

From These Hallowed Dead: *Why Memorial Affairs Matters*

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A few years ago, we participated in a battlefield staff ride of Gettysburg, along with other leaders from 1st Battalion, 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard). Like most staff rides, topics such as the exercise of the principles of mission command, decision making, and the use of terrain dominated the majority of discussions as leaders visited different locations of the battlefield. However, the final stop was unique to a staff ride, ending at the Soldier's National Cemetery or what is also known as the Gettysburg National Cemetery. This is the location where President Abraham Lincoln gave his famous Gettysburg Address, which is now engraved in stone in the south chamber of the memorial in Washington, D.C., that bears his name.

For Lincoln, the address was simple: a dedication of a battlefield cemetery in a way that honors the fallen and their sacrifice. His address, though short, was profound and transcendent, serving as great a purpose today as it did nearly 160 years ago. For those on the staff ride that day, Lincoln's words resonated personally with each Soldier as our battalion is uniquely dedicated to the mission of honoring the fallen in Arlington National Cemetery. Lincoln's words capture the mission and the motive for memorializing sacrifice to the nation and serve as the outline for this article. In his address, President Lincoln does not only appeal to Soldiers but to a wide audience of Americans, united in national identity.

While the mission of those units that perform memorial affairs is no secret, many Americans and service members do not know of the lengths to which America goes to honor the fallen or the level of detail taken to honor their sacrifice. This article will use President Lincoln's Gettysburg Address as an outline to describe memorial affairs and inform readers of the reverence and impact it has both on the military and the nation.¹⁻²

"Four score and seven years ago..."

The opening remarks of President Lincoln's address at the dedication of the Soldier's National Cemetery appeal to the audience he is addressing which includes Soldiers, politicians, local citizens, and family members of the



Soldiers from 1st Battalion, 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment conduct a graveside service. (Photos courtesy of the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard) Public Affairs Office)

fallen. His words, “Our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal,” identified the American ideals in which the rest of the address is grounded and is applicable to all Americans. Today, we see that his remarks, linking military sacrifice with the preservation of American ideals, are equally applicable to the same range and variety of audience. Memorial affairs, while honoring to the Soldier, is for the nation; it means something slightly different to every American but applies to all. The young Soldier currently serving in harm’s way, a career officer, the sibling of a service member, a Gold-Star parent, or the civilian with no personal connection to the military — all view a military funeral differently. For some, a military funeral is mournful and full of sorrow; for others, it is patriotic and reverent; and for others, it is a celebration of a life well lived. More likely though, it is a combination of a little of all of these aspects. The beauty of memorial affairs is that it touches people from every walk of life and is closer in meaning to a wide variety of audiences than anything else in public life. Regardless of their background, it is safe to say that most Americans agree that honoring our fallen and those who sacrifice is an important endeavor. Lincoln’s address demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between national ideals and military sacrifice and serves to unite various audiences.

“We have come to dedicate a portion of that field...”

As President Lincoln noted, the dedication of a battlefield cemetery was the reason for that gathering in November of 1863. But honoring sacrifice for the cause of the nation would not be limited to Gettysburg. Arlington National Cemetery also traces its roots to the Civil War and today stands as a monument to sacrifice. With an annual budget of more than \$70 million and spanning more than 600 acres, it interns/inurns more than 6,000 service members each year and receives more than three million visitors each year at no cost, including foreign dignitaries, ambassadors, political officials, and the President. Arlington National Cemetery is a shrine to service, a memorial for those who have dedicated their lives for the betterment of others that enjoy living the American ideals. It is a reminder to those who benefit from sacrifice that each headstone is, as the chaplain’s invocation so eloquently states, “a brick in the foundation of the liberty on which we stand.”

President Lincoln’s comments, “It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this,” acknowledge the sentiment that investing in land, time, people, and money is not only worthy of the investment but necessary so that “the nation might live.” In these comments, President Lincoln addresses one of the purposes of memorial affairs in linking military sacrifice with upholding national ideals. Honoring America’s fallen is necessary to maintain the American ideology, which the military represents. It is also important to note that the military is not just a representative of the society it defends but the best of what a society stands for in its ideals, values, and norms. Soldiers, therefore, are to uphold, defend, and sacrifice for the American way of life. President Lincoln acknowledges this sacrifice and implores his listeners to honor that sacrifice.

“But, in a larger sense, we cannot...”

President Lincoln’s first two subjects in his address focus on the nation and the role that honoring sacrifice plays. He then turns his attention to honoring the Soldier when he says: “But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate – we cannot consecrate – we cannot hallow – this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract.” The first mission of memorial affairs is to attribute honors to the Soldier deserving of honor. There are those who receive military honors as retirees, Soldiers who spent their youthful years in dedicated service. There are those who also receive military honors because they sacrificed their lives while actively serving in a combat zone or conducting military operations around the globe. Regardless of category, each Soldier is worthy to receive military honors.

