



REFLECTIONS ON MEMORIAL DAY

by Mackubin Thomas Owens

On Monday, we will mark the 141st anniversary of the first official observation of the holiday we now call Memorial Day, as established by General John A. Logan's "General Order No. 11" of the Grand Army of the Republic dated May 5, 1868. This order reads in part: "The 30th day of May 1868 is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers and otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies lie in almost every city, village and hamlet churchyard in the land." Logan's order in fact ratified a practice that was already widespread, both in the North and the South, in the years immediately following the Civil War.

As Americans continue to fight and die in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is fitting that we recur to the true meaning of this day. Alas, for too many Americans, Memorial Day has come to mean nothing more than another three-day weekend, albeit the one on which the beaches open, signifying the beginning of summer. Unfortunately, the tendency to see the holiday as merely an opportunity to attend a weekend cookout obscures even the vestiges of what the day was meant to observe: a solemn time, serving both as catharsis for those who fought and survived, and to ensure that those who follow will not forget the sacrifice of those who died that the American Republic and the principles that sustain it, might live. Some examples might help us to understand what this really means.

On July 2nd, 1863, Major General Dan Sickles, commanding III Corps of the Army of the Potomac, held the Union left along Cemetery Ridge south of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Dissatisfied with his position, he made an unauthorized movement to higher ground along the Emmitsburg Pike to his front. In so doing, he created a gap between his corps and Major General Winfield Scott Hancock's II Corps on his right. Before the mistake could be rectified, Sickles' two under-strength divisions were struck by General James Longstreet's veteran I Corps of Robert E. Lee's Confederate Army of Northern Virginia in an attack that ultimately threatened the entire Union position on Cemetery Ridge.

At the height of the fighting, a fresh Alabama brigade of 1,500 men, pursuing the shattered remnants of Sickles corps, was on the verge of penetrating the Union defenses on Cemetery Ridge. Union commanders including Hancock rushed reinforcements forward to plug the gap, but at a critical juncture, the only available troops were eight companies--262 men--of the 1st Minnesota Volunteers. Pointing to the Alabamans' battle flags, Hancock shouted to the regiment's colonel, "Do you see those colors? Take them."

As the 1st Minnesota's colonel later related, "Every man realized in an instant what that order meant--death or wounds to us all; the sacrifice of the regiment to gain a few minutes time and save the position, and probably the battlefield--and every man saw and accepted the necessity for the sacrifice."

The Minnesotans did not capture the colors of the Alabama brigade, but the shock of their attack broke the Confederates' momentum and bought critical time--at the cost of 215 killed and wounded, including the colonel and all but three of his officers. The position was held, but in short order, the 1st Minnesota ceased to exist, suffering a casualty rate of 82 percent, the highest of the war for any Union regiment in a single engagement.

Memorial Day is about the sacrifice of the other units, for example, the 54th Massachusetts, a regiment of black soldiers whose exploits were portrayed in the movie *Glory*. The 54th's assault, in the face of hopeless odds, against Battery Wagner, which dominated the approaches to Charleston Harbor, cost the regiment over half its number and proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that black soldiers were the equal, in both bravery and determination, of white soldiers.

In *No True Glory*, Bing West recounts the epic story of the battle for Fallujah. What Admiral Nimitz said of the Marines on Iwo Jima applied to the battle of Fallujah as well: "uncommon valor was a common virtue." Our troops continue to demonstrate uncommon valor on a daily basis.

But Memorial Day is also about individuals we may have known. It is about a contemporary of my father, who himself fought and was wounded in the Pacific during World War II. Marine Sgt. John Basilone was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions on Guadalcanal. Though he was not obligated to do so, he insisted on returning to combat and was killed on the first day of the struggle for Iwo Jima.

Memorial Day is also about Corporal Larry Boyer, USMC, a member of the platoon that I led in Vietnam from September 1968 until May 1969. The men of that platoon would all have preferred to be somewhere other than the Republic of Vietnam's northern Quang Tri Province, but they were doing their duty as it was understood at the time. In those days, men built their lives around their military obligation, and if a war happened on their watch, fighting was part of the obligation.

