

Out of Bounds

SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

memorial day

Arlington
National
Cemetery

In Erich Maria Remarque's classic novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*, soldiers sit and throw lice into a small pan set atop a candle. When the lice hit, they crackle. The deeper meaning of the passage is hard to ignore — the lice represent the soldiers, who are randomly tossed to their doom by, in the case of World War I Germany, commanders who know little of the horrors, solitude and alienation of war.

As Remarque's modernist classic rightly points out, there exists no inherent glory in sending young men into harm's way — no matter the nationality.

A timely example of our trivialization of the affect of war is how most Americans treat the Memorial Day weekend. It has become synonymous with going to the lake, having a barbeque and sipping a few suds. As those who fought — and worked — for victory in World War II dwindle in numbers, it doesn't seem as if anyone really cares that hundreds of thousands of people provided the ultimate sacrifice to ensure what they saw as something worth protecting. They weren't fighting for new boats and recreational vehicles.

The practice of Declaration Day began after the Civil War, a horrific clash of competing economic interests that cost more than half million lives. On May 30, 1868, General James Garfield spoke at Arlington National

LET'S PAUSE FROM OUR BACKYARD BARBEQUES TO REMEMBER WHAT THE HOLIDAY IS ALL ABOUT

BY MARK LUCE

Cemetery. After his speech, 5,000 citizens then decorated more than 20,000 graves — Union and Confederate. These type of celebrations continued annually until, in 1971, Congress made the unofficial day official and everyone got a day off.

It's a time when I remember some of my most precious family stories. My great-grandfather served in World War I and World War II, my grandfathers in World War II. My great uncle had a brutal war experience in Korea. None of them died in conflict, but they all lost dear friends. To a man, they never bragged of their service. And to a man, on Memorial Day, they would visit the ghosts and graves of their fallen friends.

With an interest in history, I would pepper them with questions about the time, about the wars and about their friends. They answered in different ways, but their demeanors were shockingly similar — quiet, reserved and a far away look in their eyes. They un-

derstood something that I didn't — it's not about glory, it's about service and sacrifice and making something better in spite of the seeming futility of it. They saw the fragility of the individual, the importance of human connection, camaraderie and a large-scale sense of family, not the glory or the power of a given state.

Now we are at war again, and two months in advance of publishing this column, one can't say what will be happening in Iraq, or the world, by the time you see this. As a new father, I'm horrified when I consider the world in which my son is growing up. I'm further worried about how to explain to him that human nature is increasingly sleazy and that our culture has veered on to a convenient freeway of decadence, oversimplification and willful blindness.

Democracy is an exceedingly messy business, and freedom comes with a price. Too often our big cars, new gizmos and online shopping, and the anxiety of the modern world cause us to forget that. The sacrifice I urge is a small one: Wherever you live, on Memorial Day weekend, go to a cemetery and thank those whose potential was snuffed far too early. I encourage this not in a paroxysm of patriotism, rather in a humble call to recognize — and contemplate — our shared humanity.

Mark Luce, who plans to honor all veterans on May 26, is a free-lance writer based in Kansas City, Mo.

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