

THANKS FOR THE MEMORY

Memorial Day is their day, isn't it? It is supposed to be the day a grateful nation pauses to quietly thank the more than one million men and women who have died in military service to their country since the Revolutionary War.

Or is it the day the beach resorts kick into high gear for the summer season, the day the strand is covered by fish-belly white people basting themselves in coconut oil, the day the off-season rates end and the weekend you can't get in a seaside seafood restaurant with anything less than a one hour wait.

Or is it one of the biggest shopping center sales days of the year, a day when hunting for a parking space is the prime sport for the holiday stay-at-homers?

Or is it the weekend when more people will kill themselves on the highways than any other weekend and Highway Patrol troopers work overtime picking up the pieces?

I think the men and women who died for us would understand what we do with their day. I hope they would, because if they wouldn't, if they would have insisted that it be a somber, respectful day of remembrance, then we have blown it and dishonored their sacrifice.

I knew some of those who died, and the guys I knew would have understood. They liked a sunny beach and a cold beer and a hot babe in a black bikini, too.

They would have enjoyed packing the kids, the inflatable rafts, the coolers, and the suntan lotion in the car and heading for the lake.

They would have enjoyed staying at home and cutting the grass and getting together with some friends and cooking some steaks on the grill, too. But they didn't get the chance.

They blew up in the Marine Barracks in Beirut and died in the oily waters of the Persian Gulf. They caught theirs at the airstrip in Grenada in the little war everyone laughed at.

They bought the farm in the I Drang Valley and on Heartbreak Ridge, Phu Tai and at Hue. They froze at the Chosin Reservoir and were shot at the Pusan Perimeter.

They drowned in the surf at Omaha Beach or fell in the fetid jungles of Guadalcanal.

They died in the ice and snow of the Bulge and the Vosges Mountains.

They were at the Somme and at San Juan Hill and at Gettysburg and at Cerro Gordo and at Valley Forge.

They couldn't be here with us this weekend, but I think they would understand that we don't spend the day in tears and heart-wrenching memorials. They wouldn't want that. Grief is not why they died.

They died so we could go fishing. They died so another father could hold his laughing little girl over the waves. They died so another father could toss a baseball to his son in their backyard while the charcoal is getting white. They died so another buddy could drink a beer on his day off. They died so a family could get in the station wagon and go shopping and maybe get some ice cream on the way home.

They won't mind that we have chosen their day to have our first big outdoor party of the year. But they wouldn't mind, either, if we took just a second and thought about them. Some will think of them formally, of course.

Wreaths will be laid in small, sparsely attended ceremonies in military cemeteries and at monuments at state capitols and in small town's squares.

Flags will fly over the graves, patriotic words will be spoken and a few people there will probably feel a little anger that no more people showed up. They'll think no one else remembers.

But we do remember. I remember Smitty and Chico, and Davey and the guys who died.

I remember the deal we made: If we buy it, we said, drink a beer for me.

I'll do it for you, guys. I'll drink that beer for you today, and I'll sit on that beach for you, and I'll check out the girls for you and, just briefly, I'll think of you.

I won't let your memory spoil the trip but you'll be on that sunny beach with me today.

I will not mourn your deaths this Memorial Day.