But Corporal Boyer went far beyond the call of duty. At a time when college enrollment was a sure way to avoid military service and a tour in Vietnam, Corporal Boyer, despite excellent grades, quit, enlisted in the Marines, and volunteered to go to Vietnam as an infantryman. Because of his high aptitude test scores, the Marine Corps sent him to communications-electronics school instead. But Corporal Boyer kept "requesting mast," insisting that he had joined the Marines to fight in Vietnam. He got his wish, and on May 29, 1969, he gave the "last full measure of devotion" to his country and comrades.

What leads men to behave as the soldiers of the 1st Minnesota, the 54th Massachusetts, the soldiers and Marines in Iraq and Afghanistan, John Basilone, Larry Boyer, and the countless others who have shared their sacrifice? Since the Vietnam War, too many of our countrymen have concluded that those who have died in battle are "victims." How else are we to understand the Vietnam War Memorial—"The Wall"—a structure that evokes not respect for the honored dead, but on the one hand, pity for those whose names appear on the wall, and on the other, relief on the part of those who, for whatever reason, did not serve?

Most Americans in general and veterans in particular reject this characterization. But there is a tendency these days also to reject the polar opposite: that these men died for "a cause." Many cite the observation of Glen Gray in his book, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*: "Numberless soldiers have died, more or less willingly, not for country or honor or religious faith or for any other abstract good, but because they realized that by fleeing their posts and rescuing themselves, they would expose their companions to greater danger. Such loyalty to the group is the essence of fighting morale."

It is my own experience that Gray is right about what men think about in the heat of combat: the impact of our actions on our comrades always looms large in our minds. As Oliver Wendell Holmes observed in his Memorial Day address of 1884, "In the great democracy of self-devotion private and general stand side by side." But the tendency of the individual soldier to focus on the particulars of combat makes Memorial Day all the more important, for this day permits us to enlarge the individual soldier's view, to give meaning to the sacrifice that was accepted of some but offered by all, not only to acknowledge and remember the sacrifice, but to validate it.

In the history of the world, many good soldiers have died bravely and honorably for bad or unjust causes. Americans are fortunate in that we have been given a way of avoiding this situation by linking the sacrifice of our soldiers to the meaning of the nation. At the dedication of the cemetery at Gettysburg four months after the battle, President Abraham Lincoln fleshed out the understanding of what he called in his First Inaugural Address the "mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land."

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address gives universal meaning to the particular deaths that occurred on that hallowed ground, thus allowing us to understand Memorial Day in the light of the Fourth of July, to comprehend the honorable end of the soldiers in the light of the glorious beginning and purpose of the nation. The deaths of the soldiers at Gettysburg, of those who died during the Civil War as a whole and indeed, of those who have fallen in all the wars of America, are validated by reference to the nation and its founding principles as articulated in the Declaration of Independence.

Though Lincoln was eulogizing the Union dead at Gettysburg, the Confederate fallen were no less worthy of praise, and the dialectic of the Civil War means that we include them in our national day of remembrance. As Holmes observed, "we respected [those who stood against us] as every man with a heart must respect those who give all for their belief."

Some might claim that to emphasize the "mystic chords of memory" linking Memorial Day and Independence Day is to glorify war and especially to trivialize individual loss and the end of youth and joy. For instance, Larry Boyer was an only son. How can the loved ones of a fallen soldier ever recover from such a loss? I corresponded with Cpl. Boyer's mother for some time after his death. Her inconsolable pain and grief put me in mind of Rudyard Kipling's poem, *Epitaphs of the War*, verse IV, "An Only Son:" "I have slain none but my mother, She (Blessing her slayer) died of grief for me." Kipling too, lost his only son in World War I.

But as Holmes said in 1884, "grief is not the end of all. I seem to hear the funeral march become a paean. I see beyond the forest the moving banners of a hidden column. Our dead brothers still live for us, and bid us think of life, not death--of life to which in their youth they lent the passion and joy of the spring. As I listen, the great chorus of life and joy begins again, and amid the awful orchestra of seen and unseen powers and destinies of good and evil our trumpets sound once more a note of daring, hope and will."

Linking Memorial Day and Independence Day as Lincoln essentially did enables us to recognize that while some of those who died in America's wars were not as brave as others and indeed, some were not brave at all, each and every one was far more a

hero than a victim. And it also allows us forever to apply Lincoln's encomium not only to the dead of the 1st Minnesota and the rest who died on the ground at Gettysburg that Lincoln came to consecrate, but also to John Basilone, Larry Boyer, and the countless soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines who have died in all of America's wars, that a nation dedicated to the liberal principles of liberty and equality might "not perish from the earth."

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