A Memorial Day Letter to America

From “Face-to-Face” Combat To “Arm-in-Arm” Friendship

By Lt. General Hal G. Moore (Ret.)

When the blood of any war soaks your clothes, covers your hands, and soldiers die in your arms, every breath forevermore becomes an appeal for a greater peace and unity.

It was Vietnam. I was their commander and accountable for them. We charged the enemy with bayonets fixed to our rifles in face-to-face combat. I still hear the ugly sounds of war… I still see the boots of my dead sticking out from under their ponchos, laces tied one last time by their precious fingers… I still carry the wounded to the helicopters as they bleed, scream, and beg to live one more day… and I still hold those who die in my arms, with their questioning eyes dreading death, as they call for their mothers… their eyes go blank and my war-crusted fingers close their eyelids. The blood of my dead soldiers will not wash from my hands. The stains remain.

On November 16, 1965, we won the LZ-Xray battle in the Ia Drang Valley of Vietnam. However, seventy-nine of my dear troopers died for those of us who lived. During the battle, we took prisoners-of-war. We gave them water and aspirins to help relieve their pain. Their anxious faces soon gave way to expressions of relief that they were treated with dignity.

My unending thirst for peace and unity drove me to return to the “Valley of Death” in 1993. Some of my men had accompanied me to meet with the man, along with a few of his soldiers, who had once endeavored to kill us all. Lt. General Nguyen Huu An and I came face to face. Instead of charging one another with bayonets, we mutually offered open arms. I invited all to form a circle with arms extended around each other’s shoulders and we bowed our heads. With prayer and tears, we openly shared our painful memories. Although we did not understand each other’s language, we quickly learned that the soul requires no interpreter.

General An and I then walked toward each other and shook hands. He kissed me on both cheeks! A communion of friendship was established that far outweighed past bloody memories. Later, General An and I walked part of the battlefield. Together we surveyed the once blood-soaked terrain. Foxholes dug long ago were adorned with blooming wildflowers. No thunder of war filled the air. Instead, birds sang with a most beautiful “noise.” Ever so gently, General An
placed his arm in mine. We had made a very long journey from war to peace. This was sealed through the reverent affection of one arm in the other.

Col. Tran Minh Hao, one of An’s soldiers, accompanied us during the battlefield visit. As we dined that night in Pleiku, he beautifully expressed the unity we all felt in the circle earlier that day.

“We have come to you this afternoon… feeling the loss of each of you… we come to span a bridge… untroubled by ancient rifts… we look together towards the future… we leave old hates for new friendships... forever in peace and harmony."

Spontaneous gestures of respect and friendship followed Hao’s poem. I took off my wristwatch and offered it as a gift to General An. Gladly, he accepted the gift. Then, he picked up his much-prized three-star helmet and offered it to me. Stunned, I accepted his most personal gift. Our eyes locked, as the door to our hearts had been fully opened to each other.

Lt. General An died on April 9, 1995. I later visited his family in Hanoi to pay my respects. The wristwatch I had given him was displayed in a viewing case as a part of the family shrine in General An’s home.

Resting in my den, our dueling helmets duel no more! To the casual observer, they might just be old war souvenirs. But, to me, they are examples of a greater peace and unity between once warring nations.

From face-to-face combat to arm-in-arm friendship – unity was restored by our efforts to come together. I implore our great leaders on “the many days after” Memorial Day to advance this most worthy of causes for peace and unity. People and nations rise above their differences only through effort, through trust.

Without trust, unity is beyond reach and restoration. With trust, unity is within reach and preservation. We must reach out to others in order to preserve the freedom we hold dear. We are each called to bear witness to the ideals of liberty. When we treat others with the respect and friendship that true liberty engenders, they will be brought into that same liberty.

When the heartbeat of one dead soldier stops forever, the heartbeat of our nation should accelerate, driving us to ensure that this life was not sacrificed in vain. Racing pulse should rouse us to seek, at all costs, even better ways to understand, forgive, and deal with our differences. Reconciliation should always be our end objective.

We owe our dead and their survivors no less! We owe our children much more! We owe our children’s children even more! Let us pay our debts.

God bless America.

Hal Moore

Lt. Gen. Hal Moore is the founder of The National Endowment for The Public Trust, co-author of the New York Times #1 bestseller We Were Soldiers Once… And Young, subject of the movie We Were Soldiers, co-author of the to-be-published book We Are Soldiers Still, and subject of the book A General’s Spiritual Journey. The reader may find the poem in its entirety in A General’s Spiritual Journey.
Note 1: Photograph of downed soldier and helicopter in Vietnam
Note 2: Photograph of Moore and An during their battlefield walk.
Note 3: Photograph of the helmets of Moore and An.