Honor is established on a set of principles, code of conduct, or common moral compass. When Soldiers are buried in a military funeral, the Army bestows honor upon them in the form of a 21-gun salute, Taps, a folded flag, and a final hand salute, all conducted with appropriate reverence. The words of the eulogy by the chaplains echo this sentiment: “No place at Arlington National Cemetery can be purchased; each must be earned through honorable service.” These rendered honors pay homage to the deceased as symbols of thanks for honorable and faithful service given in the cause of American ideals. If it were a business transaction, the labor provided was military service, and the currency is paid in a form of sacred honors, reserved only for this select group. In every funeral, just prior to honors, the chaplain ends his eulogy with a phrase that captures this belief: “In life, he honored the flag; now in death, this flag will honor him.”



Soldiers from the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard) conduct military funeral honors.

When Soldiers render honors to a fallen Soldier or service member, they do not represent themselves, as if they are members in the honored club. Instead, they represent the U.S. Army, a grateful nation, and their Commander in Chief — entities each in their own right worthy of bestowing honor to other parties. They bestow honors to the fallen for service in line with the code of ethics described in our Army Values, Warrior Ethos, and code of conduct. While the honors are simple, they are packed with meaning, symbolism, and history. These honors are reserved for those who have paid the price of admittance through service and are therefore deemed worthy to receive them.

“The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.”

President Lincoln’s next words draw the listener’s attention away from the speaker and on to the Soldier. The same is true in the posture and conduct of those performing the duties of rendering military honors today. The Old Guard Soldiers’ bearing and professionalism are without equal in the Army, and for good reason. It is likely that when a family buries their loved one in a military cemetery, the ceremony will be their final interaction with the Army, and their lasting impression. The Old Guard performs the duty of burying America’s heroes in Arlington National Cemetery nearly 1,500 times a year, but to those families burying loved ones, they only get one. Therefore, the care and attention to detail of ceremonial excellence, uniform standards, and code of conduct are not only impressive but absolutely necessary. The military ceremony must be nothing shy of exceptional, as it represents the epitome of what the Army should be in a single moment. And so each one must be special.

The Old Guard goes to great lengths to maintain ceremonial excellence because it represents the best of what America has to offer. Each Soldier, before conducting any sort of ceremony, must pass a list of inspections and tests ranging from a 70-minute stand at the position of attention, to marching skills, to a 100-point uniform inspection. Every clothing item issued to the Soldier must be tailored, pressed, stitched, painted, cut, pinned, burned, taped, or modified in some way to ensure uniformity and precision. The average Soldier spends anywhere between 40 and 60 hours preparing their uniform for inspection and is subject to random uniform inspections throughout their time in The Old Guard by the battalion and regiment ceremonial officers and NCOs. From the measurement of the press marks in the pants to the precision of the medals rack and the alignments of decorations and insignias, each Soldier’s uniform is detailed to the micrometer in a ritual that displays the reverence Soldiers hold for those about to receive honor. Similar to the way most Army units conduct motor pool Monday, leaders from across the regiment spend the first two hours of each week on the parade field practicing and critiquing their individual ceremonial skills. Collectively, teams train for hours every day to get sequences just perfect and synchronized. It is commonplace for a casket team to perform more than 200 flag-folds before being allowed to do one in front of a family.

Rather than the traditional Army beret, each Old Guard Soldier dons a ceremonial cap that is pulled down over the eyes to hide the Soldier's face, and the uniform lacks a nameplate, making the Soldier both faceless and nameless. Throughout the ceremony, Soldiers remain stoic, still, unwavering, and without eye contact. They do not speak nor interact with family members or visitors. In this moment The Old Guard is the face of the Army and the identity of the Soldiers rendering honors is irrelevant — they are just Army. There's no applause for them, no credit, no story — just honor to be given. This stoicism is intentional and focuses the ceremony on the individual being honored by the Army rather than the individuals conducting the ceremony. We desired to stress this point, which is why we chose using our unit rather than listing individual names as authors of this article. Memorial affairs is a selfless duty, one that requires humility, strong leadership, and a deep sense of professionalism. The Old Guard embraces the intention of President Lincoln's words here to remain focused on honoring those deserving of honor and not on those rendering the honors.

“It is for us the living rather to be dedicated here...”

President Lincoln then addresses the audience with a challenge and an invocation to action. He says, “It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us, that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion.” As history has proven, the ideals President Lincoln spoke of in his opening lines require effort and sacrifice and are causes worth pursuing and sacrificing for in order to preserve. Memorial affairs connects the American citizen to the Soldiers who play a role in that preservation. Soldiers are ambassadors of the state who demonstrate the values of the nation in their conduct, character, and values. Soldiers sacrifice certain liberties, comforts, ideologies, and if called to, their lives, for the betterment of the people whom they serve. In this regard, the American people are both the client and the employer of the Army. Dr. Rebecca Johnson connects the civilian and the Soldier when she writes, “the American people do not simply trust the military to levy an unparalleled capacity for violence on their behalf... the American people trust the military with their sons and daughters, husbands and wives, moms and dads.”³ Memorial affairs provides substance and closure to families who have spent a life placing the needs of the nation above their own. War is risky business, and the trust the American people place in their military is that those risks will be calculated and the sacrifice will not be in vain. When the price tag for liberty is a life, the American people deserve to know it was a life well spent. Memorial affairs is the acknowledgement that the military takes the responsibility for managing the risk of life with sober judgment and feels the same weight of loss. It is not just for those who benefit from military service but also serves as an acknowledgment for those who share in the sacrifice: wives, husbands, children, parents, and friends. Lincoln's challenge then to the American people is to take “increased devotion” or an accelerated resolve to uphold the national ideals some have given their lives for. He encourages the listener to not grow weary or lose heart in the midst of sacrifice but to persevere and thrive in the face of adversity and be better husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, siblings, friends, neighbors, and citizens. Therefore, the American way of life and military sacrifice are intertwined, encouraging one another toward a common goal. The honoring of military sacrifice serves as inspiration to those who observe it or as we like to say in The Old Guard, “We honor the dead so that the living never forget.”

