



Those who serve deserve our best but never have so many depended on so few

BY JEFFREY PHILLIPS, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 05/27/18 09:30 AM EDT
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"Over all our happy country, over all our Nation spread, is a band of noble heroes, is our Army of the Dead" — American poet Will Carleton, 1845-1912.

Among the sacred honors to befall a military officer away from the battlefield is to give a Memorial Day address. Speaking to Americans on this hallowed day is perhaps surpassed only by the responsibility of the gravesite presentation of the flag to a spouse or parent grieving profound loss. Or, being the first senior official to visit with the family at Dover Air Force Base as they await the repatriation of their loved one's remains.

Sharing the honor of these responsibilities with my fellow flag officers — admirals and generals — I joined an ancestry of sacred gratitude.

There were terrible moments whose wrenching pain turned my entrails to water: one evening while the chaplain, base commander and I stood at attention by the cargo doors of the delivering C-17, the honor guard bringing before us the flag-draped case of a dead soldier, his mother standing behind us wailed a wail of primeval agony; it poured forth from the ageless depths of humanity.

The sergeant who holds a dying comrade, the commander who suffers the guilt of loss — fated for a lifetime's span to wonder if better leadership could have saved this life.

For us the living, who breathe free air, Memorial Day offers the occasion for a simple thanks. Thanks that others have so valued the community we

call America that they accepted lethal danger to secure its blessings, and were thus lost. Their lives are the ultimate valuation of our way of life. In sheer numbers, that valuation has reached 1,354,664 lives thus far, without end in sight. Another 40,031 are listed as missing.

But we know that numbers do not truly tell the value of a life given.

Among those who so dearly value our America are the men and women of our Reserve and National Guard; in the current war — now nearly two decades old and not yet even declared — some 953,000 have been mobilized and more than 1,200 have been lost.

They believed.

They believed in us; we owe it to them, once we engage the enemy, to ensure these patriots have what they need to win (yes, the Reserve Officers Association believes in winning wars to which we commit our precious human capital, if not the political courage of a declaration as envisioned in our Constitution).

The fidelity of these young men and women, most not out of their twenties, and some not yet within them, is a precious resource: fewer than one in three of their age group can serve without some sort of waiver; the number not committed to college or who even have an interest (or families supportive of military service) is far lower. Never have so many depended on so few.

The Army Reserve reports weakness in its backbone core of sergeants first class, a shortage of about 40 percent; within its entire officer and noncommissioned officer corps, a shortage of some 22,000. Its shortages are not unique. The Air Force, for example, is rehiring retired pilots. To reach its recruiting goals, the Army added 400 recruiters. Last year it paid \$424 million in bonuses, nearly double the 2016 amount. Perhaps the reluctance to serve in part stems from the situation reported in a May 21 wire story, "Watchdog finds little progress in Afghanistan, despite U.S. military optimism."

Those who can and do choose to serve deserve our best. Rumors of war's end to the contrary, the operational tempo endured by our forces has not abated. The U.S. military is deployed in more than 150 countries. The Reserve and Guard are used more than ever; truly, the military cannot go to war without its reserve units. For example, 66 percent of the Army's medical capability is in the Reserve and Guard, 82 percent of its engineers and quartermasters, 79 percent of its transportation capability, and 44 percent of its military intelligence capability, as well as a hefty percentage of its direct combat capability.

There is some good news: the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act reflects growing concern in Congress for military readiness. The NDAA would authorize \$717 billion, including a 2.6 percent military pay raise (the highest increase in nine years).

The defense bill funds increased "end strength" for both active and reserve components (assuming recruiters can meet their goals). It extends special pay and bonuses in high-demand fields, increases funding for training and equipment maintenance, buys new equipment to replace that which is too expensive to repair or is simply obsolete, starts to modernize America's nuclear deterrent and align it with modern threats, and improves psychological health care for service members.

The bill plays catch-up, and ROA's mission — along with fellow supporters of national security and those who provide it "on the ramparts" — is to ensure the trend continues.

Memorial Day in America originally recognized the sacrifice of the Union's Civil War dead; that cataclysm took some 655,000 lives. Like the nation's wars before and after, with few exceptions, most of the dead had not been "regulars"; with the advent of war, they came from farms and ranches, factories and businesses, civil service and school rooms to serve, believing that what they served was worth the potential sacrifice.

Today's Reserve and National Guard are the face of this profound fidelity to nation. Whether deploying into battle alongside comrades in the "regular" force, helping secure the homeland, fighting the war on the ravaging drug trade, or aiding those devastated by the wrath of nature, these young men and women are truly "twice the citizen."

Franklin D. Roosevelt, a man who understood war, said, "Those who have long enjoyed such privileges as we enjoy forget in time that men have died to win them."

Let our nation on this Memorial Day 2018, in our remembrance of that valiant "Army of the Dead," refute FDR's words; let us thereby earn the valor of our magnificent military living today in service to the idea of a happy — and free — America.

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