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GUEST EDITORIAL

Ceremonies Aren't Only Way To Honor Our Fallen Heroes

BY BRUCE THIESEN

They said goodbye to their mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, and went off to war.

They hugged their children tight, and kissed their spouses or sweethearts one last time with a sense of the great longing that was to come.

They left the towns and cities and farms where they had been born and raised. They left schools and jobs, hopes and dreams, careers and callings. And they went off to war.

They said they'd return. And everyone hoped and worked and prayed for that day. But they never came home again.

The remains of many were returned to rest beneath the green grass of a thousand cemeteries in a thousand cities and towns across this great land.

Some were buried where they fell, far from home. Thousands more fill the sprawling cemeteries overseas. And the great oceans have swallowed the crews of a vast armada.

The fate of untold numbers is known but to God.

Each Memorial Day we honor the memory of those men and women who went off to war, never to return. Our nation owes its very existence to those who answered the call to duty.

Thomas Jefferson said: "The ground of liberty must be gained by inches." Yes, by inches, and the lives of those who fought for liberty's hallowed ground.

More than 6,000 patriots died in battle during the American Revolution. Who will honor their sacrifice if not those of us who are blessed to call America our home?

The Civil War, which tore this nation apart, has since bound us together with the strength of a common history that we might not otherwise have had. We lost 500,000—North and South—in that war.

In World War I, 116,000 lost their lives in service to America. Who will cherish their memory and mourn this loss if not all Americans who love this country?

World War II saw 400,000 servicemen and women lose their lives. Then came Korea, Vietnam and, more recently, Desert Storm. And we must not forget those who have died in our latest peace-keeping missions.

In all, more than one million Americans have died in war since our country was founded. Who will remember those who gave the last full measure of devotion to the cause of justice, freedom and democracy if not those who live under the protections of these great principles?

All Americans—"We The People"—must remember what they fought for. We the people must cherish their memory and honor their sacrifice.

Memorial Day ceremonies are not the only way to honor our fallen heroes.

Whenever we show respect for the American Flag, we honor our war dead. Whenever we vote, we confirm the democracy they died for. Whenever we exercise our freedoms of speech and to peaceably assemble, we honor their sacrifice. Whenever we gather in places of worship, we are blessed by this greatest of freedoms which they fought to protect.

To the young people who may read this, I want you to know that those we honor on Memorial Day did not die because they loved war. They did not. They loved the peace and freedom that is our American heritage.

As General Douglas MacArthur said: "The soldier above all other people prays for peace, for he must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war."

Thus, America's war veterans and our fallen comrades bequeath this heritage to our children and future generations: A free and just country unlike any other in world history.

Soon, their young hands will steer the course that America will take into the 21st century. No doubt they too will face troubled times and crises from within and without. No doubt there will be wars and rumors of wars.

But America will remain strong if our young people step into the future girded with the knowledge of our country's proud history.

On Memorial Day, with grateful hearts we honor those who selflessly gave all they had to give.

They died for their country, for their friends and families, and for you and me.

Let us thank God for America.

Let us thank God for those patriots who went off to war. And let us never forget those who did not return.

Bruce Thiesen is national commander of the American Legion.

Worth Repeating...

■ In Flanders fields the poppies blow/ Between the crosses, row on row. —John McCrae

■ The legitimate object of war is a more perfect peace. —William Tecumseh Sherman

Picking Up The Pieces Of Childhood

"Cute kid, huh?" Eric asked as he showed me a child's portrait in a Sunday paper, his hand covering the headline.

"Umhum," I agreed, momentarily distracted from Calvin and Hobbes. "Eleven years old," he said. "Held up a woman at an automatic teller machine. She was shot in the head with a .22. Killed."

It happened in Detroit. Jacob Gonzales, 11, and his 14-year-old drug-dealer accomplice held up Elizabeth Alvarez, a pregnant mother of three, at an automatic teller machine.

Jacob didn't do the shooting, but he signaled to his accomplice that this was a good victim. His take was 20 bucks. He spent it on a chili dog and some Batman toys and was arrested the next morning. He pleaded guilty to armed robbery and was sentenced to the maximum term, to remain in state custody until he's 21.

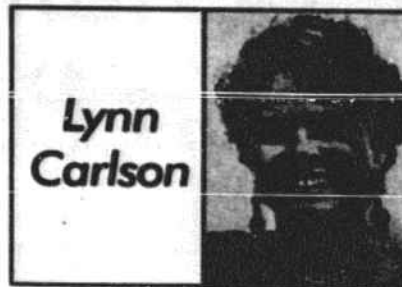
He told a New York Times reporter, "It was a game, right?"

