

My Father's Generation: A Memorial Day Tribute

By Sen. Cameron S. Brown,
(R) Fawn River Township

"We know not of the future, and cannot plan for it much. But we can hold our spirits and our bodies so pure and high, we may cherish such thoughts and such ideals and dream such dreams of lofty purpose, that we can determine and know what manner of men we will be whenever and wherever the hours strikes that calls to noble action... No man becomes suddenly different from his habit and cherished thought."

- Joshua L. Chamberlain

In a world in which so much divided opinion exists, it is good to come together as Americans and share common ground, a love for God and country. Memorial Day brings the unity of our national purpose into sharp focus and compels us to join hands, lock arms and remember. We remember, because we must not forget. Memorial Day is a day to trace what Lincoln called the "mystic chords of memory" that bind us to a past made sacred by sacrifice, unyielding courage and selfless devotion. A past that comes alive in the heart of every true lover of liberty. A past whose light penetrates the darkness of the present day and calls us to stand guard and be protectors of liberty for generations yet unborn.

The young men of my father's generation had their lives and fortunes ahead of them; hopes for a family and a career. They were full of all the joy of life that God places in the heart of each one of us. They wanted what our *Declaration of Independence* affirms as the "pursuit of happiness." But there was an unmistakable truth that governed their lives. It is a hard, tough truth, but also plain and simple. It is a truth that has to do with the core value of what it means to be an American. A truth etched not in stone, but in the heart of every true American patriot. That truth is this: to maintain liberty, a price has to be paid, a sacrifice made. And so this generation had their life plans interrupted. Things didn't go the way they wanted them to go. As they stood on the threshold of their adult life, their country called them to arms. They went off to war and for some, a terrible thing happened. They found themselves in harms way, in the line of fire, and they never came back. This was not what they had intended to have happen. It was not what they had planned for the gift God had given them. But they did choose to do their duty. And as a consequence, they are forever cherished in the memory of a grateful nation. Today, there is a silent reverence in the deepest part of our souls for the unspeakable sacrifice that called these brave young men out of the cities and farm fields of America and onto the killing fields of Europe and the Pacific Rim and onto ships in peril on the sea. I am always struck with the absolute poignancy of the many local histories throughout America of young men and women who answered their country's call and never came back.



JOSEPH S. BROWN, U.S. NAVY, WWII

Growing up I had the normal childhood curiosity about my parents, about what uniquely made them who they were. I knew that my mother grew up on a small farm in southwest Michigan, and that my father was an attorney, born and raised in a place called Kansas; somewhere, I imagined, "over the rainbow." I knew that my father worked for the federal government, and that he had a large vocabulary, a good grasp of the English language. But there was another aspect of my father's history that was unspoken. It was, it seemed, almost a secret. But I came to know about this "secret" past, because I discovered the evidence of it. I found hidden away, a uniform (maybe two) of a World War II naval officer. You see, my father, like so many men of his generation, accepted the call to enlist in the great defense of the free world against the advance of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. He was a young college student in Lawrence, Kansas when the events of a great war in a faraway land broke the carefree-spell of campus life. He would say goodbye to his fraternity house and the University of Kansas. He would leave behind the memory of a night when Glenn Miller came to town and everyone danced to the swinging sounds of *In the Mood*, *A String of Pearls* and *Moonlight Serenade*. My father was called away to war, not just for a month and a day, but for the long duration. This was the great watershed in my father's life and it left its mark in a way that I can never fully fathom. I only know that it changed him, and his remembrance of it was seldom spoken. When asked about it, he wouldn't talk about it.

It wasn't until the very twilight of my father's life that he revealed this concealed chapter of youth and war, and the stories began to unfold. All of this came to focus for me when my sister and I took a plane to Kansas City in August of 1996. At a time when a famous son of Kansas, Senator Bob Dole, was poised to accept his party's nomination for president at the Republican National

Convention, another son of Kansas was on his way home for the last time. We had our father's body shipped from Scottsdale, Arizona, where he passed away that week, to a small town in northeast Kansas where he was born 76 years before. Leaving Kansas City, my sister and I drove three hours to the city of Washington, Kansas, and there we walked into the Ward Funeral Home where preparations had been made for my father's funeral. As we entered the funeral parlor, we saw my father's closed casket enveloped in the most brilliant colors of red, white and blue. Here were the remains of an American patriot, a true son of Kansas, and my heart swelled with such emotion that no words could be spoken. I was overwhelmed with gratitude, and I found in that dark moment of sadness, inspiration!

The men and women of my father's generation were just ordinary people struggling to do what was right, trying to live out the full measure of their lives as God gave them the wisdom and grace to do His will. The quiet and harmony of their lives were interrupted by a call to noble action. It was nothing that they ever planned for, nor would they ever have wished it upon anyone, and yet it came, and so they pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor.

This Memorial Day, we pause to acknowledge the sacrifice of those who have taken the banner of liberty and lifted it high above their own self-interest. We pay tribute to real American heroes who in time of war and peace have been the bulwark of our democracy. Not long ago, one World War II veteran told me that he thought we overplay our emotion when we honor our veterans by calling them heroes. "We just did what we had to do," he said, "We really didn't have a choice in the matter." Well, I won't say that. I can't. I choose to lift up these honored Americans and say "Thank you," from a grateful heart. To live our lives worthy of the great sacrifice they placed upon the altar of freedom is the great challenge for our day. May we too be found doing our duty to God and country when and if the hour strikes that calls to noble action.



Sen. Cameron S. Brown (R) Fawn River Township, is the Assistant Majority Floor Leader in the Michigan Senate. He chairs the Homeland Security and Emerging Technologies Committee, and is Vice Chair of the Campaign and Election Oversight Committee. He earned a

Master of Public Administration degree from Western Michigan University, and has a BA in History from the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He also attended the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, VA.

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