

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

# In the name of decency, let us acknowledge how many are dying for us and who they are

**T**wo controversies in two days, and all about names and numbers.

On Thursday, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, when asked about military casualties in Iraq, replied, "It's approximately 500, of which — I can get the exact numbers — approximately 350 are combat deaths." The real figures at the time were 722 and 521. A spokesman later said: "He

m i s s p o k e .  
That's all."

He sure did.  
But why do  
n u m b e r s  
matter?

N u m b e r s  
matter because  
they are at-  
t a c h e d t o

names, and right now the names are controversial, too.

On Friday, ABC's "Nightline" put the names and numbers together on national television to "remind our viewers — whether they agree with the war or not — that beyond the casualty numbers, these men and women are serving in Iraq in our names, and that those who have been killed have names and faces."

Before the broadcast, a television critic for the Washington Post called it "a cheap, content-free stunt designed to tug at our heartstrings and bag a big number on the second night of the May ratings race." So let's forget the names and the numbers and argue about television ratings and political motives.

Let's not.

Why do names and numbers of dead soldiers matter? Because it is decent for us to make them matter.

In 1916, midway through the mechanized butchery of World War I, the British alone suffered 420,000 casualties at one point along the line of trenches that stretched from Belgium to the border of Switzerland. That one point was the Somme River.

Fourteen years after the war, a memorial was dedicated at Thiepval to the soldiers who died along the Somme between July 1915 and February 1918. The memorial, as its Web site reminds us ([www.thiepval.org.uk](http://www.thiepval.org.uk)), sits in isolation, without any accompanying visitor center or any other explanation as to why the monument is there. The memorial has a simple inscribed statement: "Here are recorded names of officers and men of the British armies who fell on the Somme battlefields July 1915-February 1918 but to whom the fortune of war denied the known and honoured burial given to their comrades in death." It also has 72,000 names inscribed upon it.

Why did the British do this? Because it was decent.

American Vietnam veterans felt the same way when it came to publicly remembering their comrades who lost their lives. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund Inc., through its expert judging panel, scrutinized 1,421 design entries before choosing the design by Maya Lin. It was built in 1982. It, too, stands within a landscape that focuses all attention on the memorial. It, too, consists of names, now 58,235 in number, engraved on stone. The memorial is dedicated to "the 2.7 million men and women in the U.S. military who served in the designated war zone." We learn the numbers again from the Web site: [www.thewall-usa.com/information](http://www.thewall-usa.com/information).

If you have stood in front of those names, as I have, you see your own reflection in the polished stone behind each one of them. And you must ask, "Who am I that these soldiers died in service of my country?"

And if you want to do the decent thing, you will walk away from those names asking the question the old vet in Spielberg's "Saving Private Ryan" asks himself: "What have I done to earn this?" You might also add, "Was it right that these soldiers should die?" and, "What could I be doing to prevent this?"

The names matter. They have always mattered. The greater the courage of the men and women doing the fighting, the more incomprehensible the reasons for their sacrificing their lives, the more suspect the motives or judgment or policies of their leaders, the more the names matter.

It has always been this way.

Herodotus describes the heroic resistance of King Leonidas and his 300 Spartans against the Persian army at Thermopylae in 480 B.C.E. and remarks, "In the course of that fight Leonidas fell, having fought bravely, and many distinguished Spartans with him — their names I have learned, as those of men who deserve to be remembered; indeed, I have learned the names of all the three hundred."

The dead were buried where they fell, and the entire united Peloponnesian force was memorialized with an inscription on the site: "Four thousand here from Pelops' land / Against three million once did stand."

Names and numbers and simple human decency.

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