

Memorial Day – 2017 and Always

For some 240 years people from other continents have been leaving their home countries and arriving on the shores of North America, most of them seeking residency in the United States. If you were to ask any one of them why he or she left their homeland and came to a foreign country to live, the universal reply is now, as it has always been, to seek freedom. They don't mean just to stay out of jail, but the freedom to go to the church of their choosing, or not go to church at all, to work at whatever trade they choose, the freedom to say what they want to without being incarcerated for doing so. Freedom of enterprise is a guarantee, along with the freedom to own as many firearms as they want to and to be able to use them lawfully to pursue wild game on public lands. These many freedoms are what we grew up with and they are so much a part of our lives that we take them for granted – like they have always been there and they always will be. I think I learned the most about appreciating what we have by living in and visiting many foreign countries – old world countries, where there is no public land, and the right to own a firearm is not a birthright, but a right acquired only with proper justification and revocable at the whim of some unelected official. I cherish my rights and I love the Navy slogan: "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Anyone Who Seeks to take them away."

The point I seek to make is that the many freedoms we enjoy are now, as they have been for 240 years, protected by American servicemen and women. There are many of us around who spent an entire career of 30 or more years in the non-combat arena of a cold war, interspersed with some hot war activity such as occurred in Korea and Southeast Asia. There were times when the man in uniform was castigated by fellow Americans; funeral services for the fallen were picketed and spat upon by the populace, yet the soldiers, sailors and airmen continued in the service of our country. War wounded veterans were left to fend for themselves and in many circles, anyone associated in any way with the U.S. military was a second class citizen, at best. At one juncture of my career we were advised to refrain from stopping for groceries while wearing a uniform, and going on an extended shopping run was strictly taboo. We were advised to go home first, change into civilian attire, and then go to town. For those of us who were in it for the long haul, those bits of advice were soundly ignored, as well they should have been. We wore our uniforms with pride whenever and wherever it was fitting to do so. I still do.

It may be an aging thing but each year as we recognize the many sacrifices of our fallen members on Memorial Day, I can't help but mentally enumerate those many shipmates with whom I served who are no longer numbered among the living. Sadly, with each passing year the list grows longer and each year it is more difficult to remember all of them. Some have no name, like the sailor who was washing the exterior windows of the bridge on USS Forrestal when he made a mistake in moving his safety harness and fell headlong to the flight deck some sixty feet below. I learned his name at the time because he was an entry in my deck log but as well as I remember him, including his countenance, his name escapes me. There were the occasional "man overboard" happenings in which the man was never recovered, and the plane crew member who removed the chocks from around the wheel of an airplane readying for flight, then stepped forward into the spinning propeller – definitely not an incident one will ever forget, though the sailor has no identity for me. Over the course of 30+ years there were many such losses, sacrifices to the cause of freedom. We lost 134 shipmates in the course of an hour or so when the after third of USS Forrestal was engulfed in flames as a result of 1,000-Lb bombs that exploded on her flight deck. Too many to recall all the names but not too many for me, us, to remember the sacrifice they made in the preservation of our freedom.

The fun and zest of meeting the world on its own terms, sometimes from the deck of a ship, other times from duty on a foreign shore was interspersed with occasional unpleasanties. The memory of one such crowds into my thoughts each year around this time. I was faced with the task of informing a young wife

and mother of an infant that she was now a Navy widow. I was totally unprepared for the series of reactions that started with denial, went into furious anger with the Navy in general and me in particular, and then shifted into uncontrolled sobbing. I have seldom felt as helpless as I did at that moment. I wanted to put a supportive arm around the weeping lady but since I was the object of her recent scorn, perceived myself as unsuited for that role. I stood by for a time, shifting my hat from one hand to the other, saying what I thought I should say, but believing the whole time that my words were inadequate. Barbara was recovering from back surgery at the time and was unable to accompany me on that tasteless mission, but had she been able, I know the words from her would have been better than mine. Every commanding officer is cast into the role of bearer of bad tidings and every one of us fervently hopes we never have to do it again. Many will agree that it is the worst part of the job.

Not all who go down to the sea in ships return to terra firma; those of us who have, remain eternally grateful for our escapes from the brink of disaster and we are always mindful of the ones who did not return. We are especially mindful of those who mourn our fallen shipmates, the wives, parents, brothers and sisters.

You will please pardon me if I do not celebrate Memorial Day. It is for me, and for many of my shipmates, a day of quiet reflection, when we remember those who have gone before us, and we silently offer our thanks for their contribution in defending our freedom. I take solace in the fact that there follows after us who have retired, a younger energetic cadre of professional guardians who will persevere in those same preservations of our freedom. May God Bless Them and Protect Them Always.

Captain Frenchy Corbeille, USN (Ret)

Freedom Is Not Free
Frenchy Sends with Warm Regards