

I have been reading old speeches and sermons on the internet about Memorial Day and used some of their content along with my own words to put together this tribute. I hope it will give you thought on this day of honor to remember the sacrifices of our military personnel and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Memorial Day, Our Veterans and Jesus

Memorial Day is established to recognize and remember the sacrifices of our military veterans. I want to talk about those sacrifices but as I do keep in mind that Jesus made similar sacrifices, also something I will shortly address.

First of all, try to picture this scenario that is occurring far too often in today's world.

It is 3am on a cold winter day at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan where the war on terrorism is being fought.

Surrounded by sandbags and concrete barriers in patchy snow the huge base has changed for a brief period from a sleeping military city of thousands of soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines, to a sea of green and tan uniforms. Some have just woken from a few minutes or hours of restless sleep to don their uniforms. Others have left duty stations, joining together as one to attend an event about to unfold. Loudspeakers blare telling everyone to take their places along the three mile road across the base.

Standing shoulder to shoulder along the route are America's men and women in uniform.

Lights of emergency vehicles can be seen slowly coming towards them. They are vehicle escorts leading a flatbed trailer to an awaiting C-17 cargo plane that will soon be on its' way back to the United States of America.

On the trailer are three caskets draped with U.S. Flags and as the trailer approaches military personnel lining the streets, each veteran pays his and her respect by coming to attention and saluting sharply to honor their fallen comrades who paid the ultimate price for freedom.

Once the trailer reaches the aircraft the military formation is dismissed and back to work, or to an attempt to sleep, return those who honored fallen heroes.

On another day, back here in the United States, Americans are preparing to honor veterans on Memorial Day. Perhaps, it is about doing the same thing as those lines of military personnel at Bagram Air Base. Simply remembering fallen heroes and honoring their service to America. It is an emotional thing to do and it surely should be emotional. A wife, husband, son, daughter, grandchild, friend has been lost and emotions run a gamut of tears to anger. Veteran after veteran have sacrificed all for freedom and they must be remembered.

All veterans are special on Memorial Day. But, during every conflict, we find some who are truly remarkable because of beyond the call of duty bravery. It is a military veteran doing something which is so out-of-the ordinary, so heroic, Congress acknowledges that person's efforts by awarding them the Medal of Honor. The deed performed must have been one of self-sacrifice, so conspicuous, so brave, that it clearly distinguishes the individual above his comrades who have also served heroically. Let me tell you about one Medal of Honor recipient.

On May 2nd 1968 Army Staff Sergeant Roy P. Benavidez, distinguished himself with a series of daring and extremely brave actions when assigned to 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), 1st Special Forces, while serving in the Vietnam War.

On that morning a 12-man Special Forces Reconnaissance Team was inserted by helicopters into a dense jungle in an area controlled and routinely patrolled by the North Vietnamese Army. After a short period of time on the ground the team met heavy enemy resistance and requested emergency extraction. Three helicopters attempted extraction, but were unable to land due to intense enemy fire.

Sergeant Benavidez was at a Forward Operating Base monitoring the operation by radio when the three helicopters returned to off-load several wounded crew members and to assess the damage to their aircraft. He voluntarily boarded a returning helicopter to assist in another extraction attempt. Realizing that all the Special Forces team members were either dead or wounded and unable to move to the pickup zone, he directed the aircraft to a nearby clearing where he jumped from the hovering helicopter and ran approximately 250 feet under withering fire to get to the crippled team. In doing so he was wounded in his right leg, face, and head.

Despite these painful injuries, he took charge, repositioning the team members and directing their fire to facilitate the landing of an extraction aircraft, and the loading of wounded and dead team members. He then threw smoke canisters to direct the aircraft to the team's position. Though severely wounded and under intense enemy fire, Sergeant Benavidez carried and

dragged half of the wounded team members to the awaiting helicopter. He then provided protective fire by running alongside the helicopter as it moved to pick up the remaining team members.

As the enemy's fire intensified, he hurried to recover the body and classified documents of the dead Special Forces team leader. When he reached the leader's body, Sergeant Benavidez was severely wounded by small arms fire in the abdomen and received grenade fragments in his back. At nearly the same moment, the aircraft pilot was killed and his helicopter crashed. Although in critical condition due to his multiple wounds, Sergeant Benavidez secured the classified documents and made his way back to the wreckage where he aided wounded troops out of the overturned aircraft and placed the survivors into a defensive perimeter. Under increasing enemy automatic weapons and grenade fire, he moved around the perimeter distributing water and ammunition to his weary men, giving them a will to live and fight.

Despite his many wounds and facing a buildup of enemy opposition with a beleaguered Special Forces team, Sergeant Benavidez mustered his strength and began calling in tactical air strikes. He directed the fire from supporting gunships to suppress the enemy's fire and to permit another extraction attempt of his fellow soldiers.

While administering first aid to a wounded team member just before another extraction helicopter was able to land, Sergeant Benavidez was shot in the thigh. But he kept going as he began to help his comrades to the helicopter. On his second trip with the wounded he was clubbed from behind by an enemy soldier. In the ensuing hand-to-hand combat he sustained additional wounds to his head and arms before killing his enemy. He then continued under devastating fire to carry the wounded heroes to the helicopter. Upon reaching the aircraft, he spotted and killed two enemy soldiers who were rushing the helicopter. With little strength remaining, he made one last trip to the perimeter to ensure that all classified material had been collected or destroyed, and to bring in the remaining wounded.

