Memorial Day Matters

Contributed by Wes Riddle
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Memorial Day was originally designated as the 30th of May, but starting in 1971 it has been held the last Monday in May creating a convenient 3-day weekend. Memorial Day is observed today as a public holiday dedicated to the memory of the fallen who died in service to their country in wartime. Its origin dates to the terrible War Between the States. The day was actually inaugurated in 1868 as a holiday on which graves of Civil War veterans serving the Union were decorated. The South did not recognize the day as such, but set aside separate days on which to decorate graves belonging to its Confederate veterans. Indeed, organized women’s groups in the South had been decorating graves even before the end of the Civil War. Ironically the last Confederate Widow, Alberta S. Martin actually died on Memorial Day, 2004 in Alabama.
The word “memorial” (serving to help people remember some person or event) is ignored too often on Memorial Day by those of us who are the direct beneficiaries of thousands of men and women, who bore the ultimate sacrifice. It is perhaps a hard thing to come to grips with the fact that it is the willing sacrifice of life that has secured for us our blessed freedoms, and continues to do so every day. The least that we should do is to actively remember those who gave their all—our ancestors, family members, neighbors and loved ones who served in uniform and died in service defending and advancing our way of life. Traditionally we are invited each year on Memorial Day to do the following: to visit cemeteries and place flags or flowers on the graves of fallen heroes; to attend memorial services and other public events; to fly the U.S. Flag at half-mast until Noon; to observe moments of silence for special reflection and remembrance; to renew pledges of support and aid to the widows and orphans of veterans, as well as to disabled veterans; and to salute the fallen and/or to play Taps in their honor (Taps is a bugle call written during the Civil War, which dates to 1862 and was used by both sides).
Memorial Day of course has its counterpart in other nations, and amongst the Western nations in particular there is a very similar ethos surrounding the honoring of the dead, who died for freedom and the safety of their homeland. One of the most famous poems of remembrance was written by Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae, MD (1872-1918), Canadian Army called “In Flanders Fields” and written in 1915. A beautiful response poem was written by Moina Belle Michael (1869-1944), a native Georgian and American professor, called “We Shall Keep The Faith” written in 1918. Moina Michael became known as the Poppy Lady after she conceived of the idea of using poppies (based on the poem by McCrae) as a symbol of remembrance for those who had served in World War I. A U.S. Postage Stamp was even issued in her honor. Together the two poems do much to bring to mind the importance of Memorial Day, its meaning and why the day matters so much.
John McCrae in his third stanza writes: “To you from failing hands we throw/The torch; be yours to hold it high. /If ye break faith with us who die/We shall not sleep, though poppies grow/ In Flanders fields.” Moina Michael writes this rejoinder in the first stanza of her poem: “Oh! You who sleep in Flanders Fields, /Sleep sweet—to rise anew! /We caught the torch you threw/And holding high, we keep the Faith/With All who died.” And in the third stanza Moina Michael refers to that one thing all soldiers and those who remember them ask and must reaffirm every Memorial Day and in all the days between, and that is that none of those who died shall have died in vain: “Fear not that ye have died for naught;/We’ll teach the lesson that ye wrought/In Flanders Fields.” It is up to us from generation to generation to teach the lesson wrought as it were, of life and blood and treasure, that so far has kept the Torch of Liberty burning bright in the heart of all true patriots. The lesson reduced to its core is that Freedom isn’t free. God bless those who died for it and those who fight for us still.

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