

MEMORIAL DAY REMARKS

By Frank Lennon

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May 30, 2011

In 1996, Carmella LaSpada asked a group of school children in Washington DC what Memorial Day meant. They talked it over and said, "That's the day the pool opens."

For too many Americans, Memorial Day now means a three-day weekend, the time to open the beach house or put the boat in the water—or, the day the pool opens.

You should be very proud of being here today, because your presence honors the true meaning of Memorial Day. You honor the memories of our fallen comrades.

To put this in perspective, if every man, woman and child in Rhode Island were to die tomorrow, that death toll would still be about 100,000 less than the number of Americans who have died in the nation's wars: 1.1 million.

Sadly, many Americans have lost this connection with their history. All too many of us today view military service as an abstraction, as images seen on television and in movies.

Ms. LaSpada wanted to show those children why they are free and who paid for their freedom. She started the "Moment of Remembrance" campaign.

She would like to see all Americans observe one minute of silence at 3 p.m. on Memorial Day, to honor those who sacrificed their lives for us.

Unfortunately, these efforts have not borne fruit the way she hoped. We are a busy nation of 300 million souls, all going somewhere and doing something all the time.

Memorial Day started shortly after the Civil War. For many years stores closed and people gathered for parades and picnics with a patriotic theme.

Today, families might still gather for picnics, but for many, the spirit of remembrance is absent.

I come from a long line of citizen-soldiers. My great-grand-uncle Terrance McQueeney, an Irish immigrant, served with the RI Volunteers in the Civil War.

My grandfather, Patrick Lennon, served in the RI Militia during the Spanish-American War. My uncle Leo Gaffney went to France with the AEF during WWI. My father, also Frank Lennon, participated in the Salerno, Anzio and southern France landings in WWII.

As a young boy, all I ever wanted to be when I grew up was a soldier. That desire was focused by a TV series while I was in high school called “West Point Story”—and after that, getting into the Military Academy was my only goal.

I can remember my mother driving over to baseball practice at Hope High school, pressing my letter of appointment up against the chain link fence.

While stationed in Berlin shortly after the wall went up in the early 1960s, I experienced a chilling link to the horrors of World War II when as a young 2nd LT I served as Officer of the Guard at Spandau prison, where the last of Nazi war criminals were held.

Also in Berlin, I served as an exchange officer to the British Army. On Remembrance Day (the British Veterans Day) the Regimental Colonel told me a story that has stuck with me to this day.

As a young man during WWII, he had served in Gibraltar. There’s an old guardhouse near the Rock, probably constructed during the Napoleonic Wars. During some interminable watch many wars ago, a British soldier had etched these words in one of the stone walls:

In times of trouble and of war
God and the Soldier all adore
But when war is over and trouble’s righted
God is forgotten, and the old soldier slighted.

If you’ll bear with me for a few minutes, I’d like to elaborate on that theme here today.

Fast forward to 1967: as a 25-yr-old Captain I went to Vietnam, first with the 173rd Airborne Brigade and then with a special unit of the 5th Special Forces Group—the Green Berets, whose headgear I wear proudly today.

I have been asked to provide you with a taste of the Vietnam experience—an almost impossible task in just a few minutes.

Increasing the complexity of that task is the aftermath of the war, which split our society in some ways that have never healed.

But let me start by trying to dispel a few myths.

Myth: Most Vietnam veterans were drafted.

TRUTH: 2/3 of the men who served in Vietnam were volunteers. On the other hand, 2/3 of the men who served in World War II were drafted. Approximately 70% of those killed in RVN were volunteers.

Myth: A disproportionate number of blacks were killed in the Vietnam War.

TRUTH: 86% of the men who died in Vietnam were Caucasians, and 12.5% were black. That's proportional to the number of blacks in the U.S. population at the time.

Myth: The war was fought largely by the poor and uneducated.

TRUTH: Vietnam Veterans were the best educated forces our nation had ever sent into combat; 79% had a high school education or better. As far as casualties go, servicemen who went to Vietnam from well-to-do areas had a slightly elevated risk of dying because they were more likely to be pilots or infantry officers.

Surveys conducted well after the war also revealed:

--91% of Vietnam Veterans say they are glad they served.

--74% of Vietnam Veterans said they would serve again, even knowing the results.

So what brought about this emotional division within our society?

More than 25 years ago, renowned political reporter Myra MacPherson wrote, "Above all, Vietnam was a war that asked everything of a few and nothing of most in America."