Forget the babyboomers. Say a little prayer for Generation X. And hope you go to heaven before the next crop takes charge.

It used to be an urban problem, this violence among the young. As the Times reporter put it, "A generation of children born to teenage mothers is coming of age in neighborhoods already weakened by the addictive power of crack and the destructive force of drug dealers."

Maybe that's the point. Or is it just a pixel in a bigger, even more disturbing picture?

As the article pointed out:



■ Last summer in affluent suburban Dunwoody, Ga., three white teens went to the home of a disabled man they knew, tied him in his wheelchair and tortured him for more than 12 hours before stabbing and clubbing him to death.

■ In rural Indiana, three white teenage girls lured a 12-year-old girl into a car, then beat and stabbed her before burning her alive.

■ In Davenport, Iowa, three white teenage boys were recently convicted of shooting to death a 17-year-old girl when she refused to let them use her Ford Escort for a robbery.

It all gave me a chill and reminded me of a conversation I had a couple of weeks ago with Cassandra Gray at Brunswick Shores, the adolescent psychiatric unit of The Brunswick Hospital.

What's the common denominator, I asked her, in all these kids you work with?

Dysfunctional families, she answered without hesitation.

I hate that term. In my mind it conjures up images of bad guys who wrap their victimhood about them like a magical cloak to protect them from the same kind of pain they've

inflicted on others. Of whiners who need an excuse to keep from getting their act together.

Besides, I've maintained since I first heard the term, the only families that function are on Nickelodeon.

But Cassandra and her colleagues who pick up the pieces of shattered childhood can't turn their heads from the big picture like the rest of us often do. With a combination of street wisdom and idealism, she makes these observations:

Many children these days have real behavioral problems—not just what our parents used to roll their eyes and call a rebellious nature or a bad attitude. Lots of ordinary kids feel unloved and neglected in the scheme of their parents' break-neck lives. They lack the basic skills to cope with life's inevitable stresses or to make decisions in their own best interests.

We don't make enough time for our kids—not just we their parents, but we their teachers and coaches and relatives and next door neighbors.

As much as we may regret it, most of us moms and dads must be at work instead of in the kitchen when the kids get out of school. As much as we may hate it, many of us don't or can't turn to our extended families for the traditional blood-kin support that has sustained many generations. Some kind of alternative support system must evolve.

"Quality time" is bull. You can't make a child feel more secure by taking him to Wally World for one week every couple of years, but you

can by sitting down to dinner with him at night and talking about his day, every day. You can by teaching her how to wax the car or catch a fish, but only if you can manage to do it without belittling her.

