The Faces of War

Delivered to the Sertoma Club of Indianapolis, May 2012,
by American Legion National Adjutant Daniel S. Wheeler

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a privilege to speak before such a dedicated group of community leaders as Sertomans.

What could be a more worthy goal than your efforts, since 1912, to provide “Service to Mankind”?

Yet, on Memorial Day each year, we celebrate another group that provides “Service to Mankind” – the men and women who have laid down their lives to “make life worthwhile” for the millions they served.

The day we now call Memorial Day has its roots deep in soil that was hallowed nearly 150 years ago by the blood of patriots.


Some say the first Memorial Day occurred in November 1863, when President Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address. “We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain.”

Some say it began in Columbus, Mississippi … when a women’s association decorated the graves of both Union and Confederate soldiers … as they tried to find a way to heal the wounds of a war that not only split a nation … but divided its families as well.

Some say Commander-in-Chief John A. Logan of the Grand Army of the Republic declared the first Decoration Day in 1868. Then on May 30, 1870 he gave an address on the new holiday in which he said:

“This Memorial Day, on which we decorate their graves with the tokens of love and affection, is no idle ceremony with us to pass away an hour; but it brings back to our minds, in all their vividness, the fearful conflicts of that terrible war in which they fell as victims....”

Surely General Logan was picturing in his mind’s eye the faces of the young men – one by one – he had sent into battle from which many never returned.

With statistics, it’s too easy to substitute numbers for real live people. When we think of 9 million killed in World War I, no face comes to mind. When we think of 63 million killed in World War II, the number is too awful to personalize … yet we must.

Because war has a face, and that face is your son’s or daughter’s, or brother’s, or sister’s, or mother’s or father’s. It may be the red-haired kid down the street, or the muscular captain of the football team.

No matter, war has a face, and most likely it is the face of a teenager or a fellow just turned 21 – full of hope, and vim and vigor – someone with an entire lifetime yet to live.

A couple weeks ago I visited Fort Benning, Georgia. It is 183,000 acres of military readiness. It’s an all male training camp. There are those constructed similarly that train both men and women, but this one is all male.
This is where 17-year-old boys become 17-year-old men. This is where guys in their teens and early 20s become a part of something bigger than they ever dreamed possible.

I was impressed by the Parade Ground. Every trooper who graduates from Basic Training or AIT school, each stands on the ground that his father or brother or even his great-great-grandfather may have fought on or died on.

You see, the Army has had soil from major battlefields all over the world shipped in – from Yorktown to Antietam; from Normandy to Guadacanal; from Korea to Ia Drang – the spirit of those who gave so much in the far flung corners of the world lives on on that Parade Ground.

I saw the place where Lt. Colonel Hal Moore – “We Were Soldiers Once and Young,” that colonel – addressed his troops before shipping them out to Ia Drang Valley in November 1965.

This is where the men were trained of whom Joe Galloway said:

“We who have seen war … will never stop seeing it. In the silence of the night … we will always hear the screams. So this is our story … for we were soldiers once … and young.”

Young. That’s what impressed me the most. I didn’t see big, burly, battle-hardened men in body armor, carrying automatic weapons and grenades, looking like they weighed at least 300 pounds – all muscle.

What I saw were teenage boys – most of whom couldn’t grow a beard if their lives depended on it – grunting and struggling to complete the obstacle course. 160 pounds of six-foot-tall adolescence.

Later, I saw young men – proud of their accomplishment – standing tall on the Parade Ground, hallowed by those who went before them. Still, so young. Lean, 28-inch waists. So full of hope and promise. Open-faced children of God, only a few hours separated from the cauldron of war.

Some will become the “faces of war.”

Some will spend the last moments of their lives saving others – like Andrew R. Small, Private First Class, U.S. Army – a 19-year-old from Wiscasset, Maine.

His platoon came under heavy fire in Nuristan, Afghanistan, on August 11, 2006. They were pinned inside of a very tight trail cut between high rocks on both sides and facing certain death, until Private Small began laying down suppressing fire so his platoon could reach safety. Someone had to stay behind. And Small did.

When the patrol leader was able to move up to Small’s position again, he found him lying dead in the trail – weapon in hand, oriented toward the enemy and out of ammunition.

Private Small’s selfless action saved his platoon and earned him a place in the pantheon of heroes. He was awarded the Silver Star for conspicuous gallantry.

Leigh Ann Hester, Army Sergeant, is another face of war. She was serving as a team leader on March 20, 2005, outside of Baghdad, when her convoy came under attack.

