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Op-Ed / Letter to the Editor

[Date]

Contact: [Name, DAV Dept/Chapter title (if applicable), Branch of Service, War era, phone number or email]

For many Americans, the last Monday in May marks the unofficial start of summer—a long weekend with a family barbecue or gathering of friends. For those who served in the military, Memorial Day holds a greater significance, as it commemorates the brave men and women who lost their lives defending our great nation.

At the core of our military lie unique themes: the selfless desire to serve and the willingness to sacrifice to defend our nation. The origin of Memorial Day, first observed over 155 years ago and then known as Decoration Day, was to beautify the graves in memory of those who fought and died to preserve our union during the Civil War. The holiday's name obviously changed over the years, but its ideals and intention have not.

It's a day all Americans should take a moment to honor those who made the ultimate sacrifice in service to our country. Memorial Day is a day for both grief and celebration, reflecting on the tragic loss of life and recounting the courageousness of their service.

As President Harry Truman stated in his address to the armed forces after the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt:

“Our debt to the heroic men and valiant women in the service of our country can never be repaid. They have earned our undying gratitude. America will never forget their sacrifices. Because of these sacrifices, the dawn of justice and freedom throughout the world slowly casts its gleam across the horizon.”

The respect and admiration we give our fallen pay tribute to their memory and the lives they lived. We do so by visiting their gravesites or placing flags, wreaths or other mementos at memorials in our communities.

But their final resting place should not be the only space where we gather, share memories or sit in quiet contemplation.

To truly honor their lives, we must share their stories with others and ensure their memories live on even though they are gone.

Stories like that of U.S. Army Spc. Lori Piestewa. Piestewa deployed to Iraq in March 2003—20 years ago this year—as part of the invasion. Her group, which included her best friend, Jessica Lynch, was ambushed on the way to Nasiriyah and taken prisoner. Unfortunately, Piestewa did not survive the ordeal.

Piestewa was the first woman service member to die in Iraq and the first Native American woman killed while fighting for the U.S. military. Before he died, her father, Terry Piestewa, a Vietnam veteran, said that the memorials in her honor were once difficult, but as time passed, it helped him and his family, including his two grandchildren, heal and celebrate her life.

No matter where their battlefield was—in the mountains of Afghanistan, deserts of Iraq or Syria, skies over Europe, islands of the Pacific, frozen terrain of Korea, jungles of Vietnam or elsewhere—the stories of the fallen matter and need to be told.

By sharing their stories, we keep their memories alive and give others a glimpse of military service that aims to inspire them to create a better world, stronger nation and kinder communities.

It is up to us to use the gifts secured by those who made the ultimate sacrifice, to do as much good as possible and honor a debt that can never be repaid.

On Memorial Day, we reflect and share the experiences of our fallen loved ones, but tomorrow and in the days that follow, we must act.

Let's carry their sacrifice with us in our hearts and strive to honor their memory by being good and faithful, hopeful and strong, and committed to building a brighter future for all.

As Maj. Gen. John A. Logan—the leader of a Union veterans organization and congressman who made the case to our country that set the precedence for this holiday—said:

“Let no vandalism of avarice or neglect, no ravages of time, testify to the present or to the coming generations that we have forgotten, as a people, the cost of a free and undivided republic.”

Duty, honor, country—they lived for it. And they died for it. As a nation, we must remind ourselves of the future they fought for and do our best to live up to those values in the days ahead.

About DAV:

DAV empowers veterans to lead high-quality lives with respect and dignity. It is dedicated to a single purpose: keeping our promise to America's veterans. DAV does this by ensuring that veterans and their families can access the full range of benefits available to them, fighting for the interests of America's injured heroes on Capitol Hill, providing employment resources to veterans and their families, and educating the public about the great sacrifices and needs of veterans transitioning back to civilian life. DAV, a nonprofit organization with more than 1 million members, was founded in 1920 and chartered by the U.S. Congress in 1932. Learn more at www.dav.org.