

Memorial Day Week
Opinion Editorial
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“The Choicest Flowers of Springtime.” – 574 words

On May 5th, 1868 Union Army Maj. General John A. Logan established Decoration Day (later to be renamed Memorial Day). His order stated that Civil War graves be decorated “with the choicest flowers of springtime” to honor the many young men who died in the bloom of their youth – who gave up their tender lives so their loved ones could live long.

On May 12, 1962 retired General Douglas MacArthur, (West Point, Class of 1903) gave his final address at the United States Military Academy. He spoke to those who would soon face Vietnam – the *choicest* young men of that generation:

“Duty, Honor, Country...they build your basic character. They make you strong enough to know when you are weak, and brave enough to face yourself when you are afraid.” He died just two years later and was buried with honors in Virginia. Many cadets who heard his final address, shortly joined him in death as young US Army officers.

Yet, the Long Gray Line continued.

General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, (West Point, Class of 1956) at 17 years old became one of the youngest cadets. Looking back on it, he said on August 2nd 2000, “As young West Point cadets, our motto was "Duty, Honor, Country." *But* it was in the field, from the rice paddies of Southeast Asia to the sands of the Middle East, that I learned that motto's fullest meaning.” Young men served and died next to him. His service to the nation rivaled that of Generals Grant and Eisenhower – also fellow West Pointers.

On December 27th, 2012, General Schwarzkopf died. His funeral was held at West Point; his remains laid next to those of his father, also a West Point graduate. Service upon service. Life upon life. In May of that year, flowers were placed on both tombstones.

My youngest son, Colin William Mansfield, was then in his third year as a West Point cadet. The Corps of Cadets saluted this legend.

As cadets, themselves, Schwarzkopf, Eisenhower, MacArthur and tens of thousands of other ex-cadets and graduates had to memorize, these words embedded within the West Point Alma Mater:

“They are here in ghostly assemblage. The men of the Corps long dead. And our hearts are standing attention, while we wait for their passing tread. We sons of today, we salute you. You sons of an earlier day; We follow, close order, behind you, where you have pointed the way.”

Colin Mansfield graduates with his class of over 1,000 cadets this May 28th, two days after Memorial Day, 2014. President Obama will be the commencement speaker.

As Graduation Day trades places with Memorial Day the significance of these two days being so closely enjoined is not lost on me, as both a parent and as a Member (but not a graduate) of my own class at West Point – Class of 1978. I understand the significance, as does the President, that my son, and his classmates, have trained for the ultimate service to their nation.

The sounds of furrowed flags and muffled drums from long-gone West Pointers will indeed be heard on both Memorial Day and Graduation Day, along with the flower-scented fragrances of West Point.

The bloom of youth, long gone, will whisper, “well done” to the bloom of youth in 2014. “Now stand your post.”

It is believed that Maj. General Logan chose the date in May because flowers would be in bloom all over the country.

They still are.

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