

That brave and fallen few

by Robert_J_Caldwell

For most Americans most of the time, Memorial Days have been a start-of-summer holiday of barbecues and family gatherings with only a touch of solemnity marking the real reason for this commemoration. A president honoring the nation's war dead at Arlington National Cemetery, wreath laying, the click of an honor guard's measured steps on stone beside those marble tombs of soldiers "Known But To God." Then, it's "play ball," or "more charcoal for the grill."

Wartime is different. Now our pause for tribute recalls more than the toll of wars past, more than the price of freedom from the Revolution through the Civil War, two World Wars, Korea, Vietnam and all the lesser clashes before and since. Now we honor, too, and especially, the young lives forever stilled in today's wars - Afghanistan and the cruel ordeal in Iraq. This year we commemorate the sacrifices in a global war brought to America's shores on that terrible Tuesday in September 2001.

As Lincoln said at Gettysburg, "It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this."

Our losses today are our brothers, sons, fathers and buddies, and, yes, sometimes our sisters, daughters and mothers. They are those we grew up with, lived alongside, perhaps the kid next door, maybe the shortstop or linebacker in high school, the quiet boy who wanted to serve his country, the young warrior so proud of his new calling as Soldier or Marine. Bombs, bullets and terrorists are no respecters of uniform, gender, soldier or civilian. Each and all are targets.

On Memorial Day, we mourned and honored in particular those of our own communities who have given their lives on foreign fields in the service of their country since the last Memorial Day:

Joseph Walter Perry of Alpine, Richwell Arzadon Doria of San Diego, Jeromy West of Chula Vista, Brian Scott Freeman of Temecula and San Diego, Jeffrey Dean Bisson of Vista, Jamie Duggan Wilson of San Diego, Ronnie G. Madore Jr. of San Diego, Richard Anthony Soukenka of Oceanside and Curtis Robert Spivey of Chula Vista.

Each a loved one, each a vibrant life cut short, each a patriot who gave, again in Lincoln's inspired prose, "the last full measure of devotion."

The spare language of Department of Defense announcements of their deaths gives only the barest details: name, rank, age, unit, date, place and cause of death.

Army Sgt. Joseph Walter Perry, 23, 21st Military Police Company of the 18th Airborne Corps, was killed Oct. 2, 2006, in Muhallah, Iraq, when his mounted patrol came in contact with enemy forces using small arms fire. Army Staff Sgt. Richwell Arzadon Doria, 25, 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division, was killed by small arms fire during an air assault mission Nov. 7, 2006, in Kirkuk, Iraq. Marine Lance Cpl. Jeromy West, 20, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment, 3rd Marine Division, died Nov. 25, 2006, while conducting combat operations in Al-Anbar province, Iraq.

Army Capt. Brian Scott Freeman, 31, a reservist assigned to the 412th Civil Affairs Battalion, died Jan. 20, 2007, of wounds suffered when his meeting area with Iraqis came under attack by mortar and small arms fire. Army Spc. Jeffrey Dean Bisson, 22, 3rd Battalion, 509th Infantry Regiment (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division, died Jan. 20, 2007, in Karmah, Iraq, of wounds sustained when his Humvee was hit by an improvised explosive device. Army Staff Sgt. Jamie Duggan Wilson, 34, also of the 25th Infantry Division's 3rd Battalion, 509th Infantry Regiment (Airborne), died Jan. 22, 2007, in Fallujah, Iraq, from wounds suffered while conducting security operations in Karmah, Iraq.

Army Spc. Ronnie G. Madore Jr., 34, 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division, was killed Feb. 14, 2007, when a roadside bomb detonated near his vehicle in Baqubah, Iraq. Army Sgt. Richard Anthony Soukenka, 30, 2nd Brigade Special Troops Battalion of the 10th Mountain Division, died Feb. 27, 2007, of wounds sustained when an improvised explosive device detonated near his vehicle. Army Spc. Curtis Robert Spivey, 25, 1st Squadron, 10th Cavalry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division, died April 2, 2007, in San Diego of wounds suffered Sept. 16, 2006, in Baghdad when an IED exploded near his vehicle.

Behind every name is a family, friends and the too-short history of a cherished life given by God and delivered over to the service of country. Yet, soldiers in the crucible of combat don't die for abstractions. They die for their friends, for the comradeship bound up forever in that mystic brotherhood of arms. Cynics scoff at sacrifice. No combat soldier scoffs.

Of our dead, we now have only memories and markers, and the words of poets.

John McCrae, a Canadian physician who fought on the Western Front in World War I and died of pneumonia on active duty in 1918, wrote "In Flanders Fields" as a tribute to his fallen comrades. Its words serve no less well for us and our honored dead today.

"In Flanders fields the poppies grow

Between the crosses, row on row ...

We are the Dead. Short days ago

We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow

Loved and were loved, and now we lie

In Flanders fields."

Theodore O'Hara, a veteran of the Mexican and Civil Wars, wrote words later chosen to grace the entrance to Arlington National Cemetery. Again, their message is timeless.

"The muffled drum's sad roll has beat

The soldier's last tattoo;

No more on Life's parade shall meet

That brave and fallen few.

On fame's eternal camping ground

Their silent tents to spread,

And glory guards, with solemn round

The bivouac of the dead."

On this year's Memorial Day, no higher duty summons us than to thank and honor our own "brave and fallen few."

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