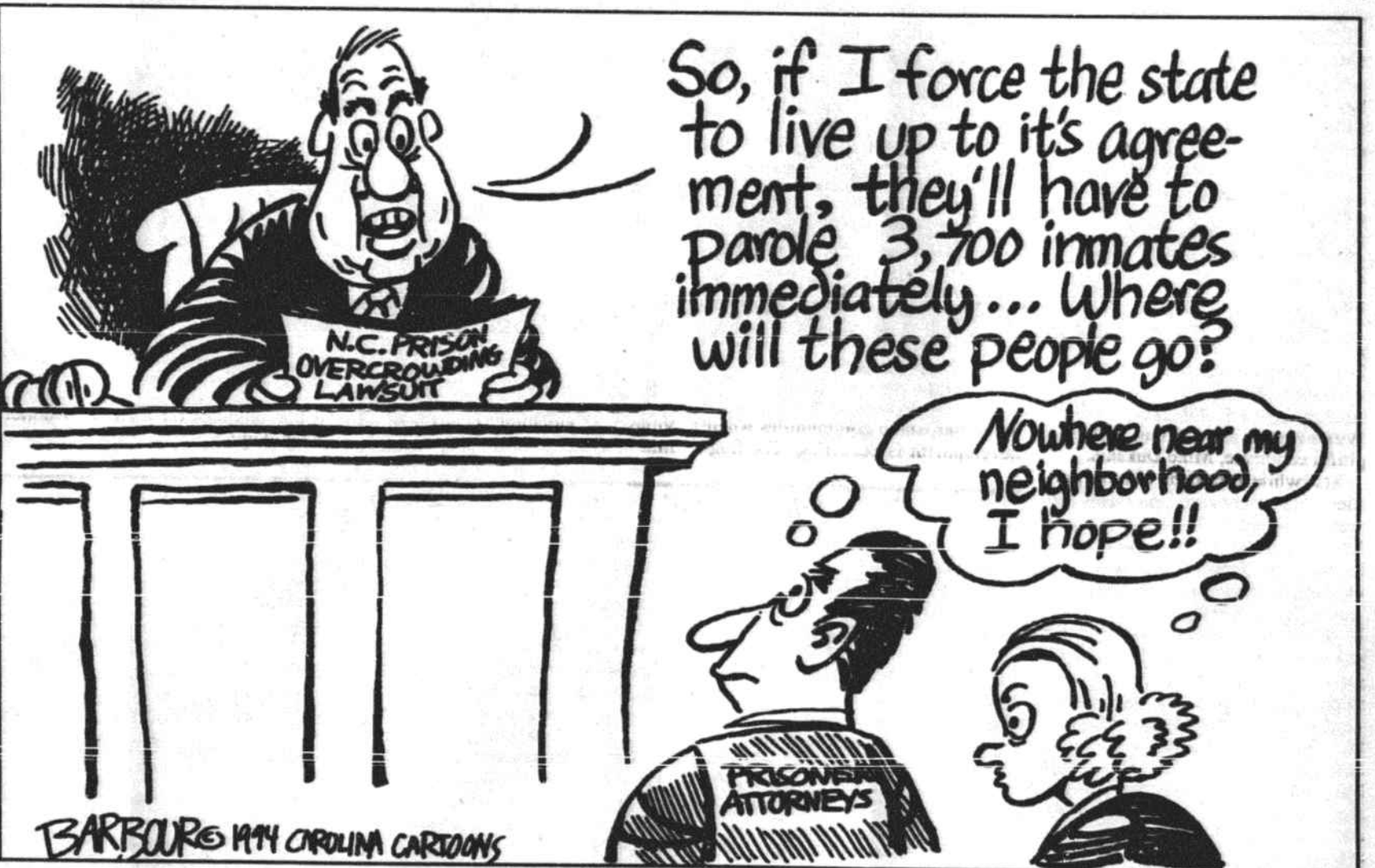
Most of us don't know how to listen to adolescents, to separate the strands of melodrama, fear, confusion and emotional intensity that are woven into their psyches. We're too quick to offer a simplistic solution, or to make light of little problems that are so very large to a young person.

And too often we don't pay attention to the signs when something is going terribly wrong with children until something terrible happens. By the time Cassandra gets them at age 14 or 15, a lot of damage has been done—sometimes way beyond what the available time, money and other resources can repair. But she and others like her keep trying, at least until the frustration of it all burns them out.

If these gnarly truths are painful to us married, middle-class, middle-age, Sunday-schooled, gainfully employed parents, I wonder, then what do they mean to a single, teenage, unskilled, addicted parent from a violent home? A mother like Jacob Gonzales had before the State of Michigan became his surrogate parent.

I don't have an answer. Nor, it seems, do much bigger hearts and minds. We can't all turn into Ozzy and Harriett, and I'm pretty sure I wouldn't want to be like either one of them.

But something's got to change.



50 Years Later, It Remains The Longest Day

If war is hell, as Gen. William T. Sherman reminded us, then June 6, 1944 must have been one hell of a day.

It was D-Day. Decision Day. The first day of the long-awaited liberation of Europe, when the greatest armada in history—more than 5,000 ships carrying 370,000 soldiers and sailors—steamed across the English Channel toward the beaches of Normandy.

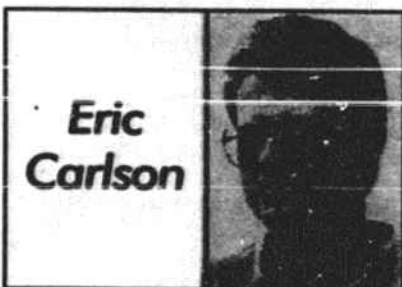
Now 50 years later, it is difficult to imagine how Gen. Dwight Eisenhower must have felt on the eve of the invasion, with 1,100 allied camps strung across the entire southern coast of England, each bursting with tons of equipment and thousands of impatient soldiers awaiting the signal to move.

Imagine staring outside at the worst June weather in 20 years, listening to forecasters say there "might" be a 36-hour break in the squalls and having to decide whether to risk a chance for victory tomorrow or to wait another month for the right moon phase and tide conditions.

