

What do heroes need?

There has been a discussion going on for some time about the role of the secular world as it revolves in and around the sacred; for the sacred - to those of us who believe and love God - is in all things – even where it is forbidden. Churches parishioners and seminary students alike argue over whether the American flag should be in the sanctuary or not.

They discuss whether the church should be involved in politics. I, of course, have my own ideas and opinions about politics – most of us do, and we are likely to disagree on many points while agreeing on others. “But Jesus was political,” people will argue. Well, Jesus ministry may have ended up political, but I think it was thrust upon him. I don’t think politics was His original intention, Feed the hungry, heal the sick, visit the prisoner. Love your enemy? Not a very political concept! God’s love is for everyone. The most quoted bible passage ever says, “God so loved the world that he sent his only son that whosoever believes in him should have everlasting life.”

And as Abraham Lincoln so brilliantly noted, we need to pray that we are on GOD’s side, rather than God being on our side.

What shall we do with this “Veterans Day” in a church that believes in peace and love? -- Thou shalt not kill and all that?

When I was asked what we were doing for Veterans Day, I have to admit I didn’t know... I’m ashamed to say at that point I hadn’t even thought about it. So I thought about it and I thought about it. And the more I thought about it the more I felt that one patriotic song and a 2 minute video clip isn’t enough.

What do our Heroes need?

Of course Veterans Day is about gratitude – it is November after all.

But Veterans Day is about stories. Stories of the past & a vision of hope for the future.

I never served in the military, but my friend Kevin did. Kevin was my best friend in high school. We played in band together and did a couple of musicals together. He was a short guy with a great sense of humor. We hung out with his older sister and her friends – they rented a small 2 bedroom house in the township – there were a lot of parties there. So many that we called the little shack “Skylab!”

I didn’t want Kevin to join the navy. I was a pacifist back then – as much as a smart aleck, know-it-all, teenager can understand about pacifism anyway. Having all the answers, as I did back then, I knew that war was not the way to a better world. I had pondered the age old question, “What if they threw a war and nobody came?”

I really didn’t want Kevin to go. He had enlisted right out of high school for the Navy. I had no idea at the time just how much thought he had put into this decision – I didn’t care, really. I just

knew that if Kevin went into the military it would change him...that's what happens to people when they go off to the military. They become someone else and I didn't want that to happen to me – to Kevin, I mean. How selfish I was back then. Not being able to afford college and not having a great deal of parental support, the military was clearly Kevin's best option for the future – for a future.

Oh sure, I was worried that he might get killed or maimed or something, but that was not the change that scared me. I was afraid that my best friend would become a different person – I didn't even know what I was afraid of, but I knew in my heart that the military changes people. It turns them into people who follow orders. It turns them into people who fold their clothes and pick up after themselves. What would happen to my free spirited, theatrical, pot smoking, trumpet-playing friend? I was afraid I would lose him. So Kevin went. His sister and I went to his graduation from boot camp and that was the last time I saw Kevin until this past September. And the military did change him. But the choices I made changed me a little bit too, didn't they?

Kevin went -- I didn't. They go, so we don't have to and we owe these men and women our thanks. ...But sometimes 'thank you' just seems inadequate.

What do these heroes need? Shouldn't our gratitude lead to something more? – to action?

On October 23, 1983, in Beirut, Lebanon, two truck bombs struck separate buildings housing United States and French military forces killing 299 American and French servicemen. An obscure group calling itself 'Islamic Jihad' claimed responsibility for the bombings.

For the rest of this message I'll be reading from my friend Kevin's online diary that he started for his teenaged son as he prepared to attend a reunion at Camp LeJeune in NC for the 30-year anniversary of that bombing.

ROAD TO LEJEUNE (Day 1). Last year my eldest son began asking questions about my experiences. For those who have been on the front line, or related to one who has, you know it is not something you talk about. At least to those outside your Brothers and with them, it is usually private and often in few words. There is no solace to be found.

As the 30th Anniversary of the Beirut bombing started picking up traction this year, it was with great hesitation and anguish that I had to come to terms in leaving the 'story' behind for him. There is a box of medals and ribbons that one day he will certainly want to understand what they mean and what sacrifice was made for them. But that time is not now and possibly not while I am alive. I am still thinking through that.

As I prepare to go to Camp Lejeune later this month to memorialize 241 Brothers that were killed, I will be putting my thoughts in a daily diary that when done, will insert them into that box.

Heroes need to be encouraged because their stories are important for their loved ones.

This entry is about boot camp

ROAD TO LEJEUNE (Day 3). The movie Band of Brothers possibly explains the unique fraternal bond better than any I have seen. And I think former military see the subtleties of this and it evokes a myriad of memories.

The majority of guys I was with were looking for a better life and for a variety of reasons. They were everyday kids from everyday towns. Honestly, I was a punk in my teenage years when I look in the rear view mirror. Though I guess many of the other kids with me were the same. I came from an all-white town so this was my first exposure to inner city guys, mostly Black. Undoubtedly, a number were lost in life in some manner and found themselves there under their own decision or even a judge's. Once your head is shaved to a nub, it was irrelevant anyhow.

But it is from the first day you step off the bus, the concept of unity is pounded into you (literally). The concept of individualism is stripped away. Patrick Henry was right "united you stand, divided you fall." But our drill sergeant, who was on a riverine combat boat in Nam and honestly out of his ~~effin~~ mind, would alter that to "united you stand, divided you die." He would repeatedly scream "do you want to die?" I would later come to respect him... And still do.

A year into it...

ROAD TO LEJEUNE (Day 14)

Life was brutally difficult at times as each of us had a primary role and numerous other responsibilities. The hours were intense often requiring us to work 14-16 hours per day and when we slept, it was in four hour chunks. And this would not only go for weeks, but months. The fatigue was incredible and going to sleep equated more to passing out.

While I had done only marginally well in High School, I excelled under pressure and could memorize vast quantities of technical information. As the battle electrician, it also meant that I had to memorize 'every' piece of mission critical equipment. Of course this role meant I was one of the few who were always first in. If you were hit by a bomb or there was a fire, the electricity had to be turned off ... and diverted so power wouldn't be lost to the critical equipment. It took intense training, but it also gained me respect.

It was the middle of the night heading towards Beirut, I don't recall the day, but probably 1 to 2 a.m. My Chief came and woke me up and vividly recall him saying "we are going in . . you need to get up and help fix something on the whale (landing) boat." I remember being really groggy and throwing on my uniform and boots. As I stepped outside my eyes cleared and looked up. In the distance the sky was a dull orange. It was at that point the game was on. I also remember saying "holy mother . . ." In the dark around me I could hear the team coming alive, but quietly. Meaning there was little talking. I can close my eyes and still hear the sporadic clattering of feet across the deck . . the grinding of the gun turrets as they tested them . . the sound of M60

ammunition being loaded. These are sounds that there is nothing similar to. It was somewhat surrealistic thinking back. I was also only 19 years old and I did not go back to sleep that day. This day would be repeated over and over.

Experience would teach me that you don't want to go through life being marginal or doing enough to just to get by. You want to be at your best and give it your all. There come times in your life when you will be called upon and you must perform beyond your ability.

ROAD TO LEJEUNE (Day 19)

There was always anxiety before deploying as there was so much uncertainty. And I must be honest, as the Anniversary of the bombing is upon us this week, I have a variety of feelings, but mostly sadness and a very deep feeling of emptiness. And that is of course from the sense of loss of so many lives. And while I made a conscious decision to go the memorial service this week, there is still hesitation in the back of my head. I realize that I still have demons that I must face.

This week I had a bit of an epiphany. For decades, I have watched the old timers (war veterans) gather together at memorials and days of remembrance. And probably like you, I always had gratitude and respect for guys who gave so much and then managed over time to maintain unity. I then realized I had become one of them. At 50 and with most about my age, I reflect how we have become the same.

I needed to be there just not for me, but for the others.

And like the USS Arizona, we are but a small group. In context to most wars, there were only tens of thousands of us involved in the operations, not millions. I realize that it is so important to remind people of our story. Not only will history probably repeat itself at some point, but because of our numbers, we will be lost to obscurity like the USS Maine or the Spanish-American War.

In our gratitude we must encourage these men and women to tell their stories. And we must listen.

One of the others, [Danny Joy, Beirut Veteran] wrote this: "I thought, "What... was that?" To this day I can smell it, and I can hear the screams for help, I can feel the dust upon my skin. I can feel the reverberations and the concussion in my body from the explosion - and the ringing in my ears. I feel guilty that I lived through it. Now I stay in my "bunker" at home, a trailer where I have been living since 2001. I am at peace in my own little world - me and my two dogs. A wise veteran once said for those who died the war is over. For the rest of us it is only a nightmare away."

Our reading from revelation today speaks of a new heaven and a new earth, and what a vision it is – *"See, the home^[a] of God is among mortals...⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes.*

*Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away."*

Our Old Testament reading:

*"... they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*

What a vision! Are these not visions of things worth living and dying for?

What do heroes need? They already have a vision...They need us to walk beside them and listen.

Holy and merciful Father, May you bestow upon us a spirit of affection which can resist the selfishness of the world, and cause us to remember our obligations to each other and to Thee. Grant that we may be permitted with loving hearts to support the families and friends of the fallen. May you give us the wisdom to recognize those in need, the peace of understanding, and the additional strength to humbly and selflessly carry their burdens. All of which we ask for Thy name's sake.

Amen