Unfortunately, the same can be said for our current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan—unlike WWII, where everyone sacrificed.

Another thing was the miracle of television.

Marshall McLuhan, the famous Canadian educator, wrote:

"Television brought the brutality of war into the comfort of the living room. Vietnam was lost in the living rooms of America--not on the battlefields of Vietnam."

Nothing happened in Vietnam that had not happened a thousand fold in the history of warfare. In previous wars, especially WWII, even personal mail from soldiers was censored before it was sent. As a result, many of the nitty gritty horrors of war were sanitized.

Lost in the media furor is the fact that Vietnam was the first American war where there was no military censorship.

The combination of total press freedom and the march of technology brought the realities of combat into America's living rooms, night after night.

As a result, a deadly fear of “civilian casualties” resulted in politically imposed “Rules of Engagement”: in certain areas we could not fire on the enemy unless they had fired at us first--which meant we would suffer the first casualties.

This is like changing the rules of boxing so that you could not take a swing at your opponent unless he hit you first.

But the armchair generals back home were fixated on how wars had been fought generations ago. This time, many of the enemy did not wear uniforms. Some Purple Hearts were earned as a result of wounds inflicted by women or children.

Also, there were areas we could not bomb--so the enemy would retreat to those areas, resupply and recover.

We fought with one hand tied behind our backs.

Because I spoke French, the second language of Vietnam, I assisted in the interrogation of a number of POWs.

They said they hung on, in the most miserable of conditions, because they believed they could outlast us. Their leaders did not need to invent propaganda; they simply read translations of American news articles. Every one I questioned firmly believed that our will to fight would erode because of anti-war sentiment on the home front.

I am personally convinced that the anti-war effort had the opposite effect from what was intended. Instead of shortening the war and saving American lives, it fueled the enemy's will to resist, extended the war, and ended up costing us more casualties than had we presented a united front.

In 1995 the *Wall Street Journal* interviewed a colonel from the general staff of the North Vietnamese army. He said:

Every day our leadership would listen to world news...to follow the growth of the American antiwar movement.

We [believed] that American commanders had their hands tied by political factors. Your generals could never deploy a maximum force for greatest military effect.

...through dissent and protest [America] lost the ability to mobilize a will to win.

People often ask why all these soldiers put themselves in harm's way, when it became apparent we would not be allowed to win the war militarily. When it came right down to it, none of us were viewing the war from a political perspective. We simply fought and died for each other.

Yes, we are here today to honor our dead. But sometimes, perhaps selfishly, I think we place too much emphasis on honoring the dead and not enough on remembering why they died.

The same goes for those who served, and live among us today.

Former war correspondent Michael Herr wrote, “All the wrong people remember Vietnam. I think all the people who remember it should forget it, and all the people who forgot it should remember it.”

Reach out to a friend or neighbor—especially one who served in Vietnam—and say thank you. It’s not too late.

A significant difference between Vietnam and the War on Terror is that the citizens of this great nation have learned to support our military personnel, even if they don’t support the war.

It is strange that we can enjoy such comfortable lives, and yet think so little about the cost of that comfort. Unless a friend or relative is a casualty, we give almost no thought to war, or conflict, or much else that happens beyond the boundaries of our immediate communities.

When a crisis rears, however, and a threat intrudes on this sheltered, suburban way of life, everyone expects our military to be there to take care of us.

For every publicized Seal Team 6 success, there are thousands of unknown small actions that take place every day—actions that combine to allow the rest of us to sleep in peace.

I would argue the greatest social service a nation can provide its people is to keep them alive and keep them free.

More than 2400 years ago, the Athenian leader Pericles offered a tribute to the fallen heroes of Greece that is just as applicable today:

“Not only are they commemorated by columns and inscriptions, but there dwells also an unwritten memorial of them, graven not on stone but in the hearts of men.”

I’d like to close with a short piece by Charles M. Province. Some of you may have heard these words before, but they deserve to be heard again, especially on this day.

It is the soldier, not the reporter,
Who has given us freedom of the press.

It is the soldier, not the poet,
Who has given us freedom of speech.

It is the soldier, not the campus organizer,
Who has given us the freedom to demonstrate.

It is the soldier,
Who salutes the flag,
Who serves beneath the flag,
And whose coffin is draped by the flag,
Who has won the protestor's freedom to burn the flag.