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A day for honoring a 'legacy of life'

Officials, veterans, others pay tribute to the dead of past and current wars

By Bradley Olson

Sun Reporter

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All over Maryland and around the country, politicians, veterans and the civic-minded of all stripes paid tribute to military service members who died fighting in wars around the world, some long ago concluded and others that have yet to end.

"Today we ask Americans not to have sad thoughts at the passing of our heroes, but rather to have thoughts of their legacy of life that was made possible by their commitment, their loyalty and their patriotism," said Lt. Gov. Anthony G. Brown, a former Army helicopter pilot who is now a colonel in the U.S. Army Reserve, speaking to a group gathered at Dulaney Valley Memorial Gardens in Timonium.

While he and others spoke of sacrifice and courage, and an Army band played "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "God Bless America," Shelia Towns sat just a few feet away, thinking about her husband, Robin, an Army sergeant first class who was killed last October in Bayji, Iraq. She pictured him at the grill in the backyard of their Upper Marlboro home, making steaks or hot dogs for her and their six children on holidays such as Memorial Day and the Fourth of July.

"He loved God first, and family," she said after the ceremony.

Craig Walenga recalled long deer-hunting trips he took with his nephew, Brandon Craig, an Army corporal who was killed last July and whose funeral prompted

Cecilton residents to line the streets holding flags. Craig, who Walenga said was able to turn his life around through military service, often made fun of the way his uncle would try to avoid having to carry or move the deer he or fellow hunters had just killed.

"He always had a joke to tell," Walenga said.

Brown and the several hundred people who attended honored Towns, Craig and eight other Marylanders who fell in Iraq and Afghanistan since last Memorial Day. Nearly 80 Marylanders, including 45 from the Baltimore area, have fallen in those countries since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

And while much of the day's focus was turned to them and the grief of their families, the Dulaney Valley ceremony also honored those who died in previous conflicts around the world, including some whose remains have never been found

Harold Thompson's thoughts were carried away to the handful of friends he lost when his ship, the destroyer-minesweeper USS *Hobson*, was attacked in 1945 by Japanese kamikaze planes after the crew had lived through the Normandy invasion and a host of other dangerous missions.

Although many grieved, some recalled important battlefield successes. Leroy Haslup, 87, recalled the code-breaking successes of his Navy signals intelligence unit in Hawaii that led to one of the most important naval victories of World War II at the Battle of Midway.

After the event, Haslup and others made their way through the cemetery, stopping at occasional graves to say a few words, pray or leave behind a carnation.

About the same time, a group of Iraq war veterans planted forget-me-nots near the foot of a giant American flag at the top of Federal Hill, overlooking downtown Baltimore.

"War is about people," said Matthew Weinstein, Progressive Maryland's federal issues director, in a written statement. "All too often we forget the soldiers who are on the front lines. We forget them by not addressing the hardship their service imposes on their families while they are gone. And too often we forget them when they come home and need help paying for health care and educational needs."

A few hours later, park rangers from Fort McHenry placed wreaths and bouquets

at the graves of veterans buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery, the oldest African-American cemetery in Baltimore City.

In a brief ceremony, they honored the likes of Benjamin Burns, whose U.S. Colored Troops Union regiment fought in numerous Virginia battles and was present at Robert E. Lee's surrender in Appomattox in 1865, according to Ranger Vincent Vaise.

The Rev. Douglas B. Sands Sr., chairman of the board of directors of the Mount Auburn Cemetery Corp., said the board has made it "a daily task" to repair the site after years of neglect.

He expressed thanks "for those who gave their lives, so long ago" and for the visitors, "for often this is a lonesome place."

One ranger read aloud "The Black Regiment," a poem by George Henry Boker that celebrates the charge of African-American troops at Port Hudson, La.

Vaise led several rangers - some carrying flags and others wearing Civil War-era garb and muskets, which they fired in honor of the dead - past many gravestones that had fallen into disrepair. He noted that plenty of graves were in worse condition, shrouded in the brush near where he stood.

"There are graves here that have been forgotten," he told a few people who had come to lay the flowers. "There's folk here that probably didn't get justice in their own life and then got forgotten about after they were dead. Well, we're here to remember them. ... This is what Memorial Day's all about. You don't need a crowd. You just need to remember people that would otherwise be forgotten."

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