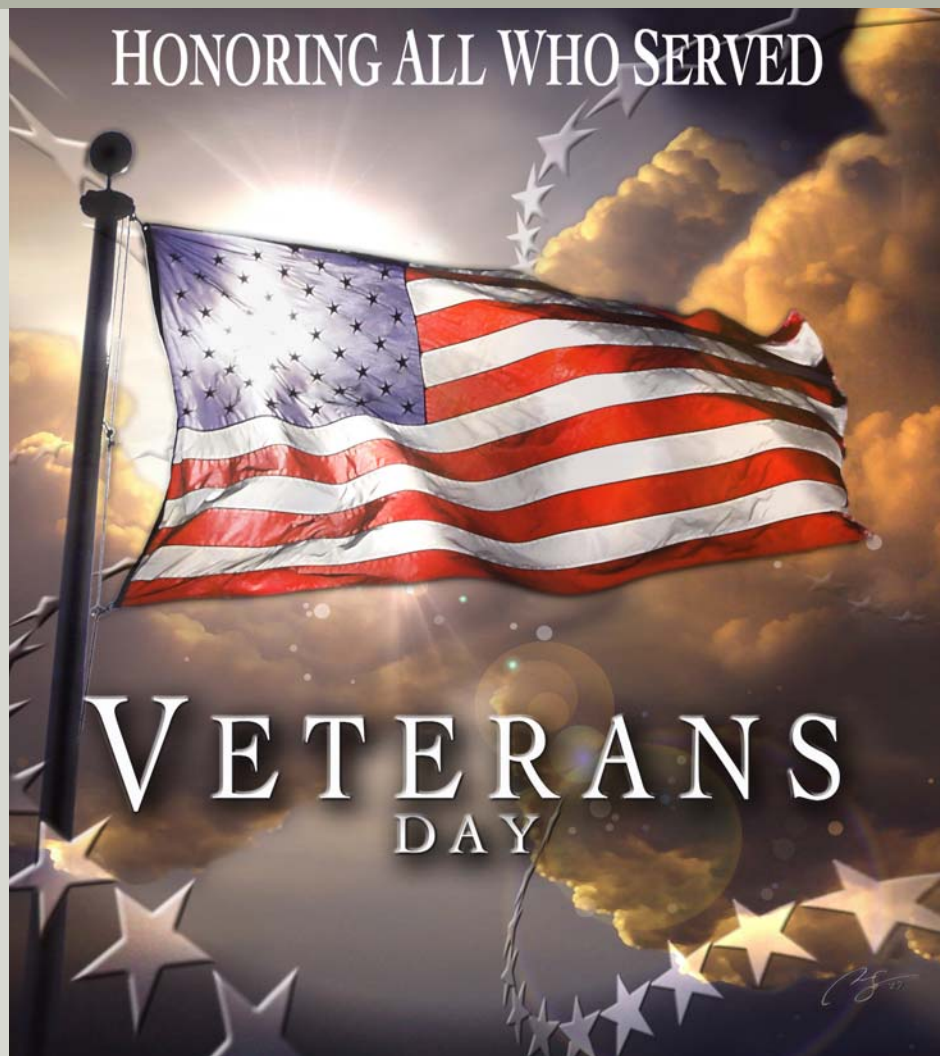
It was evident that November 11 was a date that had significance to Americans. World War I, known in that more optimistic time as “the war to end all wars,” ended on November 11, 1918. Germany signed an armistice, or cease-fire, with the Allied powers, which included the United States, Britain and also Indian troops who are commemorated on the India Gate in New Delhi. The Armistice signing occurred at the 11th hour on the 11th day in the 11th month.

The next year, President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed November 11 as Armistice Day in the United States, to remember the sacrifices made by members of the Armed Forces to ensure what was expected to be a lasting peace. Surviving soldiers marched in parades through their hometowns. Politicians and veteran officers gave speeches. Prayers of thanksgiving were heard in places of worship. Nowadays, more solemn remembrances also occur, such as maintaining moments of silence at 11 a.m. on the day.

On Armistice Day in 1921, the body of an unknown soldier killed on the European battlefield was buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is honored with a special guard, and often visited by the President on Memorial Day in May or on Veterans Day.

Congress made the day an official federal holiday in 1938, to honor veterans of World War I for their willingness to serve and sacrifice for the common good.

But in 1954, following World War II and the Korean War, Congress changed the name of the November 11 holiday to Veterans Day, to honor those who fought in all of the nation’s conflicts. In his 1954 proclamation, President Dwight D.



Eisenhower reflected on those who fought “to preserve our heritage of freedom.” He urged Americans to “reconsecrate ourselves to the task of promoting an enduring peace so that their efforts shall not be in vain.”



*Soldiers of the New York City Recruiting Battalion with retired U.S. Army veteran Samuel Vasques from New York during a Veterans Day parade in 2006.*