

## Commentary - Honor Through Remembrance

May 22, 2025



It is a profound honor to reflect on Memorial Day, where memory and mission converge.

This day is not one of celebration. It is a day of solemn remembrance — when our nation pauses to reflect on the profound cost of the freedoms and way of life we each hold so dear.

Behind every headstone and memorial etched with the names of our fallen service members are lives lived with deep purpose and conviction — and defined by courage and sacrifice: the young Marine who never returned home, the soldier who died to save his fellow troops, the sailor whose name is known only to God, the airman whose remains are still missing in action.

Behind each of them, a family lives with a permanent absence — a parent's grief, a spouse's broken heart, a sibling's pride, a child's aching questions.

As we honor the fallen, we must also speak of those whose fates remain unknown — those still missing in action. For their families, there has been no return, no final goodbye, no folded flag. Only a silence that spans generations — filled with questions, memories, and the hope that one day, answers may come.

More than 81,000 American service members remain unaccounted for from conflicts dating back to World War II. Among them are hundreds of Oregonians whose names are etched into monuments and hearts, even as time marches forward.

Commander William B. Ault of Enterprise, Oregon, led a daring assault during the Battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942. After striking enemy carriers, his final radio message was: "O.K. So long, people. We put a 1,000-pound hit on the flat top." He and his radioman were never seen again. For his heroism, he was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross, and the USS Ault and Ault Field bear his name.

Private First Class Dale Warren Ross of Ashland, Oregon, went missing during combat on Guadalcanal in 1943. Seventy-six years later, his remains were discovered and identified, finally bringing closure to his family.

Staff Sergeant George Edward Davies of Portland, Oregon, was shot down over Romania in 1943. His remains were identified and laid to rest with full military honors in June 2024 — over 80 years later.

Each identification made, each name returned to a loved one, is a sacred act. It reminds us that the cost of war extends far beyond the battlefield, affecting families and communities for generations.

This year marks a profound milestone: the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II — a war that demanded extraordinary sacrifice from more than 152,000 Oregonians. Tyranny was defeated, but freedom came at a heavy cost. The generation that answered that call helped liberate the world and laid the foundation for a more just and inclusive America — one we are still striving to fully realize.

This year also marks the 80th anniversary of the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs, created in 1945 to serve returning WWII veterans. Born out of war, ODVA was founded on the principle that "equity, justice and a simple duty" should be recognized for those who "brought us victory and peace." That mission continues today.

Let us remember Oregon's deep and personal sacrifices:

One Oregonian died in the Civil War.

Sixty-five were lost in the Spanish-American War.

1,030 in World War I.

3,757 in World War II.

269 in the Korean War.

709 in Vietnam.

One during the USS Pueblo incident.

One in Panama.

Seven in the Persian Gulf.

142 in the post-9/11 conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Each number is a name. Each name, a story. Each story, a reminder of the sacrifice made not only in distant places, but right here — from Oregon's fields, towns, and Tribal communities.

We must also acknowledge a harder truth: some of those we remember today gave their lives for the hope of freedom and equality they were never fully granted in life. Black Americans served in segregated units. Native Americans and Asian Americans defended a country that treated them as outsiders. Women gave their

lives in uniform long before they were fully recognized in it. LGBTQ+ service members served under policies that denied their identity. Latino service members endured discrimination even while wearing our nation's cloth.

They died for a constitution whose promises were not fully extended to them. Let that truth not divide us, but deepen our reverence. Their sacrifice was not diminished by injustice. In fact, it is all the more sacred. Because they believed — as we all do — in a nation that is great, and that can yet be greater still. They died not just for the America that was, but for the America we still strive to become.

Today, more than 260,000 veterans call Oregon home. They are our neighbors, our leaders, our protectors. At ODVA, we carry forward the solemn responsibility to care not just for the fallen, but for the living. To ensure no sacrifice is forgotten. To uphold the promises made — in law, in policy, and in principle — to those who wore the uniform of our nation.

Memorial Day traces its roots to the Civil War, when families decorated graves — North and South — bound by grief and shared humanity. More than 150 years later, we still honor that call.

And we do so not just with flowers and flags, but with purpose. We honor our war dead when we invest in mental health and suicide prevention, when we build housing for unhoused veterans, when we lift up the voices of veterans of every race, gender, background, and orientation.

We honor them when we teach our children not only the history of war, but the cost of peace.

At 3 p.m. on Memorial Day, wherever you are, I invite you to join in the National Moment of Remembrance — one minute of silence for those who gave everything so that we may live freely.

In that moment, let your heart be full — not only of sorrow, but of resolve. Because we are the stewards of their legacy. And it is our duty to remember, not just with words, but with action.

May their memory guide us. May their courage strengthen us. And may their sacrifice — whether known or unknown, celebrated or too long overlooked — be honored in all we do.

*Dr. Nakeia Council Daniels is a proud United States Army veteran and the director of the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs, overseeing agency operations and ensuring the availability of and access to vital veteran services and programs for more than 260,000 veterans and their families across the state.*