

# Did They Die in Vain?

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**By Ben Mauldin**

ACADEMY, Texas—Citizens of the United States of America celebrated Memorial Day on May 31, 2021. For many people, that holiday is merely a day to spend with family.

But, for many older citizens, that holiday is more than a family celebration. For many, that holiday is day of memories—remembering people, events and principles.

## **Memories of a marine**

Let me take you back to 1970. As a member of the United States Marine Corps, I spent my entire tour of duty in Vietnam as an artillery man with one unit (called Fox Battery 2/11 First Marine Division).

As I recall, our battery consisted of about 50 men. Some would come and go during the 10 months that I was there.

During the time I was there, three of my fellow marines from Fox Battery were killed in action, and one was severely injured. A couple more were less seriously wounded.

They always used to tell us that, statistically speaking, those numbers were about the same rate of death or injury (car accidents, etc.) that our age-group of males could expect if we stayed at home.

The three men who lost their lives were killed by mines or booby traps. The term IED was not commonly use at the time, but it was the same concept.

## **Memorial service**

On one occasion after the death of two of the men, the battery held a memorial service. We assembled together at the base of Hill 55. A chaplain arrived by helicopter and the gunny called us all to attention. The chaplain played taps from a tape recorder and said a prayer. Lt. Rogers (who was killed about a month later) read Psalm 23.

Capt. Harper, an older man (probably about 40 years old), had a short speech prepared. But, when he opened his mouth, he just said: “I just hope that somehow, somewhere, these men will not have died in vain.”

## **Lack of support**

Do you remember the environment of our country back in 1970?

Soldiers and marines (soldiers are Army and marines are Marines) knew that our military had lost the support of most of the world and even our country.

This included our government and many of our own citizens. Everybody was just waiting for the opportunity to pull out of Vietnam and to go home.

So it was easy to think that everything we were doing at that time might be for nothing. It might be in vain.

### **Question from a friend**

A few days ago, I was doing a small job for a friend and customer. As I left the house, she mentioned watching the movie *Saving Private Ryan*. She asked me if I thought there would be people willing to do that today—meaning: Is this generation of young people capable and willing to storm beaches and engage in fierce combat? I thought for a moment and then answered “Yes.”

I asked her if she had seen another movie called *Blackhawk Down*. She had.

I reminded her of the scene where the two soldiers (who were riding in the reconnaissance helicopter) asked to be let down on the crash scene to protect a possible survivor—knowing that they would almost certainly be killed. She remembered.

### **When the chips are down**

I told her that through the years I have reminded my children and grandchildren about a valuable lesson from that scene. If those two soldiers in the helicopter had not been on the scene and it had been two other soldiers there, they would have wanted to do the same thing. It is just the nature of what they do when the chips are down.

I have thought about that memorial service on Hill 55 many times over the 50 years since I stood at the attention with my fellow marines. I have thought about Capt. Harper’s words and have asked myself: “Did those men die in vain?”

### **Standing in the gap**

The most prolific author in the New Testament wrote about the heroic patriarchs recorded in Scripture. He compared them and their legacy to a “great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1).

Many thousands of men and women have been killed in combat. Some were shot by an adversary. Others stepped on mines or triggered explosives. It is accurate to say they had been in a bad place at the wrong time.

But they were there—willing to do their part, whatever it was.

Many detractors have called them “cannon fodder.” But I think they are part of that “great cloud of witnesses”—telling the rest of us through the ages that there will always be someone willing to stand in the gap.

Did those men die in vain? Brave actions and willing sacrifices do not reflect a life in vain. Brave actions and willing sacrifices reflect a life of honor. And it was an honor to have known and served beside them.