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Column: Only the faces have changed

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Fourteen-year-old Mary Ann Vecchio and 17-year-old Juan Romero never met me. But almost 50 years ago, their photos changed my life when I was in high school studying geometry, translating Latin and working part-time. There was no internet, no Facebook and no cell phones back then.

Reports of the Vietnam War that loomed somewhere far away were broadcast every night in black-and-white on television. I was sitting at my desk translating Cicero's Oration with my trot (study guide) open to help me. Then, on May 4, 1970, I was pulled from the pages of the Roman Empire into a reality that had avoided capturing me for 17 years.

In today's vernacular, you would say that Mary Ann Vecchio's photo went viral. Published in just about every newspaper, a photo taken by a student photographer, captured her screaming in anguish as she knelt over the body of Jeffrey Miller. He had just been killed by National Guardsmen at an anti-war protest on the grounds of Kent State University in Ohio.

Just two years earlier, my mother woke me up and whispered, "Jimmy, they killed Bobby Kennedy." Kennedy was shot in the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles on June 6, 1968. A photo of the Senator showed a busboy, only 17 years old, named Juan Romero, who moments before was shaking Kennedy's hand; now on the floor in shock next to the dying Kennedy.

I was 15 years old when Kennedy died and 17 when the students at Kent State died. More than 58,000 soldiers, many not much older than me, were killed in Vietnam. I grew up fast in those years.

As Memorial Day approaches, I plan to visit the graves of my uncles and father who served in the Navy, Marines, Air Force and Army. None of them glorified war or their service. They didn't talk about the battles, the weapons or the killing; they talked about the friends and comrades they met in the service. They were glad to have come home.

They were there for the graduations, the births and the Little League games when so many others who died in battle could not come home. I honor each of them every Memorial Day with flowers at their graves. I will add the Bourne National Cemetery to my stops this year.

The photos of Mary Ann and Juan from 50 years ago have now, unfortunately, become the faces of the high school kids in Parkland, Florida. More death by needless gun violence. The anguish and shock on the faces of Juan and Mary Ann from 50 years ago repeated on the faces of a new generation.

So I have to ask on this Memorial Day: Did my generation drop the ball handed to them by the members of what is called the Greatest Generation? Were we not supposed to make the world a better place than our parents left us? We have had 50 years to do something.

The heroes we honor on Memorial Day did not die so that American children can die in their schools; they did not die so that we can fear attending a movie or a concert.

Look again at the faces of Mary Ann, Juan and the Parkland students. They are just kids. Maybe on this Memorial Day their prayers for a better and safer America will be answered by the generation in power before another 50 years passes.

East Falmouth resident Jim Carroll's career as a lawyer talking to jurors taught him the importance of speaking from the heart.