

2,500 Memorial Days and counting

The ancient Athenians understood that war is a constant in our human experience and made special efforts to prepare their children, women and men for what they



had to do in order to preserve their freedoms in a constantly hostile world. Thucydides tells us that all Athenians took part annually in a ceremony of public burial of soldiers who died in battle in defense of Athens. The bones of the dead were on display for two days. Every citizen saw firsthand the price those soldiers had paid.

These bones then were carried to the public burial area in coffins on 10 wagons, one for each Athenian tribe. An eleventh wagon carried a symbolic empty coffin, their "tomb of the unknown soldier." While citizens grieved, a noted figure, chosen "for his intellectual gifts and his general reputation," discharged the awesome responsibility of eulogizing the dead.

Thucydides records the funeral oration of Pericles in 431/430 BCE. Pericles praises the soldiers who lost their lives. He describes the hard-fought achievements and sacrifices of past citizens and forcefully encourages the present generation to devote themselves equally to the good of the whole city.

We should hope that our Memorial Days preserve, or reclaim, such civic reverence. Our current volunteer army does not require each and every young adult to give parts of their lives or their very lives for the common good. Memorial Day then may involve learning more than remembering.

I am fortunate to know a modern Pericles. His name is Lt. Col. Ted Westhusing. A 1983 graduate of West Point (USMA), Ted has served in a number of airborne outfits as a rifle platoon leader, scout platoon leader, company commander, regimental executive officer, and most recently, G3, 82d Airborne Division. He took intensive classical Greek from five hours a day, five days a week last summer. So I know firsthand about his dedication, integrity and seriousness of purpose. He is now at Emory University preparing to write a dissertation on cooperative and competitive military virtues, within the U.S. armed services and how authentic leaders of character can best harmonize those sets of virtues. He plans to go to the War College for a year, and then to West Point as a professor in philosophy within the English Department.

But as Ted himself says, Memorial Day is not about him. It's about the 3,000-plus paratroopers from the 82d who are ready to deploy to Afghanistan. These paratroopers volunteered three times — once to join the Army, once to go to airborne school and once more to join the elite, the 82d — to risk their lives for us.

It's about Lt. Gen. McNeill, Commanding General XVIII Airborne Corps, directing the fight in Afghanistan.

It's about their predecessors, who jumped into Normandy, Salerno and Sicily, who broke down Hitler's indestructible Atlantic Wall, who fought and won at The Bulge.

It's about soldiers and Marines who fought and won at Chipyong-ni, Chosin, Inchon, and those soldiers who were

immortalized at Ia Drang.

It's about paratroopers who jumped into Grenada and Panama and won.

It's about the men and women who fought and died in Desert Storm.

It's about Special Forces Lt. Col. KT, who was inserted into Northern Iraq to prevent thousands of Kurds from starving and freezing to death.

It's about SM, the senior Delta Force operative on the ground at Mogadishu Oct. 13, 1993, trying to kill or capture a warlord bent on starving thousands of Muslim Somalis.

It's about Col. S, who led his battalion as the first unit into Bosnia to prevent Muslims from being slaughtered by Serbs and Croats.

It's about Lt. Cols. JA and MB, who led the first battalions from the 82d Airborne into Kosovo to protect Muslim Kosovars from being slaughtered.

It's about the thousands of soldiers who have rotated through the Sinai for six months away from loved ones and civilian comforts to bring peace to that troubled land of Islam.

It's about the thousands more who spend a year away from home staring down the 600,000 North Korean troops, facing them across the demilitarized zone.

All these soldiers are never paid enough, do not have the housing they deserve, nor the benefits their arduous missions demand. But Ted assures me that as long as they know America cares, they will fight anywhere, anytime, for their and our families, and win. And from my own knowledge of western warfare, I believe him.

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