

Column from Sen. Matt Bartle for

Week of November 8, 2005

VETERANS DAY: FOR OUR TOMORROW THEY GAVE THEIR TODAY

The harsh landscape covered with jagged rock and sandy gray volcanic soil could not have been more different from the gentle rolling hills of western Missouri that he called home. It would be beautiful there now with the trees just beginning to bud and the earth awakening after a cold, hard winter. But that was worlds away from where young 18 yr. old George Phillips was now. He was a private in the 5th Marine Division's 28th Regiment, 2nd Battalion huddled in a foxhole on the remote island of Iwo Jima.

In his book, "Flags of Our Fathers" James Bradley takes up the story of these heroic soldiers from the 5th Marine Division. From his research I have taken many of the following facts.

Nov. 11th, 1918, had been a day of peace when a war-weary world declared an armistice to the bloody struggle known as World War I. But Veterans Day (as the date came to be called) was to be marked by a little known but momentous occasion as a nation, again at war, activated the new 5th Marine Division. This group of soldiers represented the best America had to offer. They were called from America's rural heartland, from its teeming cities and from the countless small towns that dotted our nation's vast landscape. They had been whipped into shape by intense military training and honed to the edge of perfection in the art of making war. They were U.S. Marines. The best of the best, and their country was about to ask of them an incredible sacrifice.

Fittingly, they had chosen as their emblem a blue spearhead set against a shield of scarlet. Indeed they were the tip of America's spear and they stood ready to test their mettle against a silent and lethal enemy hidden deep inside a concrete, steel and rock island fortress honeycombed with 16 miles of tunnels, heavily defended and all but impenetrable.

The 2nd Battalion of the 5th Division's 28th Marines was a unit destined for history. To this battalion was entrusted the critical mission to take and hold Mt. Surabachi, the ominous volcanic mountain that towered over the surreal, inhospitable landscape of Iwo Jima and against it they hurled their might. On February 19, 1945, they had landed on Iwo Jima and after days of bloody fighting the 2nd Battalion met its objective. A reporter's picture of the scene became the most famous photo of the Second World War as six marines raised the stars and stripes high atop the summit of Surabachi.

The victory came at an incredible cost. By the end of the battle for Iwo Jima the United States has sustained over 26,000 casualties, including nearly 7,000 dead. Pvt. Phillip's 2nd Battalion had suffered staggering losses. Of the 1,688 troops committed to the battle, 1,511 were killed or wounded.

It was cold comfort to those that remained on Iwo Jima on March 14th when Admiral Chester Nimitz declared that the island had been conquered, for enemy resistance was still intense. On that day, Private Phillips was standing guard as his squad rested in their foxhole after a night of close-in combat when a movement caught his eye. Almost without thinking he yelled a warning to his buddies and threw his body atop the grenade that landed at their feet. His citation on the Congressional Medal of Honor awarded to him posthumously states, "Stouthearted and indomitable, Pvt. Phillips willingly yielded his own life that his fellow marines might carry on the relentless battle against a fanatic enemy. His superb valor and unfaltering spirit of self-sacrifice in the face of certain death reflect the highest credit upon himself and upon the U.S. Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for his country."

This week marks another November 11th. Another Veterans Day. As we at home enjoy a spectacular fall weekend, brave young men and women wearing the uniform of our nation, many from our own neighborhoods, once again have taken up arms to defend us from a "fanatic enemy" who seeks to wreak havoc and terror on our homeland. They fight on foreign soils far from home in the remote mountains of Afghanistan and the dangerous streets of Baghdad. Today let us pray for their safety and gratefully honor their courage and sacrifice.

In closing, let me share with you a poem found engraved by a soldier near a marine cemetery on Iwo Jima. It offers fitting tribute to these young heroes, both present and past. "When you go home, Tell them for us and say, For your tomorrow, We gave our today." To Private Phillips and to the countless Americans who have given, and continue to give, their "tomorrows" for our "todays" we say to you we have not forgotten. We vow to you - we never will.

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