“...That these dead shall not have died in vain...”

President Lincoln's words of encouragement are not exclusively for American citizens but also for the military force, both to take increased devotion as well as provide motivation that military sacrifice accomplishes something. By honoring sacrifice, the military instills a confidence in both American service members and civilians that the military will achieve the purposes of the state and care for its people, both in life and in death. Military honors bind those who are serving with those who have completed their honorable service. A military funeral, regardless of venue, connects the lineage of those who have served and sacrificed through military service and binds them in a timeless guild of the American profession of arms. The ethos of being a member of a fraternity, and torchbearer of the profession, motivates Soldiers into more honorable service. This is what it means to steward the profession: to serve, not solely in the current environment, but to live up to the example of those who came before, and to build on the foundation and legacy of those whose memory is transcribed in stone. Those who fall in the line of duty or have lived in commitment to those values serve as guideposts and examples for the rest of us still serving. Therefore, memorial affairs serves as a catalyst for current Soldiers to strive for more virtuous service as a part of something greater than themselves.

For those who have presented a flag to a grieving loved one, the experience is beyond description and impossible to dismiss. When presenting a flag to a next of kin, all ceremony, all moving pieces, all preparation, lead to this one snapshot in time that the family will remember forever. The officer or NCO in charge, drops to one knee, places a folded flag into the lap of the next of kin, and issues solemn condolences on behalf of the President of the United States, the Army, and a grateful nation. These condolences, reserved only for these instances, serve as the personal affirmation that the deceased earned their honors. In this pinnacle moment, while looking into the eyes of a spouse, mother, son, brother, the heart of the Army and the nation rests in the tender words of one Soldier. For the Soldier passing the flag, the brevity of the situation calls into question his/her own mortality, conduct of service, and life's direction. It is an honor to pass a flag, one that provides meaning and purpose behind your own service. Those passing the flag understand that one day their spouse or their kids will receive a flag in a similar manner. This flag represents more than the cloth it is composed of but forever enshrines the memory of their life and their service to country. Memorial affairs grants the prospect that, one day, those of us who are currently serving will receive similar honors, and that holds us accountable to our own conduct today.

In the Soldier's National Cemetery, the walkway is marked with plaques with stanzas from the poem "The Bivouac of the Dead."⁴ Some of these same words are inscribed in gold above McClellan Gate in Arlington National Cemetery. These words expand upon what President Lincoln said in his address:

"Yon marble minstrel's voiceless stone
In deathless song shall tell,
When many a vanquished ago has flown,
The story how ye fell;
Nor wreck, nor change, nor winter's blight,
Nor Time's remorseless doom,
Shall dim one ray of glory's light
That gilds your deathless tomb"

The final verse is a promise to those who have given their lives in service that their sacrifice will be honored. It is a call to the nation to the unfinished work of preserving liberty and national ideals that "all men are created equal." It is a promise to those who serve, that their sacrifice, whether it requires death or not, will not be in vain. This is the purpose of memorial affairs, and that purpose is worthwhile.

Notes

¹ For those readers who are unfamiliar with President Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, it may be beneficial to pause and read it to provide context to the outline of this article. The address can be viewed at https://rmc.library.cornell.edu/gettysburg/good_cause/CU_copy.htm.

² Military funeral honors is the official term used to intern or inurn a fallen Soldier. Memorial affairs is the process of conducting military funeral honors. While this article will focus primarily on The Old Guard and Arlington National Cemetery, memorial affairs extends to Veterans Affairs, National Guard Bureaus, local military units, and all those around the globe who participate in the mission of honoring America's fallen heroes. Memorial affairs is not exclusive to those killed in combat but includes those who have faithfully served, who have honorably sacrificed their life, or a portion of their life, to the American cause. And while this article primarily discusses the Army, the concept also applies to all branches of service.

³ Rebecca Johnson, "Serving Two Masters: When Professional Ethics Collide with Personal Morality," in George Lucas' *Routledge Handbook of Military Ethics* (London, 2020), 268.

⁴ Theodore O'Hara, "Bivouac of The Dead," 1847 (written in memory of the Kentucky troops killed in the Mexican War), <https://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/bivouac.htm>.