Or imagine being one of the paratroopers floating down from the pitch-black skies over France a few hours later. The battle plan called for you to land in the fields outside Ste-Mere-Eglise to regroup with your unit and move into the city.

Instead you feel the wind wafting you toward the very middle of town. You look down helplessly at the German guns flashing and the limp bodies of your comrades dangling from parachutes caught on light poles and church steeples.

Imagine riding a landing craft through the high surf and the geysers of artillery explosions toward the killing fields of Omaha Beach. You have been aboard a ship for



days, waiting for the weather to improve. But it hasn't.

Now you and your fellow G.I.s are seasick, soaked to the bone, splattered with each other's vomit and packed like pickles into a (barely) floating shoe box. You are waiting for a big steel door at the end to fall so you can run headlong into that spray of flying lead clanging against the hull.

The door drops. You follow the others off the end. But not onto a dry sand beach. Instead you find yourself chest-deep in water and 100 yards from the nearest cover with machine-gun bullets splashing all around you.

Some of your buddies are crippled by the pitching ramp as the landing craft rides forward on the waves. Others disappear in a red mist as their burden of ammunition explodes. Many more simply stop moving and slip beneath the foam.

Seventeen landing craft loaded with more than 1,000 men sank in the surf off Normandy that day. In just 10 minutes of fighting on Omaha Beach, a single company of 205 soldiers saw 197 killed or wounded. Half of the men in the first wave became casualties as more than 2,000 Americans died. And that was on just one of the five landing areas.

But somehow the invasion worked. About 155,000 men came ashore in the first 24 hours. Once se-

cured, the beaches were transformed into a massive loading zone, where an endless stream of trucks brought supplies and reinforcements for the advancing troops.

And advance they did, from field to field, from hedge-row to hedge-row, from town to town, all the way to Paris in less than three months.

If D-Day had failed, it would have taken the allies years to mount another assault, giving the Germans time to develop their deadly missile program and to perfect their new crop of jet fighter planes. Instead, the invasion set the stage for victory in Europe and the end of the Nazi holocaust.

The coming week of D-Day anniversary observances reminds us that it may be difficult, but sometimes necessary for America to go to war. While we may argue endlessly about our involvements in Korea, Vietnam, Grenada, Panama or Iraq, no one with any sense could dispute the necessity of fighting to stop Adolph Hitler.

As a child, I devoured books about about the two world wars and the valiant warriors who fought them. One of my favorites was "The Longest Day," by Cornelius Ryan, an incredibly detailed account of the D-Day invasion (and the longest book I had read at the time).

It described the amazing logistical feat of assembling the massive invasion force and the cat-and-mouse espionage game of keeping such an endeavor secret.

It revealed some of the clever deceptive tactics used by the allies—like dropping thousands of dummy paratroopers (nicknamed "Ruperts") behind enemy lines to create a diversion for the airborne assaults.

It told how the paratroopers were given little toy clickers called

"crickets" to identify friends or foes during the inevitable confusion following a night-time parachute drop. One click was to be answered by two clicks.

It landed me on the beach at Pointe du Hoc with Army Rangers as they fired grappling hooks to the top of sheer limestone cliffs and used ropes to scale the vertical walls as the Germans lobbed grenades on them from above.

The drama of this monumental story was later portrayed in a three-hour, Academy Award-winning movie of "The Longest Day," for which Ryan also wrote the screenplay.

With an epic tale to tell, Hollywood assembled an equally impressive cast of the era's most renowned screen actors: including John Wayne, Richard Burton, Charles Lawton, Sophia Loren, Rod Taylor, Robert Mitchum, Henry Fonda, Sean Connery, Robert Wagner, Eddie Albert, Vic Morrow, Mel Ferrer, Edmond O'Brian, Robert Ryan, George Segal, Gert Frobe, Curt Jurgens, Paul Anka, Fabian, Sal Mineo, Roddy McDowell and Red Buttons.

It's a typical "gung-ho" American war movie, with the real horrors of combat neatly sanitized. Still, it provides an entertaining introduction to the history and scope of the D-Day invasion.

I can't imagine TV networks letting this anniversary pass without airing "The Longest Day." But if they do, local residents will have a rare opportunity to see the movie on screen. Saturday, June 4, at 7 p.m., the film will be shown as part of the Battleship USS North Carolina's annual Memorial Day observance, preceded by a brief talk on the invasion by UNCW military historian Dr. Larry Cable. Admission is \$2.