**Memorial Day - May 27, 2019**

By Commander Timothy Reidy

Thank you.

Good afternoon. Thank you for coming out to remember our fallen heroes on this cloudy spring day.

While we gather here in remembrance, there are many thousands who are out picnicking, playing soccer, or just spending time with family. They are out there in the sun and in the rain, some at work, some at war, and some at play, but they all know that it is Memorial Day… Memorial Day, a day to remember those who fought and toiled and died in service to their nation. So we have a tradition, a holiday, a day off to do with as you like, to remember as is your custom…

My Memorial Day isn’t that different from those others… I have 3 children…8, 11, and 14. Sometimes we go to a Memorial Day celebration, sometimes they go with their Scout troop or Cub pack to put flags on graves and memorials of people they never knew,… safe in their understanding that these people laid down their lives so that today my children could live their happy life.

My career is not that of an infantryman. I didn’t parachute from airplanes or man a fighting position. After college I joined the nuclear navy. I stood my watch over the dawn of the digital age, in steel submarines finishing cold war business under distant seas or standing alert waiting for orders I hoped would never come… to launch missiles whose destructive power is barely imaginable (even to those who tend them).

I grew up just north of us (in Salem) and I’m not ashamed to admit that I can’t remember many Memorial Days from my youth. The reason for the day seemed so remote when I was young, the deeds of others more of a distant idea than a concrete reality. Sure, my Grandfathers served, but that was long before me… So I went to school, went to college, and joined the submarine force without really understanding.

In the sub force, we have the tolling of the boats. Submariners today are so removed from our predecessors, our heroes of WWII, but we still toll the boats every Memorial Day and describe the history and death of each of the 60 submarines on eternal patrol in service to this country. Even after dozens of times participating, to me the toll and the loss seemed very remote.

It wasn’t until I got to Afghanistan, a submariner in a very high and dry land far from any water, that **I** felt what those lives really meant. Like I said, I served in Afghanistan, but I wasn’t out advising Afghan troops or fighting on a Forward Operating Base. I’m a nuclear submariner. My machines of war, my instruments of battle, are cruise missiles and nuclear warheads. So, I went to Afghanistan as a planner. For the uninitiated, a planner is a somewhat useful person who tries to create order among strategic chaos, to at least winnow the wrong path away from all the right…So I wasn’t anywhere outside of Kabul, or in more danger than a convoy between bases…

But there were many, many who were out in danger…and from our vantage in a converted shipping container in a base in the heart of Kabul, we could watch and read as the reports, Troops in Contact, came in to the Theater Ops Center. We could and often did see them in real time… but at the end of the day, even if I hadn’t seen the reports come in, as I walked back to my barracks, I’d learn what happened that day. My route always took my past the flags. Now, at Camp Eggers where I was stationed there was a flag stand where every coalition country had a flag pole and flag representing their participation. If during the course of that day a coalition soldier had fallen, one of those flags would be at half-mast as I walked past… There weren’t enough days where each and every one of those flags flew high and proud. Many, maybe even most days in the fall and winter of 2010/2011 one or more of those flags would be mourning…flying at half-mast. So now I came a little better what Memorial Day is for

…and I give thanks for all those that don’t quite understand it’s significance the same way, but still remember.

Because there is another side to that sacrifice that each half-staff flag represented, that each bell calls to when the boats are tolled. There are those at home who know acutely what loss those flags represent…a few directly affected amongst generations that don’t have to know quite so well but care anyway…And that brings me back to today. All those people, those assembled here and those who aren’t, all of them are willing to agree that their day and their way of life are affected by those that sacrificed, fought and toiled and died in service to their nation on battlefields near and far.

I’ll give you one quick example of this unique American gratitude… During my time in Afghanistan I worked with many coalition troops, but the most interesting insights I gained from a Dutchman assigned to our office. This Dutch major wasn’t an infantryman, either. He was a finance officer…and he had never worked with coalition before, so he was learning… learning about America and Americans at home and at war. And every holiday we would get boxes of cards and care packages full of -useful stuff-. And he’d be amazed. Amazed at a country so appreciative of the women and men serving, sacrificing so far away. He’d tell us, “you guys don’t know. This is amazing that so many people care.” He would gather up a half dozen of the cards that we’d receive and happily write back to the American kids to let them know their remembrance and attentions were appreciated… It was from him I learned to appreciate this support… something unique to America amongst all our allies.

That brings me full circle to today and this remembrance... Memorial Day, a day inaugurated to remember over 200k dead and 450k wounded in the Civil War and expanded to take in the – over 620k dead and over a 1.2 million wounded since then… in WW1 and 2, in Korea, in Vietnam, and in Iraq and Afghanistan…in isolated cold war battles and in training accidents…in peacetime and in war. These numbers will never go down…never diminish and we will remember them.

So today we change our pace of life and make a day that is different. To remember all those lost. Whether you come to a remembrance celebration, play a game of soccer, or just stay home with family…. it is a day that all those who died in service to this country sacrificed to give you. So let’s celebrate and remember. Thank you.