

The Radio Operator: A Memorial Day Reflection

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I am ambivalent about Memorial Day. On the one hand, it offends me that, for most Americans, Memorial Day has become just another holiday weekend—a getaway to the beach, the opening of the pool, a sale at the garden center. I once served as an Army Nurse, in a stateside hospital to which wounded soldiers were evacuated regularly. So for me, the “memorial” part of the weekend always overshadows the “holiday” part. While I’m firing up the grill and watching for the kids and grandkids to arrive, remembrance rolls in out of the blue, like a solemn cortege. Suddenly I’m thinking of soldiers who suffered and died—and not just the soldiers of my own generation. I think, too, of the families they never came home to.

But on the other hand I’m equally offended by displays of patriotism and military splendor—flags, marching bands, the Blue Angels breaking the sound barrier overhead. To my way of thinking, Memorial Day (which was once called “Decoration Day,” when women would carry flowers to the graves of the fallen) ought to be quietly mournful. Just once a year, couldn’t we gaze directly at the precious lives lost? Couldn’t we quit numbing ourselves with all that loyalty to the nation for which lives are still being sacrificed?

A few years ago, I visited San Antonio, a city of several large military installations. I went to the veterans’ memorial there—an enormous bronze sculpture that depicts two soldiers in realistic detail. One soldier is mortally wounded, and the other is calling for help by radio. The name of this sculpture is “Hill 881 South.” The artist, Austin Deuel, served as a Marine illustrator. Apparently one day in 1967, Deuel made a quick sketch of something he saw in the thick of a terrible battle. Nineteen years later he worked that sketch into the largest memorial of its kind in this country.

I have a photograph of “Hill 881 South.” Sometimes I hold it in my hands and contemplate its crucial details.

Weapons. The radio operator, balanced in a dynamic squat, has dropped his weapon. It lies at his feet, between the angles of his tense knees. The wounded soldier, sprawled on the

ground, has a grenade in his pocket—a rounded, almost heart-shaped swelling that lies, ironically, just above his heart.

Protective gear. The radio operator's helmet has slipped back, as though it could fall off any second. The wounded soldier's helmet is entirely off—thrown away from him, upended on the ground. Nowadays visitors to the memorial come and place flowers in that helmet.

Posture of the wounded one. His whole body is sprawled on a slant, with the lower extremities higher than the head and heart. Perhaps only people in the medical profession would notice this: He's actually lying in Trendelenburg Position—the position of choice for patients in shock. Maybe it's just an accident that the decline of the very ground where the soldier has fallen is right for his failing circulation. To me, the downward sprawl of this one wounded young man represents perfectly the universal state of shock: an entire nation wounded by a terrible war.

Posture of the radio operator. One hand grasps the radio—to call for help—while the other feels for a pulse, the fingers resting against the exposed jugular vein of the wounded one, the dying one. The radio operator's face is lifted, his mouth slightly open, as though he's just taken a breath in, right before the cry out. His eyes are fixed on the sky. He's searching, of course, for the medevac helicopter. But to me he's also searching the face of that which lies beyond the madness he's caught in. Call it the face of God, if you're so inclined. Or call it the face of Enlightened Humanity—or Peace.

Veterans of that battle on Hill 818 South have determined that the wounded soldier in Deuel's sculpture is most likely PFC James Arthur Randall, who did not survive. The radio operator is said to be Cpl Donald Hossack, for whom one day a helicopter did come, whisking him home to the rest of his life.

As for the larger-than-life radio operator, the one Austin Deuel captured forever his enormous, bronze sculpture: It comforts me to hold his likeness in my hands. He cannot let go. His fingers are still pressed to the pulse of fallen ones—of the ones who may be falling even now, as we check the skies for fair weather, and fire up the grill.