

Memorial Day 2005

By Ray Elliott

Good morning. And it is a GOOD morning to remember America's fallen servicemen and women for the sacrifices they made in the name of freedom and our way of life.

To that end, I'd like to share a poem with you that was written by an Iwo Jima veteran now living in Mishawaka, Indiana. Bill Madden lost a good part of his hearing on Iwo Jima 60 years ago when a Japanese mortar exploded near him and buried in his foxhole until one of his buddies uncovered him. Bill was later wounded again and evacuated after 16 days on the island. In his poem, he speaks of loss and survival as only a very few can know it. ...

IWO JIMA

Ka-zoon! Ka-zoon!

"Incoming!" I cry,

as fragments of mortars

explode into clusters of troops who explode into fragments

of flesh and sand and steel

which zing past my ears as

I dive like a fox for a hole.

Ka-zoon again, and

a tardy stray locates my lair

and buries me there

with pieces of rifle

and shattered grenade;

my buddy Al helps rob the grave

of all but my ears

left buried there,

forever to listen for incoming calls.

My best friend Jim is shredded now;

I sit on my helmet and grieve as he dies

Jim, my friend for life.

Well, there is still Al;

Yes, Al is still here.

We are still three, aren't we?

But no, not really three,

All and me,

We're a ghost and two.

Jim is gone, mortar-blasted
Iwo blasted, evil-blasted;
Just two survive, Al and me.

Then Al is gone.

The sniper chose Al, right next to me.
How could this be? We were three;
Now there's me,
Just me.
Why me?
Why?

Bill Madden, and others of you like him who have served our country in times of war, do not need Memorial Day to remember those who gave their last breath fighting in the uniform of their country. For those who fought and survived, every day is Memorial Day; every day they remember those who didn't make it home alive.

But it is important for the rest of us to mark this day – Memorial Day 2005 – to gather in honor of the brave men and women who have given their lives in battles around the globe. We need to acknowledge the debt we owe these individuals for every day we live in this country.

With that in mind, I attended the 60th Anniversary Reunion of Honor for the battle for Iwo Jima held on the island this past March. Besides the 100 or so Iwo veterans, a number of sons and daughters and grandchildren attended the event with their fathers and grandfathers to see the place that has haunted them through the years. Several people on the trip never got to know their fathers long, if at all. One man was five when his father was killed; another was four months; two younger men were grandsons of a Marine killed when their father, also dead now, was five.

So, the families of those who die in war suffer and make huge sacrifices for our way of life, too.

Then last fall I traveled on a World War II Battlefield tour in Europe. The American cemeteries at Colleville-sur-Mer above Omaha Beach and at Luxembourg alone are grim reminders of the price our servicemen and women have paid fighting our country's battles. Row after row of white crosses and Stars of David mark the final resting places of those young people who died a long time ago, a long way from home. Military cemeteries like these are also scattered across the United States and in other places in Europe and the South Pacific. And cemeteries in every part of America are graced with thousands more who died serving in our armed forces.

Not long before the European battlefield tour, I attended the dedication of the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C., where the sacrifices of that "Greatest Generation" were honored with a long-overdue, permanent remembrance and tribute in the nation's capital. Nearly 300,000 of the 16 million men and women who served, died in combat in that war; some 1.2 million have died in service of our country since the Revolutionary War, and we're still counting.

On these pilgrimages, I spoke with many survivors of their war. It didn't take long before someone mentioned those who had fallen more than 60 years ago and never had the opportunity to live the life of freedom the rest of us enjoy today. Imagine what contributions those men and women could have made to our world had they lived. But we can only settle for remembering the great contributions they made with their sacrifices.

And imagine what our world would be like today had we not been victorious in that war. In fact, imagine what our world would be like today without the sacrifices of those who have died in battles for our way of life from the Revolutionary War on down through our history. But we can only imagine. Our debt to those thousands of individuals who gave their lives will forever go unpaid unless we remember their sacrifices, never forget them and live free.

Our current sons and daughters, friends and neighbors from all walks of life, from all corners of the United States and some from other countries who volunteer and serve to gain their U.S citizenship more quickly, perform at an unparalleled level of expertise out of a sense of duty to our country and a sense of honor in their service. That dedication of a relative few in defense of the many, which all too often has resulted in the ultimate sacrifice of their very lives, is why we are here today to pay homage to them. That is the very least we can do.

During the World War II Memorial dedication weekend, I accompanied an old Marine friend of mine who had lost a leg in Vietnam to visit with some of the soldiers and Marines in the amputee section at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC. The men we visited had been wounded and had lost limbs in Iraq. Although my friend knew it would be an emotional experience for him, he said he remembered how World War II veteran amputees had visited him when he was the one lying in a hospital bed, recovering from his own physical wounds from Vietnam and wanted to repay the kindness. He never forgot what those veterans had done for him, how much they had helped him. They helped because they KNEW – as many of us can never know – everything that he was thinking and feeling: the horror of violence, the shock of loss, and still, the pride of service, the concern for fellow comrades still out on the battlefield.

We visited that day with one of today's warriors, a young Marine, who was wounded in Iraq last year by a rocket-propelled grenade that hit his Humvee and resulted in the loss of his left arm just below the elbow, his right hand just above the wrist and shrapnel

wounds that riddled his legs and lower body. As we talked with him, I was struck by his positive attitude, despite all he had been through, was continuing to go through and will go through for the rest of his life. He was so proud of his country, his unit and his service - and he wanted to continue serving.

So many others have felt the same as this young Marine but whose lives were cut short from battle in wars in Korea, Vietnam and on back through the years. And they deserve to be remembered. At the end of his 1927 novel, *The Bridge Over San Luis Rey*, about whether we live by chance or by design, Thornton Wilder writes, "There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning."

Those who endure and survive the battles have the love, know the meaning and remember the losses and the toll of war. Though most move back to civilian life and make their way in our society, they will never truly get over what they have experienced, nor will they ever forget their fallen brothers and sisters.

Memorial Day is the reminder to every other American that it is THEIR duty, also, to remember and to honor those who have sacrificed to preserve this life we all get to live. But not only should we remember and honor – our debt is greater than that. We all have an obligation to live this gift of freedom with the kind of purpose and the kind of character that is worthy of those who have given their lives in service to our country and are still giving them today.

Unfortunately, it was reported again in this past week's news that still more American lives were lost and ended all too soon in Iraq. One of those killed was 20-year-old Army Pvt. Jeff Wallace from nearby Hoopston. So still more families are grieving at the loss of a beloved son or daughter, brother or sister, husband or wife, father or mother – even a grandfather now and then. Those families who have made or are just now making sacrifices will mourn today and for the rest of their lives in the shadows of the tombstones of their loved ones...

And what will the rest of us do today? And tomorrow? Next week? Next month?

Whatever it may be, keep these brave men and women in your hearts and minds – always. Never forget them or what they did. Help insure that their contributions and sacrifices are known to future generations; and that those contributions and sacrifices matter in the freedom we have.

I want to close with another poem of sorts, one I saw written on the wall in Malinta Tunnel when I was stationed in the Philippines years ago. The tunnel on Corregidor was General Douglas MacArthur's last command post in the Philippines before the Japanese captured the islands in the early days of World War II. The Japanese accepted General Jonathan Wainwright's surrender of the tunnel, the island and a Marine regiment that

included soldiers and sailors, then held the survivors in the tunnel where 474 of them died of wounds, starvation or other causes.

Printed in black letters on the wall near where the men had been held, I read and have always remembered these words:

In this tunnel lingers
the memory of Marines
whom fate denied you
the chance of meeting.

Leave one smile
and your name
shall be praise.