## Home of the Free Because of the Brave

Robert VanDerslice, like millions of people, found himself one morning waiting on a seat in a crowded airport for his boarding call. While looking around though amidst the crowd, he saw a rather unusual sight. There was an elderly man sitting across from him, facing a large picture window that gave passengers a view of the runway. Robert notes that the eyes of the man reflected a life of hardship, and as he looked at the man, he noticed tears streaming down from his eyes. Wanting to do something, Robert walked over to him and asked if he could join him, asking the man if he was alright.

There was silence at first, and then the man asked “did you stand when she walked by?” Confused by the question, Robert said he didn’t understand. He then looked at him in his eyes, and asked again, “did you stand when she walked by?” Still confused, Robert told him that he didn’t understand, and asked the man if he stood when she walked by, with no clue as to who “she” could be. At this point, the elderly man turned and looked out the window to the tarmac. It seemed that the conversation was over.

Robert began to walk away, but was still troubled by the question. He boarded his plane, and found his seat as the plane began to clear the gate. He then looked back at the terminal that he had left, where he saw the man sitting alone facing the tarmac. He was still alone, and Robert saw that several others walked up to him, but left confused, shaking their heads, or just leaving quickly. And yet the man continued to stare out the window. It was then that Robert was able to see what the man was staring at.

About 300 yards away was a plane surrounded by military personnel. Watching from his plane, he saw a small procession of six men carrying a flag draped coffin away from the plane to a waiting hearse, where they stood after the rear door of the black car had been closed and they offered a salute as the car drove slowly away. He looked back to the window of the terminal, where the man was sitting still, offering a salute but not standing, for he was confined to a wheel chair.

The plane hadn’t completely left the gate yet, and Robert was able to get off the plane has it had a rolling stair gantry for passenger access. He walked quickly and headed for the terminal, back to the elderly man. He walked up next to him, and faced the plane as another coffin draped with the flag was placed in a waiting hearse, and this time he raised his hand in salute, allowing his hand to drop only when the hearse rolled out of view around a security fence.

The elderly man once again looked at Robert, visibly moved. He said in a quivering voice, “Thank you sir...for what you did. My greatest wish these days is to stand again for her, but I can’t. I gave my legs in ’43 and my oldest son in ’67 to that Lady, so she could keep walking. It hurts when no one cares that she walks by.”

Robert ended up missing that flight, but writes “my heart and soul found wings to the heavens on the words of a 90-year old man who dared to share a heart full of memories

with me and dared to remind me why Old Glory still waves as the beacon of hope in a lost world."

While for many we consider this weekend to be the unofficial start of summer, we also must never forget the true meaning of Memorial Day.

Three years after the civil war ended, the head of an organization of Union Veterans established Decoration Day as a time for the nation to decorate the graves of the war dead with flowers. Originally it was decided that this would take place May 30th, as this was a day flowers would be blooming all across the country. In 1868, the first observance was held at Arlington National Cemetery.

The ceremonies centered around the mansion that was once Robert E. Lee's home, and various officials from Washington, including General Grant, presided over the ceremony. Children from the Soldiers 'and Sailors 'Orphan Home made their way through the cemetery and placed flowers on both the graves of both Union and Confederate Graves.

In the years that followed, local celebrations of this day would continue. And, while many now just celebrate with a cookout or a day off, countless others give back to honor this day as it was founded.

Most recently in December of 2000, the "National Moment of Remembrance Act" was passed, creating the White House Commission on the National Moment of Remembrance. This commission is charged with "encouraging the people of the United States to give something back to their country, which provides them so much freedom and opportunity" by encouraging and coordinating commemorations in the United States of Memorial Day and the National Moment of Remembrance. That moment encourages all Americans to pause at 3 p.m. on Memorial Day for a moment of silence to honor those who have died in service to our Nation.

Of course, many of us will mark today as a day for a day trip up north or just enjoying a day off. And there is nothing wrong with that at all. We work very hard, and it's nice to have a 3-day weekend and look forward to summer, or to grill some burgers and take it easy on a Monday afternoon. So please, don't feel guilty for enjoying today with friends and family. But at the same time, my hope is that we also never take for granted the reason we have so many freedoms in our country is because so many people were willing to serve to safeguard them. With that in mind, I'd encourage us to keep in mind all they have done by praying for our veterans and those who have died, and praying for all of our active duty servicemen and women as we do each day at Mass, or by simply saying "thank you" to a veteran or a person in uniform. You might consider a visit too to a cemetery such as at Fort Snelling, or helping your kids or grandkids too to gain an appreciation for the sacrifice of our fallen soldiers. Above all else, never take for granted the remarkable country we live in by praying for our nation and realizing how blessed we are to be Americans. We are truly the home of the free because of the brave.

May God bless our troops, our veterans, and all those who paid the ultimate sacrifice for our freedoms, and may God bless America.

Blessings,
Fr. Paul