

Church of the Good Shepherd  
and  
St. John the Evangelist

7 Easter  
May 28, 2006  
Fr. Bill McGinty

**“In which we serve...”**

On August 29, 1939 the German Submarine U-30 slipped her moorings and ghosted out into the North Atlantic. Five days later Britain declared war on Nazi Germany. On that day, September the third, a radio signal went out from the Admiralty London, to all shipping.

“Be advised. We are now at war with Germany. U-boats may be operating in your area.”

One of the ships that received the signal was the passenger ship “Athenia” sailing west three hundred miles off the North West of Ireland. She immediately began to sail a zigzag course and as night fell blacked out her lights. She had 1500 people on board mostly Americans escaping the war. The torpedo that hit her at 9pm sending her to the bottom of the Atlantic also wrote her name in to the history books as the first naval casualty of World War II.

With that explosion began the greatest battle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the battle of the North Atlantic. By the time it was over in 1945 hundreds of thousands of ordinary men and women had taken part in it. Millions of tons of shipping had been sunk and Churchill writing to Truman wrote: “I lie awake at night thinking of those men who stayed at their posts upon that grey and cruel sea, that the lifeline for our boys fighting in Europe might not be broken. Amid the silent night of that great ocean, theirs was true courage against an enemy they could not see and against a fear they knew too well. What we owe to them cannot be carved on stone monuments, but it must be remembered by everyone who ever puts on a uniform or bares arms in freedom’s name. Only the sea knows all their names, but we can never forget their story.”

On this Memorial Weekend we remember as a Nation the sacrifice of all the men and women in every service who fought, died, lived and served in defense of this country and her people and in every war conflict. In town squares, hillsides, parks and cemeteries, services will take place over these three days. Names will be read and “taps” will be played. Amid our lines of marching Veterans, there are now none from the 1<sup>st</sup> World War and precious few from the 2<sup>nd</sup>.

It is the reason why this weekend is so enormously important, not just for us, but for future generations that the stories be told of the generations of Americans who went to war that the 20<sup>th</sup> Century might end in freedom and democracy and not in totalitarian Regimes and in the victory of evil. Given the chance, there will always be those who will try to rewrite history and the history books. Memorial Day tells the world: “We will not allow that to happen. We will stand at post for our fallen brothers and sisters in arms, and we will not allow their names or their story to fade into a sad good night.”

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Today we pray for families who have lost loved ones and we pray for the blessings of God on all who have served and continue to serve.

The Gospel stories of Jesus are full of stories of service to others. Service and that willingness to go the extra mile for those you care about. Service like this have become rarer commodities in our society today. To all of you who remember when service meant something, there has to be a certain sadness today in that.

We see it constantly in the Gospel that Jesus teaches his disciples to follow his example and reach out to the poor, the marginalized and the defenseless.

Time upon time he tells them: “You must not be like the others who lord it over one another always squabbling for the most important positions of power. No, if anyone would be great among you, he must become the servant of all.”

Service takes many forms, from the young nurse dressing wounds or assisting with an operation in Iraq to a sailor on watch in the North Atlantic in 1942. General George Patton once said: “In the heat of battle a soldier does not fight for his neighbors or those living on the same street in Brooklyn; he fights for his mates in the foxhole beside him.” It is these sacrifices, and this service, that we celebrate today. It has little to do with governments and politicians, and everything to do with man's love for his fellowman.

Is there such a thing as a Christian soldier? Or is that a contradiction in terms? I don't think so. I took this from a soldier's diary written on a troop ship in the Mediterranean in early 1941.

“We shipped out of Gibraltar under cover of night. Everyone is scared. You can tell when they go quiet. The run to Malta and then the dash to Alexandria is dangerous. Some of the sailors call it “suicide alley.” The German and Italian planes can hit you at any time.

Looking around many of the men are unashamed to read their Bible or little prayer book. You can tell the Catholics with their rosaries. Nobody makes fun of them. It's like we are all in this together. Catholic, Protestant, doesn't seem to matter any more. There are just “us” and “them”. I wish I knew how all this is going to work out. Maybe it's the end of the world. I'd like to be home. They all would. You can see it in their faces, but there is a job to be done. I wish it wasn't me. These ships make me sea sick. I hope I can get to sleep.” February 12<sup>th</sup>.

After Stephen Spielberg made the movie “Saving Private Ryan” some years ago, he realized that the generation who fought and served in World War II were dying out. Subsequently, he set up teams to research and write down their stories. A part of the effort resulted in the HBO original series, “Band of Brothers” about the 101 Airborne Squadron, the Screaming Eagles, telling their story from the beaches of Normandy through the liberation of Paris, the Siege of Bastogne to the liberation of the Death Camps. That story can be multiplied many times by many regiments, many ships in the lives of our service men and women.

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Today we don't just remember them; we honor them that at times of greatest peril for our nation they stood and fought for what was decent and right.

Let us pray:

God our Father we pray for peace in our troubled world that the Creation you have given us might live in harmony.

We pray for our nation and her people that they may live the values that our fathers served and died for, and we pray all who serve that their dedication will be enough to keep us safe and free from harm.

Amen+