

Thoughts on the Cost of War

By Ken Kalish,
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I responded to a dear cousin's post this morning that featured a resurrection of an artist's sand work in Normandy for Peace Day a while back and replaced a listing of the media in which the piece was covered by media with the standard lie about not appearing in the American media. It pissed me off enough that I wrote a very long response in keeping with today's observance of Memorial Day. You may not like it, because it speaks a lot of truth:

War is a penurious claimant of its price. It doesn't squander its largess over a few days, weeks, months, or years. It exacts payment in lives claimed long after the end of hostilities. In our own family, my Uncle Guy took his life many years after having been marked for payment during the Battle of the Bulge. The diseases, the wounds, the missing limbs, the broken minds—these are the small change of warfare. Veteran suicide is just small change plus interest due. Neither does war deal in large bills. It makes demands only in singles so those of us who selectively remember only the pomp and circumstance, the parades, the sales, and the picnics can occasionally drop by its many vaults and appreciate the pretty architecture, rows of neatly groomed graves, and scenic siting of those things we call cemeteries. Perhaps if we would only look closely at each unit of payment we could somehow begin to appreciate war's cost. There's the Medal of Honor recipient in the Pacific whose known grave and those of his fellow Marines have been paved over to create a mall parking lot. There's the paucity of remains in the lovingly welcomed home coffins weighted with sand and stones. There are the thousands of mutilated bodies buried with no cover but the torn clothing, if any, that remained after death was brutally and vaingloriously visited upon them. There are the billions of tiny fecal pellets now swallowed by ocean sands from long-dead sea creatures that investigated, fed upon, and briefly dwelt among the dead claimed by the deep. There are wild, waist high fields of grass and looming forests nourished by those long vanished millions of gallons of blood. There are fleshless skulls appearing to stare deep into heaven's sunny skies or gaze mutely upon the fires of hell. Some of those skulls whose inhabitants once experienced the fires of hell still scream out to us indignantly, demanding a halt to whatever source of fire had been ignited to claim the previous inhabitant's life. Let's all stop uttering the spurious platitude saying something along the lines of "They died to protect our freedoms and keep our nation safe." No combatant ever dies for such silly reasons. The Allied warriors who fought so valiantly on the beaches or from the skies of D-Day did so because war planners heeded the words of a

long-ago genius Chinese general who said your best chance of victory comes when your forces are so placed to afford them no hope of retreat. The men on the beaches or far inland fought because their lives were at stake, unlike the Germans who fought only to hold entrenched positions. Many wars are fought for political reasons, and with no real hoped-for outcome other than a dim and ill-defined concept of "victory." We didn't fight the Mexican-American War for anything so noble as preservation of the Union or protection of the persecuted. We went into Mexico to kill a gangster, and we didn't even complete that goal. We went to war with Spain because we were told the Spanish had mined and sunk an American warship and revenge was to be exacted by acquiring Spanish lands. Knowing that a coal bunker had exploded would have made it a far less patriotic cause. We have sent our combatants to take land from the Native Americans. We have sent them to "stop Communism." We have sent them to apprehend drug lords, or to seek revenge for an easily dismantled assassination plot. Every member of America's military knows clearly that becoming part of the community of war dead is a possibility. Infantry soldiers know this is much more likely than do those who fill administrative jobs, but in war no uniformed person—dog catcher to grunt—is exempt. Today is Memorial Day. Let's hope that far more people take a moment to add the words "I'm sorry" to our platitudes about being grateful for their sacrifice.