Only then, in an extremely serious condition from numerous wounds and loss of blood, did Sergeant Benavidez allow himself to be pulled into the helicopter. His fearless personal leadership, tenacious devotion to duty, and extremely brave actions in the face of overwhelming odds saved at least eight men.

There are many, many more such stories like this. 3,515 Medal of Honor stories alone. But the picture is clear. Many men and women have put their lives in extreme danger for their comrades in arms and, in some cases, gave their lives in order that the others might live. It seems in every war, in every battle, almost without exception, such heroic actions occur sometimes from individuals you would least expect.

In a small, Middle Eastern country nearly 2,000 years ago, that's exactly what happened. A closer look at this hero reveals some strong similarities to the hero I just described, though I must admit there are also some differences.

His name was Jesus, son of Joseph the carpenter. Raised in Nazareth, the scriptures give us little or nothing to go on about His early life, other than the familiar Christmas story, the visit of the Magi, and the time when He stayed behind at the temple and His parents came to find Him. After that, there is a significant jump ahead in time to His adult life and ministry among both His people the Jews and many Gentiles as well.

But really – who would have expected such heroic action from this Man. The prophet Isaiah tells us there was nothing about Him physically which would have hinted at the possibility of any heroics. We like to picture our heroes as big, brawny action figures. Jesus was not such a figure. But, similar to so many heroes of present day, He also heroically gave of Himself for others.

Jesus put Himself in harm's way, He heroically endured pain and suffering for our benefit. And He did it willingly. Isaiah says this about Jesus:

“He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”

Matthew records in his gospel, not once, but twice, that Jesus responded to the pain and suffering He was about to endure with the words, “Not my will, Father, but Yours be done.”

Just, as in the case of Staff Sergeant Benavidez, Jesus willingly endured this pain and suffering on behalf of His people to the point of self-sacrifice. Christ died for us as have millions of military veterans.

It's at this point, however, where our comparison of our veterans and Jesus Christ differ somewhat. The men and women of the military put their lives in danger for the sake of their fellow soldiers and country against other human beings. The battle Christ waged was against something far more powerful and devastating. The ultimate victory was not simply the taking of some important hilltop or body of water, or even one country over another, but one which secured our very souls—the victory over the power of the devil and of sin in our lives, and ultimately, the victory over death.

And the clearest, most dynamic example of how Christ's life and death and bravery — and resurrection—inspired His people is the fact that we are able to gather, to sing hymns, hear the Word of God read and proclaimed, offer up our prayers of praise and petition, and encourage one another in our faith.

All of us know that America still has the best well-equipped and trained military in the history of the world. However, we need to be honest with ourselves and admit that in a world of terrorist attacks, where individuals do not hesitate to give their lives for their particular cause or insane belief, we will never be totally protected and invulnerable. Jesus explains that “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.”

We will need our military to prevail and our faith in God to endure. A life of steady and regular prayer will, indeed, protect us from the temptations that come our way and ultimately preserve a life of eternal joy in heaven one glorious day. This is promised by Jesus Christ.

The book “*Writings of a Caveman*” by Jim King tells a story about one soldier who lived with and believed in Jesus's promise even as he found himself in the heat of battle during the Korean War. A soldier was badly hurt on the battlefield of Heartbreak Ridge. His buddies were in a foxhole about 50 yards away when the man was hit by the sniper fire in an ambush. As the fire continued, the other men discussed among themselves what must be done to save the wounded soldier. But since the sniper fire was too intense, to crawl out and bring back their wounded buddy would mean almost certain death.

For a while, no one would move. The men in the foxhole could hear their wounded friend yelling for help.

Then one of the men in the foxhole began to look intensely at his watch. He could not keep his eyes off it. All the others in the foxhole noticed this, and began to ask questions. But the soldier with the watch remained silent.

All of a sudden, the man with the watch jumped out of the foxhole, and crawled to his wounded buddy. He then grabbed him by the nape of the collar, and very slowly made his way back to the foxhole, all the while with sniper fire whizzing around them. Both amazingly made it back to the foxhole without additional injury.

After the sniper fire had died down, the man who saved his buddy was asked why he waited so long to crawl after his wounded friend. To which he responded: “My mom said every day at the exact same time she would be praying for me. And, according to my watch, I left the foxhole exactly when she started praying.”

We may not always receive answers to prayer in such dramatic fashion. Sometimes our prayers may also involve physical protection or even for the sparing of life, but they may seem to go unanswered. But we have God's promise that the ultimate victory in this world—the one which guarantees us eternity with Him—is ours, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

As we go forth, let me encourage you to remember those who have served and made the sacrifice for the freedoms we enjoy today. At the same time, give thanks to God for Jesus Christ, and His willingness to serve, His bravery, His commitment to our spiritual freedom and our eternal salvation. And then, be confident in your daily “faith battles,” knowing that you are equipped by God's armor to be that faithful warrior that makes a difference in the world around you.

The need for a military force will more than likely never disappear. We will need a protectorate from the forces around the globe to guarantee the rights and privileges we express today. This includes freedom of religion. It is through our soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines that we have the luxury of our unprecedented freedoms on Earth.

These men and women sacrifice for us just as our Lord Jesus Christ did. We should thank them in person, and give thanks to God for all the men and women who serve in the military at present, for those who served in the past, and those who will serve us in the future. This Memorial Day and every single day of the year we should do so.

God Bless America and our troops in harm's way.

John Stewart
CMSgt, USAF (retired)