

Opportunity.

Legacy.

Duty.

Purpose.

Patriotism.

The reasons behind choosing military service differ from person to person. But as varied as the reasons are, there's a universal understanding: **Service means sacrifice**. *Even if* that sacrifice is one's own life.

The impact of this ultimate sacrifice ripples through our communities. Service members' death touch more than just the lives of their loved ones and friends. When their stories are shared in our neighborhoods, our homes, our schools and our places of worship, these men and women become a part of the collective identity of our hometowns.

The stories of their sacrifices live on in the pride of memories of their loved ones and at observances and through inscriptions on memorials and plaques dedicated to the legacy of their generation.

Woven into the fabric of our country are those who died while wearing the cloth of our nation.

They instill a sense of pride among citizens. They inspire new generations to raise their hands in service.

There is no greater sacrifice than to offer one's life for the greater good.

As President Abraham Lincoln observed more than 150 years ago:

**“This extraordinary war in which we are engaged falls heavily upon all classes of people, but the most heavily upon the soldier. For it has been said, all that a man hath will he give for his life; and while all contribute of their substance, the soldier puts his life at stake, and often yields it up in his country's cause. The highest merit, then, is due to the soldier.”**

This respect we give to our fallen speaks to the value we place on their service.

And it's not just back home that we remember them.

These tributes begin at the very spots where they selflessly gave their lives—both for the brothers and sisters they stood shoulder to shoulder with and for their country.

Tributes include the Battlefield Cross, which some historians say has its roots in the Civil War. Today, it's most recognizable as a helmet resting on top of an inverted rifle stuck in the ground with boots placed in front. Dog tags hang from the rifle. On the battlefield, members of the unit can come to this memorial and pay their final respects.

In more recent conflicts, the military also paid tribute to those who died with fallen comrade and ramp ceremonies. These are part of the dignified transfer—the solemn return of service members from their theater of war back to the United States and to their loved ones for eternal rest.

The fallen comrade ceremony happened at places including Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan, and Balad Air Base, Iraq. The remains of those killed in action in theater were brought to the base. No matter the hour of day or night, when the announcement of their arrival came over the loudspeakers—often mere hours after the person’s death—military personnel who were not on guard lined the road leading to the base’s flight line and rendered a final salute as the Humvee carrying the body would slowly pass by to a waiting aircraft.

On the flight line, a small group then conducted the ramp ceremony, carrying the transfer case onto the aircraft and draping an American flag over it for its journey to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware.

But some who died while serving have not yet made it back home to the United States.

We honor them through tributes such as the Missing Man Table. It’s an opportunity to reflect on those who are still missing in action or prisoners of war.

But we don’t just reflect. We act. By continuing to look for them, we honor their sacrifice. The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency sends teams all over the world to tirelessly search land and sea to recover the remains of those who haven’t returned home.

Through this work, they bring people home.

People like Corporal Thomas Cooper, who was killed in 1943 during the Battle of Tarawa in the Central Pacific. In 2019—more than 76 years after his death—the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency identified his remains, which, along with those of 93 other unknown deceased, had been disinterred from the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu.

He was finally brought home. And decades after his death, Corporal Cooper's family was able to bury him with full honors at Arlington National Cemetery this past March.

We're still looking for the rest. The agency estimates that more than 81,600 service members remain missing. Among them are 41,000 who are presumed lost at sea in the Indo-Pacific region.

Some of those still missing at sea were killed aboard Japanese "hell ships" during World War II. Hell ships were what they called unmarked Japanese merchant ships that sailed between the Philippines and Japan during the war. They appeared to carry only Japanese military personnel and supplies.

But below deck, crammed into dark, sweltering holds were Allied prisoners of war. The conditions were deplorable. People were often heaped on top of each other, with no access to sanitation or light and little to no food or water. It's estimated that 126,000 Allied prisoners of war were moved this way, including survivors of the Bataan Death March.

More than 1,500 men died in their holds from heat and thirst or were killed by Japanese guards.

But more than 19,000 died when the U.S. Navy and other Allied forces carried out attacks on these ships. The naval forces had no way of knowing their own people were hidden on board. All they knew was that they had to thwart the enemy's efforts to move supplies and personnel needed to prolong the war.

We must continue to share their stories, to remember what they sacrificed for the rest of us.

Because few men and women choose to put their lives on the line to serve and defend the Constitution. Few go toward danger. Few willingly face atrocities most of us can't fathom. Few volunteer to serve, knowing that death may be the outcome.

But we can ensure that those who make this choice and make the ultimate sacrifice can rest knowing they served with the thanks of grateful citizens and knowing that they won't be forgotten.

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