

Beacon Hill Byline

May 24, 2004

Memorial Day, 2004

Longmeadow commemorates Memorial Day each year with a Sunday service during LongMeddowe Days. This year's service seemed more serious than previous ceremonies because of the deployment of U.S. military personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As a regular speaker at the event, I sensed that seriousness as I thought about my remarks. I happened upon a book of Ernie Pyle's dispatches from the North African front in 1942, where I found a quotation that gave me a theme for the day. Here's a summary of my remarks and the unexpected result of the speech.

Ernie Pyle went ashore with Allied troops in Algeria and made these remarks about the soldiers. "Americans, notoriously, are often foolishly generous. The troops in the first wave came ashore with only canned field rations carried on their backs, yet our soldiers gave much of that food to the pitiful-looking Arab children. The result was that pretty soon the soldiers themselves hadn't much left to eat..."

The American character has not changed in the intervening years, and here are some examples of the generosity of our new generation of soldiers. Our forces have carried out their orders to build schools for Afghan and Iraqi children to attend. Then, with spontaneous, voluntary action, they have written, phoned or e-mailed home to solicit supplies for those schoolchildren to use. Americans have converted a garbage dump into a soccer field, and then called home to get jerseys and soccer balls so the kids can play. Frisbees are another item in high demand. Marines, noticing the need for dental hygiene, arranged for thousands of dental kits to be sent from the U.S.

Another American decided to seek out leaders of Iraq's Boy Scout movement, repressed under Hussein. Scouting is returning to Iraq, leading an observer to comment, "It's one of these good things that every time you turn over a rock, something else surprisingly good jumps out."

All of these activities are being accomplished while the troops are in a combat zone, facing possible attacks by grenades thrown into Humvees, along with random gunfire and roadside bombs. They are a few examples of American generosity that a search of the internet turned up. They are not stories that it is easy to find, but they are at the heart of our mission to introduce freedom to repressed societies.

After the Memorial Day service ended, I was approached by the Longmeadow volunteer who runs the town's youth soccer program. He wanted to know how he could send a dozen soccer balls and surplus jerseys to the Iraqi children. A Longmeadow couple whose son is on duty in Iraq then offered to see if their son's unit can find a use for the equipment. I then learned that First Church is collecting school supplies at the request of a member of the church.

I was gratified at the response to the remarks, while realizing that I have no information about how the generous offers can be accepted. I will find answers. And I ask readers of this column to share with me, or the Longmeadow News, any information you have or requests you have received about how we can become part of the work carried out each day by our forces in Iraq. As always, I can be reached at mary@rogeness.com or 567.1661.