What’s Your Legacy?

This month we will observe Memorial Day, a time to remember those who sacrificed on behalf of our country. While serving at The United States Army Band “Pershing’s Own,” I would often be conducting the band at the Tomb of the Unknowns while the President laid a wreath. Arlington National Cemetery would be full with thousands of people on hand to mark the occasion. Each of the more than 300,000 gravesites would have a small American flag placed in front of it by Soldiers of the Third United States Infantry Regiment “The Old Guard.”

Every Soldier in “Pershing’s Own” would approach each performance with the utmost professionalism, but I must admit that I rarely reflected on the true meaning of the day, how it applied to me, and how it would apply to those of us who are music educators.

As you walk through Arlington National Cemetery as I did nearly every weekend while living right outside its gate at Fort Myer, you see graves of Presidents, Medal of Honor awardees, four- and five-star Generals and Admirals, and many other names that are prominent in the history books. But a vastly greater number are graves of America’s sons and daughters who answered their nation’s call to duty, served faithfully and without fanfare, and then returned home to be spouses, parents, and the bedrock of their communities.

I recently reflected on the legacy of one of those young men. He was the eighth of nine children born during the Great Depression. The death of his mother at an early age and an absent father meant he was raised by his brothers and sisters. During the Depression, millions of Americans were malnourished and often homeless, and he was among them, reduced to begging, stealing, or going without food for days on end. Having left school to work on a farm for room and board only at age fifteen, a draft notice for World War II offered three meals each day. He remarked that Basic Training was so bad that they couldn’t wait to get into combat. Once, when visiting the grounds of Camp Patrick Henry, Virginia where many thousands of Soldiers waited to board troop ships out of Hampton Roads, he described the high fences and the guard towers with machine guns. When asked who they were guarding against, he replied, “the machine guns were aimed in; not all of us wanted to go.”

He had been trained on the Army’s big guns, 155mm howitzers. During the invasion of North Africa, the cannons landed in Morocco and his company landed in Algeria. A sergeant grabbed him, pointed at a corporal and said, “Go with him, he’ll show you how to fire a mortar.” Landings on Sicily, at Salerno and Monte Casino in Italy, and the liberation of Rome figure prominently in history books. All he remembered was months of walking in deep mud. Each morning they received their rations for the day. He said they would eat the good stuff for breakfast, the second best for lunch, and the bad stuff for dinner so that if you got killed during the day you would have eaten the better rations.

A landing in Southern France followed by fighting in the Vosges Mountains and then a move north to relieve the 101st Airborne Division in the Battle of the Bulge, eventually ended in occupation duty in Nuremberg. Again, his only recollection was nearly three years without once sleeping in a bed and walking all through Europe.

He didn’t get any prestigious military honors and only achieved the rank of Private First Class, but he did his job to the best of his abilities. Demobilization brought him and millions of others back home where they got jobs, married, started families, and became the strength of our nation, a greatest generation not just in war, but also in peace.

What does this have to do with us as music educators? Think about the Superior ratings your groups have received, the many recognitions you will hopefully garner in your years of teaching, the great performances and the cheers of thousands of audience members. But what will be your legacy? What will be in your obituary?

The young Soldier described above recently passed away at the age of 95, peacefully, in his sleep, and surrounded by family. But those 95 years of life, 69 years of marriage, and years in combat were all summed up in a single 360-word obituary. The legacy he left was simply his family and the people whose lives he touched. When your legacy is recounted, let it be the lives you touched; the people whose lives were better because you were there. Let your legacy be the young people who you exposed to great music and who became better adults because of it.

You have probably deduced that the young Soldier described above was my father and in fact, I was named after the corporal who taught him how to fire a mortar and marched with him all the way across Europe.

Next month’s SBO article will describe my method for planning rehearsals. As always, I love to hear from SBO readers about things you would like to see in future articles. Contact me at www.ThomasPalmatier.com.