



News Release

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Like Civil War Vets Before Them, World War II Vets Facing “Silent Artillery of Time”

*Most Honored Veterans in Our History
Have Much in Common*

An opinion piece by Sander Diamond, professor of history, Keuka College

In July 1938, more than 1,500 Civil War veterans gathered in Gettysburg to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the epic battle.

As young men, some heard Lincoln deliver the Gettysburg Address in November 1863. Seventy-five years later, they listened to FDR recall the great battle and watched him light an eternal flame at the very place where so many of their comrades had fallen.

In the summer of 1938, they probably sensed that the upcoming Munich Conference was a stop-gap measure and that their nation may again have to take up arms.



Within the next five years, only a handful remained, claimed not by bullets but by what Lincoln called “the silent artillery of time.” Their passing was hardly noticed in the middle of World War II, when a new generation was called upon to uphold the ideals uttered by Lincoln. But their deaths did not completely sever the link with the Civil War. Many of their widows lived on, with the last Confederate widow—97-year-old Alberta Martin—passing away May 30 of this year. The last Northern widow—Gertrude Nanaway—predeceased her in January 2003. The final break with the Civil War was complete, 139 years later.

Ten years from now, 70 years after D-Day, the nation will start its generational disengagement from the 16 million men and women who served in World War II. Approximately 4 million are still alive and given the advances in medicine and the increase in life expectancy, some of those will surely be alive for the 70th anniversary of D-Day and if one or more marries a younger person—as was the case with the husbands of Alberta Martin and Gertrude Nanaway—their spouses may be alive well beyond mid-century.

(more)

Civil War and Second World War veterans have much in common. The Army of the Potomac saved the Union. The veterans of the last world war saved the world. They share the honor of being the most honored veterans in our history and their struggles the most documented. Their generations produced the most well remembered generals and admirals. Their wartime leaders, Lincoln and FDR, are the central figures in the pantheon of presidents. Civil War veterans watched their nation rise to world power status and that was confirmed in the summer of 1945. The old men at Gettysburg witnessed the passing of rural America while the veterans of World War II saw the industrialization of the planet.

They also share a common dream with veterans of all conflicts: that their war will be the last. The grave markers at Gettysburg, in Flanders, at Normandy, and in the countless battlefield memorials where, in FDR's words, "the pride of our nation" remains, tell the story of war. Closure for these men came when they fell, but for those who lived to fight another day, closure came when the enemy surrendered. There was an absolute finality to World War II when the Germans and Japanese signed instruments of unconditional surrender in Berlin and on board the *USS Missouri*, respectively.

Today, we are once again at war. In the new age of terrorist warfare, we wonder when closure will come. We cannot look forward to a Versailles Peace Conference or bin Laden and his successors signing a document of unconditional surrender. We have learned that through the use of primitive weapons, terrorists can tie-up an army and disrupt civilized life. Those now serving in Afghanistan, who have read portions of the 911 Commission Report, President Bush, and presidential hopeful John Kerry know this new war will be a long one and the sacrifices many with battles played out on our soil. It is a form of war largely unrecognizable to yesterday and today's veterans. In this new era, we will have to find a Grant and an Eisenhower to develop a new strategy in the field, and at the helm, we'll have to find a person who will take us beyond where we are today—a latter-day Lincoln or FDR, a person of wisdom, vision and, above all, perspective.