



Memorial Day brings to mind the father of my boyhood best friend.

When I first met this man in the 1950's, he'd put over a decade between himself and his service as a US Marine in some of the bloodiest Pacific island campaigns of World War II. This soft-spoken, almost diminutive veteran displayed more than most men's measure of valor, and, unlike many of his compatriots, lived to tell that tale, which he never did to us kids, and perhaps no one.

This man paid a very dear price for his patriotism. No, he didn't lose his mind, physical health, marriage, or dignity. But he forfeited his soul. And I suspect that remained his lot in life until he left us.

There is little doubt the Second World War was one of awful necessity. Freedom and humanity were under merciless assault. The brutality, oppression and genocidal savagery of the Nazis and the Imperial Japanese could only be crushed with brute force, and soldiers like my friend's dad were an instrument of that force.

Returning to their homes and families after the war, these people were genuine heroes. Not the kind who are sometimes Photoshopped, so to speak, and marched before the media, deserving as they may be. No, they were regular human beings, flawed and troubled, but willing to sacrifice themselves for something greater than their own hopes and dreams. Many of them never lived long enough to wear a medal.

Neither being part of a righteous cause nor the gratefulness of a besieged nation were sufficient to heal this man's soul. He saw and did things, and had things done to him, that most of us cannot begin to imagine.

When with him, I could sense what wasn't there. Sure, being a kid, I didn't know what to call it, but I glimpsed the void in his eyes. Some spark was snuffed out in this man, and not even so much as a lingering ember could be seen in his countenance.

At that time, these wounds were not openly discussed. We lacked the current knowledge of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), instead opting for the then popular term “battle fatigue,” which was just a garbage can phrase for something nobody really understood. But, even in my small town, the physically hobbled and mentally wounded veterans of this conflagration were everywhere, carrying their often-invisible scars.

I never heard my friend’s father utter a word about the war, let alone what was happening within the dark shadows of his being. The only “talking” he did was with his eyes, face and the sound of his voice. And they all said he lost something vital back on those bloody beaches and in the sweltering jungles of America’s Pacific campaign.

There are experiences in this world that stab at more than mind and heart, but also at soul. They assault one’s fundamental beliefs about the nature of humanity, the meaning of existence, and the goodness in living.

Think about what it would be like to never again feel normal, to be, in some sense, unrecognizable to yourself. That may give you a flavor for what this kind of wounding can do to a human being.

So, pause to remember, in deep gratitude, those crucified in the cauldron of war so the rest of us would not have to endure such wounds, nor suffer the loss of our freedoms.

May their souls rest. Few deserve it more.