



Renewal & Remembrance

WASHINGTON — A couple months ago, our daughter's 8th grade class followed a rite of passage in Northeast Ohio. They visited D.C., something I'd done nearly 30 years ago with my classmates.

She and her friends visited the major museums and monuments including Arlington National Cemetery. And I can't help but think her experience, like mine, was one of muted reverence. Our daughter, Sammie, is aware the country is at war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and she's certainly studied our many conflicts in American history classes. But at 14, it's not easy to appreciate the sacrifice war extracts on society. It's difficult to understand the freedoms we've come to expect when you've not had to work or struggle for it. I was no different.

I'm sure Sammie thought about those interred around her as she watched her friends lay a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknowns or as she walked passed John F. Kennedy's grave or the memorial honoring the seven astronauts lost in the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster. And I'm sure those thoughts vanished quickly as an ice cube in the summer sun as she and her friends got back on the bus and headed to the next site. I was no different.

Two years ago, I returned to Arlington National Cemetery as part of the Professional Landcare Network's (PLANET's) Renewal & Remembrance, an annual environmental enhancement project. And I was blessed to be able to attend again last month. Contractors from 28 states donated their equipment, time and energy to renew the hallowed grounds and to remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice. This year, there were about 400 adults and 50 children involved in the program. Some contractors closed their businesses for several days to participate in Renewal & Remembrance, no small feat in this economy. The work includes liming hundreds of acres, adding cables and installing lighting protection to trees, installing plants and trees, and updating irrigation systems.

It's a truly humbling experience — returning to Arlington National Cemetery as an adult. Walking past rows and rows of white tombstones is a reminder of the fragility and fleeting nature of life.

The numbers are staggering. There are more than 300,000 people buried at Arlington National Cemetery — soldiers from every war since the American Revolution. And the number grows, on average, by 30 every day.

Etched in many of the tombstones are the wars in which the soldier who lies below participated. How can I not be humbled when there are three wars listed or the man lying there took his last breath when he was half my age.

Walking through the grounds I came across a stone, its carving worn with age. The lettering, still legible, indicated an ID number and had the words Unknown U.S. Soldier. It saddens me to think no one comes to visit the man, that somewhere there was a family that never learned the fate of their son, brother or husband. I said a quiet "thank you" and moved on.

Many who donated their time that day, as they do every year, were veterans or relatives of veterans. Some have sons or daughters currently on active duty and in harm's way. I don't know what path my daughter will choose in life. I can only hope, one day, perhaps when she brings her children to Arlington National Cemetery, she will finally understand and appreciate the sacrifice of those laid to rest there.

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