

Commentary...

Memorial Day reminds us of our highest ideals

By Kelly Fitzpatrick
Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs

Every year, I'm struck by the powerful — and often, opposing — emotions that Memorial Day stirs.

We celebrate our freedoms, and yet we mourn the cost that they required. We look ahead to a bright future, while we remember the trials and challenges of the past. We honor those who served, but we grieve their loss.

Celebration, and sadness. Gratitude, and remorse. Hope, and helplessness. Memorial Day is unique in evoking such a broad spectrum of feeling, because it is this holiday that speaks most keenly to our highest ideals, as well as the steep price we are willing to pay for them.

Sadly, it is also a day that, for many, has lost its significance. President George W. Bush would often tell the story of asking schoolchildren what the meaning of Memorial Day is, only to have them respond, "That's the day the pool opens!"

For many Oregonians, Memorial Day is primarily the unofficial start of the summer recreation season, a chance to enjoy our amazing forests and beaches, rivers and lakes and mountain trails.

We should enjoy all that our state has to offer, but we should also keep in mind the words of another president, John F. Kennedy: "A nation reveals itself not only by the citizens it produces but also by the citizens it honors, the citizens it remembers."

We must remember the fallen because the courage, the strength, the selflessness and the sacrifice of each one of these brave warriors is the ideal to which we all should aspire.

On this Memorial Day, I think of Bob Maxwell, a great American and Oregonian whom we lost earlier this month. Bob was a World War II combat soldier, and until his death, the only Medal of Honor recipient still living in our state. While he did not die fighting for our country he fearlessly faced death in a way few Americans ever have.

He earned that medal — the U.S. military's

highest decoration for valor — for the courage he showed during a battle in September 1944, when a live German hand grenade was tossed in the midst of his squad. Without a second thought, he hurled himself upon it, shielding his comrades from the blast with nothing but a blanket and his unprotected body.

Maxwell cheated death that day, though he carried shrapnel in his body for the rest of his life. It was a life he dedicated in humble service to the veteran community, and to the memories of his brothers in arms, who never got the chance to come home.

We must never forget the true cost of war. It is a price paid not in dollars and cents, but with the blood of our heroes. They were nothing less than the best America had to offer, those who answered the call when their nation needed them, who paid the ultimate price to protect us and our way of life.

The stories of their sacrifice are forever woven into the fabric of our nation and its history. They gave their lives on the foreign soils of Europe, the black sands of the South Pacific, the frozen reaches of Korea, in the sweltering jungles of Vietnam, the scorching deserts of Afghanistan and Iraq, and in many other places across the globe.

The United States lost more than 400,000 of its sons and daughters in World War II — 2,826 from Oregon. 54,246 American service members gave their lives in Korea (287 Oregonians); 58,209 in Vietnam (791 from our state).

In Iraq and Afghanistan, we lost 6,713 American service members — 142 Oregonians. Each one of their names is etched on slabs of granite that form the heart of the Afghan/Iraqi Freedom Memorial, located just a few steps from the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs office building. Each one of their names is read aloud each year at our Memorial Day ceremony, as we seek to honor and remember their sacrifice.

Each one represents the loss of a bright and shining

light in the lives of their families, a pain that they feel each and every day — not just on Memorial Day. We remember and honor their sacrifice as well. They, too, paid a great price for the freedoms we

now enjoy.

On behalf of the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs, I urge all Oregonians to take a moment this Memorial Day, to remember our fallen heroes who gave

their lives in service to our nation, and say, "Thank you."

Kelly Fitzpatrick is a U.S. Army veteran and the director of the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs.

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