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SD Department of Veterans Affairs
Secretary Zimmerman May 2017 Column

A Visit to the Cemetery

As Memorial Day approaches, it is a great time to pause and consider the true meaning of this holiday. Memorial Day represents one day of national awareness and reverence, honoring those Americans who died while defending our Nation and its values. While we should honor these heroes every day for the profound contributions they made to secure our Nation's freedom, we should especially commemorate them and their families on Memorial Day.

Let us never forget how fortunate we are to live in freedom and let us always commemorate our history and honor the sacrifices these heroes gave to protect that freedom.

Military life and ceremonies are inspired in tradition and symbolism and funerals for our fallen are no exception. Let me share with you some of the symbolism of military funeral honors.

The bestowing of military funeral honors is a way to show the nation's deep gratitude to those who have faithfully defended their country. This ceremony is the final demonstration a grateful nation provides to a veteran's family.

One of the best-known military traditions is the 21-gun salute or three volleys from rifles. This tradition comes from traditional battle ceasefires where each side would clear the dead. The firing of three volleys indicated that dead were cleared and properly cared for.

Originally composed to signal lights out, the somber tune of 'Taps' became a traditional way to pay tribute to service members honoring the extinguishing of a life.

At the end of a funeral the flag is removed from the casket and folded by the honor guard. With each fold representing something different – the first – liberty, second – unity, third – justice, fourth – perseverance, fifth – hardiness, sixth - valor, seventh – purity, eighth – innocence, ninth – sacrifice, tenth – honor, eleventh – independence and the twelfth fold – truth. In the folding, the red and white stripes are finally wrapped into the blue, as the light of day vanishes into the darkness of the night. Sometimes a few of the shells from the volleys may be inserted into the back fold before it is presented to the family as an expression of gratitude for the sacrifice they have made.

It has also been said that the three sides of a folded flag are symbolic of the three colors in the flag, the three sided hat of the colonial soldiers and the colonists, the three branches of the national government, the three primary documents of our land (Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights), and of course, the three famous words form the soldier's motto - duty, honor, and country.

While visiting a cemetery it's not unusual to see coins on a veteran's grave. The coins are symbolic that a friend was there. It's said that a penny means they visited and wanted to say thanks. A nickel means they trained at boot camp together, while a dime means they served together and a quarter signifies they were with the veteran when he/she passed away.

Whenever attending a funeral where military services are conducted, please go out of your way to thank the leaders from the service organizations that conducted the military funeral honors. They are all volunteers honoring one of their heroes.

As Memorial Day draws near, let us ponder the life they made possible for us by their commitment and sacrifice. They paid the ultimate price for freedom, and it is our duty to keep their legacy fresh in the memories of future generations.

Larry Zimmerman, Secretary
South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs