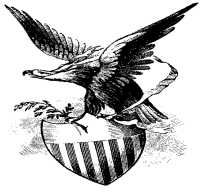


Light Brings Salt

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Iron Range Bible Church

Dedicated to the Systematic Exposition of the Word of God



Special Memorial Day Issue! America's Honor

The stories behind Memorial Day.

BY PETER COLLIER

(Note: This article is from Monday's Wall Street Journal editorial page.)

Once we knew who and what to honor on Memorial Day: those who had given all their tomorrows, as was said of the men who stormed the beaches of Normandy, for our todays. But in a world saturated with selfhood, where every death is by definition a death in vain, the notion of sacrifice today provokes puzzlement more often than admiration. We support the troops, of course, but we also believe that war, being hell, can easily touch them with an evil no cause for engagement can wash away. And in any case we are more comfortable supporting them as victims than as warriors.

Former football star Pat Tillman and Marine Cpl. Jason Dunham were killed on the same day: April 22, 2004. But as details of his death fitfully emerged from Afghanistan, Tillman has become a metaphor for the current conflict--a victim of fratricide, disillusionment, coverup and possibly conspiracy. By comparison, Dunham, who saved several of his comrades in Iraq by falling on an insurgent's grenade, is the unknown soldier. The New York Times, which featured Abu Ghraib on its front page for 32 consecutive days, put the story of Dunham's Medal of Honor on the third page of section B.

Not long ago I was asked to write the biographical sketches for a book featuring formal photographs of all our living Medal of Honor recipients. As I talked with them, I was, of course, chilled by the primal power of their stories. But I also felt pathos: They had become strangers--honored strangers, but strangers nonetheless--in our midst.

In my own boyhood, figures such as Jimmy Doolittle, Audie Murphy and John Basilone were household names. And it was assumed that what they had done defined us as well as them, telling us what kind of nation we were. But the 110 Medal recipients alive today are virtually unknown except for a niche audience of warfare buffs. Their heroism has become the military equivalent of genre painting. There's something wrong with that.

What they did in battle was extraordinary. Jose Lopez, a diminutive Mexican-American from the barrio of San Antonio, was in the Ardennes forest when the Germans began the counteroffensive that became the Battle of the Bulge. As 10 enemy soldiers approached his position, he grabbed a machine gun and opened fire, killing them all. He killed two dozen more who rushed him. Knocked down by the concussion of German shells, he picked himself up, packed his weapon on his back and ran toward a group of Americans about to be surrounded. He began firing and didn't stop until all his ammunition and all that he could scrounge from other guns was gone. By then he had killed over 100 of the enemy and bought his comrades time to establish a defensive line.

Yet their stories were not only about killing. Several Medal of Honor recipients told me that the first thing they did after the battle was to find a church or some other secluded spot where they could pray, not only for those comrades they'd lost but also the enemy they'd killed.

Desmond Doss, for instance, was a conscientious objector who entered the army in 1942 and became a medic. Because of his religious convictions and refusal to carry a weapon, the men in his unit intimidated and threatened him, trying to get him to transfer out. He refused and they grudgingly accepted him. Late in 1945 he was with them in Okinawa when they got cut to pieces assaulting a Japanese stronghold.

Everyone but Mr. Doss retreated from the rocky plateau where dozens of wounded remained. Under fire, he treated them and then began moving them one by one to a steep escarpment where he roped them down to safety. Each time he succeeded, he prayed, "Dear God, please let me get just one more man." By the end of the day, he had single-handedly saved 75 GIs.

Why did they do it? Some talked of entering a zone of slow-motion invulnerability, where they were spectators at their own heroism. But for most, the answer was simpler and more straightforward: They couldn't let their buddies down.

Big for his age at 14, Jack Lucas begged his mother to help him enlist after Pearl Harbor. She collaborated in lying about his age in return for his promise to someday finish school. After training at Parris Island, he was sent to Honolulu. When his unit boarded a troop ship for Iwo Jima, Mr. Lucas was ordered to remain behind for guard duty. He stowed away to be with his friends and, discovered two days out at sea, convinced his commanding officer to put him in a combat unit rather than the brig. He had just turned 17 when he hit the beach, and a day later he was fighting in a Japanese trench when he saw two grenades land near his comrades.

He threw himself onto the grenades and absorbed the explosion. Later a medic, assuming he was dead, was about to take his dog tag when he saw Mr. Lucas's finger twitch. After months of treatment and recovery, he returned to school as he'd promised his mother, a ninth-grader wearing a Medal of Honor around his neck.

The men in World War II always knew, although news coverage was sometimes scant, that they were in some sense performing for the people at home. The audience dwindled during Korea. By the Vietnam War, the journalists were omnipresent, but the men were performing primarily for each other. One story that expresses this isolation and comradeship involves a SEAL team ambushed on a beach after an aborted mission near North Vietnam's Cua Viet river base.

After a five-hour gunfight, Cmdr. Tom Norris, already a legend thanks to his part in a harrowing rescue mission for a downed pilot (later dramatized in the film BAT-21), stayed behind to provide covering fire while the three others headed to rendezvous with the boat sent to extract them. At the water's edge, one of the men, Mike Thornton, looked back and saw Tom Norris get hit. As the enemy moved in, he ran back through heavy fire and killed two North Vietnamese standing over Norris's body. He lifted the officer, barely alive with a shattered skull, and carried him to the water and then swam out to sea where they were picked up two hours later.

The two men have been inseparable in the 30 years since.

The POWs of Vietnam configured a mini-America in prison that upheld the values beginning to wilt at home as a result of protest and dissension. John McCain tells of Lance Sijan, an airman who ejected over North Vietnam and survived for six weeks crawling (because of his wounds) through the jungle before being captured.

Close to death when he reached Hanoi, Sijan told his captors that he would give them no information because it was against the code of conduct. When not delirious, he quizzed his cellmates about camp security and made plans to escape. The North Vietnamese were obsessed with breaking him, but never did. When he died after long sessions of torture Sijan was, in Sen. McCain's words, "a free man from a free country."

Leo Thorsness was also at the Hanoi Hilton. The Air Force pilot had taken on four MiGs trying to strafe his wingman who had parachuted out of his damaged aircraft; Mr. Thorsness destroyed two and drove off the other two. He was shot down himself soon after this engagement and found out by tap code that his name had been submitted for the Medal.

One of Mr. Thorsness's most vivid memories from seven years of imprisonment involved a fellow prisoner named Mike Christian, who one day found a grimy piece of cloth, perhaps a former handkerchief, during a visit to the nasty concrete tank where the POWs were occasionally allowed a quick sponge bath. Christian picked up the scrap of fabric and hid it.

Back in his cell he convinced prisoners to give him precious crumbs of soap so he could clean the cloth. He stole a small piece of roof tile which he laboriously ground into a powder, mixed with a bit of water and used to make horizontal stripes. He used one of the blue pills of unknown provenance the prisoners were given for all ailments to color a square in the upper left of the cloth. With a needle made from bamboo wood and thread unraveled from the cell's one blanket, Christian stitched little stars on the blue field.

"It took Mike a couple weeks to finish, working at night under his mosquito net so the guards couldn't see him," Mr. Thorsness told me. "Early one morning, he got up before the guards were active and held up the little flag, waving it as if in a breeze. We turned to him and saw it coming to attention and automatically saluted, some of us with tears running down our cheeks. Of course, the Vietnamese found it during a strip search, took Mike to the torture cell and beat him unmercifully. Sometime after midnight they pushed him into our cell, so bad off that even his voice was gone. But when he

recovered in a couple weeks he immediately started looking for another piece of cloth."

We impoverish ourselves by shunting these heroes and their experiences to the back pages of our national consciousness. Their stories are not just boys' adventure tales writ large. They are a kind of moral instruction. They remind of something we've heard many times before but is worth repeating on a wartime Memorial Day when we're uncertain about what we celebrate. We're the land of the free for one reason only: We're also the home of the brave.

THE LAST WORD

"Dear American Soldier in Iraq: There are a few things you should know about how tens of millions of us back home feel about you and the fight you are waging. These things need to be said... What has happened is that many Americans, for all sorts of reasons—some out of simple fatigue, some because they do not believe that war solves anything, some out of deep loathing for the present administration—do not believe that what you are doing is worth doing. You know that what you are doing is worth continuing... You know that you are fighting the most vicious and primitive ideology in the world today. It is the belief that one's God wants his followers to maim, torture and murder in order to spread a system of laws that sends societies back to a moral and intellectual state that is pre-civilization. You know that the war you wage against these people and their totalitarian ideology is also necessary because a society unwilling to fight for its values does not have values worth sustaining... We see you as the best and brightest of our society. Even *The New York Times*, one of the mainstream media publications that do not understand the epic battle you are waging, acknowledged in an article by one of its embedded correspondents that few Americans of your age can come close to you in maturity, wisdom or leadership abilities. It is unfortunate that the battle for moral clarity and moral courage in America is as divisive as the battle for freedom is in Iraq. But that is the nature of the world we live in. And it has ever been so... You probably knew all this. But you need to hear it anyway. That, and thank you. Thank you very much." — Dennis Prager