Memorial Day — it's more than a three-day vacation

Commentary by
Guy Schein
DOE Richland Operations Office

Memorial Day is a time to remember those who died in service to our nation to preserve our freedom. Besides being a time to remember the men and women who made the supreme sacrifice, however, it's also about acknowledging and protecting the ideals they died for, so their sacrifices were not in vain.

On Memorial Day, we come together not to remember those who fell in a single battle, but to remember too many patriots who died in too many wars. We carry on a tradition that can be traced back to President Lincoln and his address dedicating the Gettysburg battlefield cemetery.

It's a sacred day to all war veterans. None need be reminded of the reason why Memorial Day must be commemorated. But what about the general public — and, more importantly, future generations? Do most non-veterans really recognize this day's importance?

Observing Memorial Day should be regarded as a civic obligation. We owe a debt that can be truly repaid only by individual Americans. By honoring the nation's war dead, we preserve their memory and thus the meaning of their service and sacrifice.

Why remember? Sacrifice is meaningless without remembrance. America's collective consciousness demands that all citizens recall and acknowledge, on special occasions, the deaths of their fellow countrymen during wartime. Our freedoms were paid for with the lives of others whom few of us actually knew. But they are collectively remembered on this one special day.

Who are we remembering? On Memorial Day, America commemorates those who made the greatest possible sacrifice — giving one's own life selflessly. We mourn the loss of all who died defending our country since 1775. In 226 years, some 60 military actions have claimed 1.4 million lives. Those men and women are mostly anonymous except to their loved ones. They came from all walks of life and regions of the country. They were our relatives, friends and neighbors, and they all had one thing in common — love of country.

What do we remember? GIs do not choose where they serve or what foreign policy they must enforce. While most Americans are familiar with the major wars — the American Revolution, the War of 1812, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, World Wars I and II, Korea, Vietnam and the Persian Gulf — few think of those killed in "minor" conflicts. Whether it was in the Franco-American Naval War of 1798 or the tragedy aboard the USS *Cole*, no American death in service to country is insignificant.

> "...the highest obligation and privilege of citizenship is that of bearing arms for one's country."
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> — Gen. George S. Patton, Jr.

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How do we remember? Attending commemorative ceremonies is the most visible way of remembering the fallen. But simply pausing for a few moments of personal silence is an option for everyone. Placing flags at gravesites, marching in parades, sponsoring patriotic programs, dedicating memorials and wearing poppies are some other ways to show you care.

> "...from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain."
>
> — Abraham Lincoln

Whether done individually or collectively, it is the thought that counts. Personal as well as public acts that show your gratitude and patriotism are essential if the notion of remembering war dead is to be instilled in the young.

As America's war vets disappear from society's notice, there are fewer and fewer standard-bearers left to carry this torch of remembrance. Such traditions will live on only if there is a vibrant movement to which that torch can be passed.

When do we remember? Until the National Holiday Act of 1971, Memorial Day was observed each May 30. That custom became a tradition with the Grand Army of the Republic, the Union veterans organization that made honoring Civil War dead a civic duty for all citizens.

New York was the first state — in 1873 — to declare "Decoration Day," as it was known then, a national holiday. By 1890, all northern states had followed suit. Changing to a Monday holiday in 1971, merely to create another three-day weekend, has somewhat undermined the meaning of Memorial Day and contributed to the general public's nonchalant observance of it.

Perhaps the most profound tribute of all was made on the first national memorial observance, in May 1868, by then General James A. Garfield. His words ring true today for all fallen veterans of all wars: "They summed up and perfected, by one supreme act, the highest virtues of men and citizens. For love of country they accepted death, and thus resolved all doubts, and made immortal their patriotism and virtue." ✦