

MEMORIAL DAY – 2018

by Bill Betten

[A speech given May 28,2018 by California WW1 Centennial Task Force Co-Director Bill Betten upon invitation of the City of Montclair and the Montclair Community Action Committee. Presented at the city's annual commemoration and veteran's memorial dedication.]

Though annual cemetery decoration practices reflecting the real origin of the "memorial day" idea began before the American Civil War, the first Civil War soldier's grave ever to be "decorated" was in 1861, in Warrenton, Virginia.

The U.S. National Park Service¹ ("Memorial Day",2018) attributes the beginning of Memorial Day to a pharmacist in Waterloo Village, New York, and practicing a Memorial Day occurred in both the north and the South in 1865. And in 1866, women in Columbus, Mississippi laid flowers on the graves of both the Union and Confederate dead in the city's cemetery.

So, in 1868, the 3rd Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Army of the Republic, General John A. Logan issued a proclamation calling for "Decoration Day" to be observed annually and nationwide.

Before WW1, in July of 1913, in fact, veterans of the United States and Confederate armies gathered in Gettysburg to commemorate the fifty-year anniversary of the Civil War's bloodiest and most famous battle. The four-day "Blue-Gray Reunion" featured parades, re-enactments, and speeches from a host of dignitaries, including President Woodrow Wilson, the first Southerner elected to the White House after the Civil War.

In 1917, my grandfather, Walter S. Synder, and his brother Elmer enlisted in the Army, as did many others who responded to the call, some to serve, some for adventure, some just to get off the farm. But for most of these, as with all young people, the real threat of not surviving, was ignored. These were brash young men with daring enough for twenty, tenacity between their teeth, and courage in the sticking place, so off they went to serve in an army truly unprepared for war.

Yes, they turned the tide of retreat at a town called Château-Thierry and in Bellau Wood. They stopped the Hun at a river called the Marne, and sent the Germans packing in what was left of the Meuse-Argonne, but not after many paid the ultimate price.

My grandfather witnessed the terror of the submarine threat on the open seas, saw the havoc wrought by wicked machine gun fire, cringed and recoiled from the constant deadly artillery, prayed against the mangling strike of the deadly German Mauser rifle, and gagged in the agony of poisonous gas. All these took the lives of his buddies next to him, as a daily routine.

Today we Americans are stunned when we learn of the death in the Middle-east of a single American soldier that we knew. But, in WW1 the weekly lists reported in the papers were counted by scores. In fact, in the fourteen months American troops were in the trenches in WW1, over 80,000 Americans died. Almost 203,000 were wounded, many to die later from the results of their wounds after returning home.

But, before the American Expeditionary Force arrived, the latest ideas in warfare, such as flame throwers and mechanization brought bedlam and confusion to the battle. Developments like tanks and more deadly chemical agents only added to the chaos and mayhem. Forward movement and the taking of ground had become rare and what terrain was taken, was seldom held.

But, the U.S. Doughboy was key to breaking the stalemate, and most historians acknowledge the fact that the United States' role ensured the war's end and the Allied victory, so when our troops returned home it was only natural that we heartily applauded them, but for them things had changed.

My grandfather not only carried home with him the personal wounds of bullet and gas. In his mental "kit" came the memories of friends and comrades left dead in No-Man's-Land. True, he was also no longer the same, simple farmer satisfied with a rural existence which made his generation one of progress and transformation. But, he remembered.

After the war the American Legion was born, and with it were born memorials and tributes founded all over the United States to companions lost.

Today, 100 years after the war began for the United States, the national U.S. WW1Centennial Commission and the local California WW1CentennialTask Force are teamed up with the goal to honor, and commemorate that American sacrifice, and to remind and educate today's citizen.

You and I stand here today to rejoin that heritage of remembrance and honor those who gave the ultimate sacrifice. I plead that you not quickly forget the promise General of the Armies John J. Pershing made to his troops in his victory announcement after the enemy's capitulation in WW1. He wrote:

“Our armies, hurriedly raised and hastily trained, met a veteran enemy, and by courage, discipline and skill always defeated him. You have seen many of your comrades make the supreme sacrifice that freedom may live. I thank you for the patience and courage with which you have endured. I congratulate you upon the splendid fruits of victory which your heroism and the blood of our gallant dead are now presenting to our nation. Your deeds will live forever on the most glorious pages of America's history.”²

One hundred years later, I find my self battling to help Pershing keep this promise and not let the deeds of the courageous be forgotten. To recall, when others wish to forget, the personal sacrifice made by so many in a war our forefathers did not start, but were deigned destine to finish.

¹ “Memorial Day - Over 150 Years of Remembrance”. n/a (Last updated: June 2, 2019,) Retrieved from <https://www.nps.gov/articles/memorial-day-history.htm> (last accessed July 29, 2019.)

² Pershing, John J., 1931 *My Experiences in the World War*, Vol. 2, p.390. New York: Fredrick A. Stokes Company.