

This is Lieutenant Roger McCort from The Salvation Army in Eureka with today's Community Comment.

Today is Memorial Day 2018. It's the 150th national celebration commemorating our war dead, though there were a handful of smaller events in earlier years as well. It was called Decoration Day for the first century, then became Memorial Day in 1967 and moved to the last Monday in May fifty years ago.

The day began to remember those who fell during the Civil War. Six-hundred-fifty-five-thousand and some died in military service to the Union or Confederate forces.

Since then, we have seen official military conflicts such as wars against Native Americans, the Spanish American War, wars in the Philippines and Haiti, World Wars One and Two, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. We have been involved in dozens of military actions around the world in places such as China, South America, the Caribbean, Mexico, Russia, Greece, and Germany. Also, Cuba, El Salvador, Grenada, Kuwait, Somalia, Bosnia, and Yemen. I'm leaving a lot out, because we don't have time to list them all.

Together, the United States has seen over one-million, three-hundred-and-fifty-five thousand men and women who wore our uniform struck down in battle.

One-million, three-hundred-and-fifty-five-thousand brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers, children, friends, lovers, companions, and fellow Americans.

It's a hard number to wrap your head around. A recent study at Colombia University calculated that most Americans know 600 people, thanks to the explosion of social networks over the last decade or so. Before that studies suggested we each knew less than 300 people. That means we can understand Memorial Day by recognizing that every individual we know would have to die more than two-thousand-two-hundred-and-fifty-eight times to reach our casualty levels. If you don't use Facebook, then everyone you know needs to die five-thousand times.

It's hard to humanize numbers so large.

The first Memorial Day where I understood that there was something more to the holiday than the beginning of barbecue season was when my friend Craig was discharged from the Marines. He was stationed in Beirut, Lebanon, in October '83 when two truck bombs detonated at the installation where his unit was stationed. I said he was lucky to be alive. He described what it meant to pull pieces of 241 of your fellow marines, including most of your unit and friends, out of the rubble of your home. It put a human face on the numbers for me.

It's funny – I just checked, and those men aren't even part of the one-million, three-hundred-fifty-five thousand, because that count only covers official action casualties. I wonder how many others that number fails to add.

There are others we don't really stop to consider. Civilian deaths outnumber military deaths in any conflict. Non-American troops serving beside our forces don't share space in our counts. Enemy troops either, for that matter. I would argue that every life should be recognized, especially those that are cut off in their youth, like most of the men and women who serve.

Our war in Afghanistan is about to turn seventeen years old. That means, unless peace breaks out soon, we will be sending our children to fight in a conflict that is older than they are. The death toll there climbs by one American soldier every three days.

Move your flags to half-mast today. It is Memorial Day, when we should pause to consider what war costs us and why it needs to end. Every one of the fallen is one life too many to lose.

Grace and peace to you. This is Lt. Roger McCort with the KINS Community Comment. Happy Memorial Day.