

Memorial Day honoring our heroes

By Reverend William Randall

Memorial Day seems to be the beginning of summer, though officially it is still a few weeks away. The holiday means parades, trips to the beaches, cookouts, picnics and other entertainments, but it is far more than this. Memorial Day is one of the patriotic days to honor our heroes who have served in the military, especially those who died for freedom's cause.

General John A. Logan officially inaugurated Memorial Day as "Decoration Day" in 1866 in Waterloo, New York. Graves of the Civil War's dead were decorated and ceremonies have been held in communities across the United States ever since. The first use of the name "Memorial Day" was in 1882. This name became more commonly used after World War II. It was declared the official name by federal law in 1967.

The first observance preceded General Logan's celebration by one year in Charleston, South Carolina at a location now called Hampton Park. The site had been a Confederate prison camp where many Union soldiers died and were placed in a mass grave. Immediately after the cessation of the war, former slaves exhumed the bodies from the mass grave and re-interred them properly in individual graves. They built a fence around it and declared it a "Union graveyard." The work was completed in 10 days. In May, 1865, the Charleston newspaper reported that a crowd of 10,000, including 2,800 children, celebrated with sermons, songs, and a picnic on the grounds, thereby creating the first Decoration Day.

Today our thoughts go to more recent wars. The First World War is memorialized through the poem, *In Flanders Fields*. It is often used at Memorial Day observances. The words here reproduced are meaningful because they inspire us to value freedom and to defend it.

In Flanders Fields
By John McCrae

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe;
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.

The words were written by John McCrae, a Canadian physician serving troops near the border between France and Belgium. He wrote *In Flanders Fields* to honor comrades who had died in the war. Not long after he penned the words, he joined the dead in Flanders Fields. While caring for the wounded, he looked out from the field tent and saw poppies that grew profusely there.

The red poppy is a symbol of Memorial Day. Today, veteran's organizations distribute artificial poppies to raise money for the placing of flags on veteran's graves. Though graves of those who served in the Armed Forces are decorated on that day, it has also become a time when families place plants or floral arrangements on the graves of deceased loved ones. However, Memorial Day is a special patriotic day when we express our gratitude and stop to honor those who gave their lives for freedom's cause. Though interesting floats might pass by in a Memorial Day parade, the greatest thrill is to see veterans in uniform carrying the American flag down Main Street. •

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