Hester maneuvered her team through the kill zone, then turned around to assault the insurgents’ trench lines with grenades. She then jumped into the trench and killed at least three of the enemy with her weapon.

She was the first woman to be awarded the Silver Star in the “War on Terror.” She’s in the Kentucky National Guard and works as a retail store manager when not on duty. Another face of war.
Aviation Machinist Mate First Class George D. Phraner was born in Philadelphia, and was 19 years old on December 7, 1941.

He was aboard the USS Arizona when General Quarters was sounded. He rushed to a forward 5-inch gun – his battle station – but found no shells.

Phraner ran below and began lifting 90-pound shells and heaving heavy loads of cordite into the hoists.

That’s when the forward magazine exploded – spewing 1.5 million pounds of detonated cordite, fire, and steel into the Hawaiian sky.

The explosion demolished Arizona’s bow, killed scores of sailors and Marines – including Phraner’s own gun crew.

Phraner, down in the magazine, was left in total darkness, suffocating as his lungs filled with the acrid smoke and minute particles of debris.

He groped for the ladder, found it, and began climbing as he was overcome by nausea. He smelled the sickening stench of his own burning flesh. His hands were seared and sticking to the hot metal ladder.

Through the fog engulfing his brain, Phraner heard the sounds of those dying – their whimpers and their screams.

He was unable to breath. His lungs were aching and on fire. “I just wanted to let go,” he recalled. “I was light-headed and it seemed okay to just let go.”

Yet he hung on.

Overhead he saw a shimmer of light swirling in the smoke. From somewhere within himself, he mustered the courage to live and he crawled onto the main deck.

As he reached it, he said “A Marine lay dead beside me. His body was split in two. I began to realize there were dead men all around me. Some men were burning – wandering aimlessly as they died.”

Phraner was 19. He lived until 2008. Another face of war.

Lt. Mike Christian was 27 when his fighter jet was shot down over Vietnam in 1967. He was imprisoned at the infamous Hanoi Hilton.

As his captivity dragged on into months and then years, Christian found himself needing a visual reminder of the country he served. To that end, he began gathering bits of twine and cotton and string and paper from around the compound.

He kept any berries or roots he could use to color his scraps. He fashioned a sewing needle out of a piece of bamboo and began the tedious job of sewing an American flag inside his prison tunic where it would be close to his heart but hidden from the enemy.

When it was finished, Christian would remove his tunic and display the flag sewed inside so he and his fellow prisoners could pledge their allegiance.

Fellow POW and Medal of Honor recipient Bud Day recalled that this was the happiest time of each day, because it reminded them of home and renewed their hopes.

Early one morning a Vietnamese guard caught a glimpse of Christian’s flag. Christian was dragged away and interrogated.
Throughout the day, they could hear his screams as he was tortured without mercy. Finally, he was dragged back to his cell and dumped there – unconscious, bloody and beaten beyond recognition.

Bud Day said they nursed him as best they could but they had no medicines and no pain relievers. There was little they could do to ease his suffering.

Yet, a few days later, late in the night with only the moon for a candle, there sat Lt. Mike Christian – 29 years old, huddled in a corner, eyes still swollen nearly shut – pulling tiny pieces of twine through his tunic with a bamboo needle.

Piece by piece and stitch by stitch, he was turning his black pajama shirt red, white and blue.

Mike Christian paid the price for his patriotism, over and over.

He was released after six years but came home an old man at 33. He died a few years later, yet another real face of war.

We remember him, too, on Memorial Day, just as we remember – one by one – the one million Americans who have laid down their lives for our nation on the field of battle.

I believe if these “faces of war” were to speak to us now, they would want their fellow citizens – and future generations – to honor the price they paid for freedom and to revere those who paid it.

I also believe they would want something else.

They would want us to not only honor those who fought and fell, but also to cherish the values they believed in, the values they lived and the values for which they gave so much of body and soul.

Courage, patriotism, integrity, loyalty, sacrifice, duty, compassion.

Especially today, it is so important that our young people see that we adults do remember those values and that we are thankful for America’s heroes.

That we honor them.

That we remember them.

And that we also recognize that their service, sacrifice and courage are noble things. Great things.

And while America has no kings or queens, America does have an aristocracy – a nobility – and they are called “veterans.”

On this Memorial Day – indeed, on every day – we should thank God that they live – and have lived – among us.

We should ask God’s blessing on this great nation, that was built on the foundation of the values practiced by our military men and women and preserved by the shedding of their blood.

Millions have died throughout history bearing arms for the nation they loved.

This month, we take a few minutes to remember them all – one by one – face by face – and to thank God for blessing America with the likes of them – our heroes – our veterans.