

They gave their todays for our tomorrows

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The Civil War ended in 1865. But it wasn't until 1997 that the last shot of that war was fired. In 1997, two young boys were playing around with their new metal detector when they came across a live shell that dated back to the Civil War. The police were called and exploded the shell, in many ways making it the last shell fired from the Civil War.

It's pretty amazing that years after the end of a war, its weapons could still be alive and capable of destruction. Yet that seems to be the nature of war: its effects linger on in the lives of people and nations for many generations. Most of us can recall the World War II photo of five Marines raising an American flag on the island of Iwo Jima. The man in the center of the photo was John Bradley. Although Bradley won the Navy Cross for saving a fellow soldier's life, he preferred not to talk about the war and refused to accept any hero worship that others tried to force on him. One of the few comments Bradley ever made about the war, he made to his young son in response to a remark about heroism. Bradley replied, "The real heroes of Iwo Jima are the guys who didn't come back."

This weekend, we honor those men and women who didn't come back. The ones who, in President Abraham Lincoln's words in the Gettysburg Address, "gave the last, full measure of devotion."

When we reflect on the honor and heroism of our soldiers, we are confronted with the sacrifices they made, as well as our response to those sacrifices. The whole concept of anyone making sacrifices for us, much less dying for us, sometimes makes us uneasy. Confronting their heroism forces us to stop and examine our own lives. Why did they do what they did? What cause is worth dying for? Would we be willing to do the same?

Celebrities are people who make news, heroes are people who make history. The qualities of heroism are eternal--self-sacrifice, courage, honor, duty.

A man who served in the Navy during World War II shared that one night he was running his transport across the Atlantic when he noticed the white trail of a torpedo coming toward him. His ship was filled with hundreds of soldiers, and the potential loss of life would have been devastating.

Nearby, a smaller ship had also seen the torpedo coming. The captain of the smaller vessel maneuvered his ship between the transport and the torpedo. The explosion destroyed his ship, killing all those on board.

The man who told this story ended it by saying, "The skipper of that other ship was my best friend." Slowly, he remarked, "You know, there is a verse in the Bible which has special meaning for me now. It is this: "Greater love has no one than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

What kind of love would give itself up for another? What kind of love would be willing to die for you and me? It is the love that Jesus demonstrated to show us how much we mean to God. It is the love we celebrate today in the example of those soldiers who gave their lives for our freedom.

In India there is a cemetery where the bodies of American soldiers are buried. Over the entrance to the cemetery are these words: "Tell Them We Gave Our Todays for Their Tomorrows."

Let's never forget that our tomorrows were bought with a price. Someone had to pay with their lives, so that we might be free today. There is no way we can sufficiently say, "Thank you." In the revised words of the hymn, The Battle Hymn of the Republic, "As He died to make men holy, let us live to make men free, God's truth is marching on."