

Memorial Day, May 28, 2018

On Sunday, May 27, 2018, I, Pat Lanigan, took an early Sunday morning walk up and down the hills of my town, Forest Hills, Pa. I enjoyed the quiet and the exercise as it gave me an hour, or so, to think. I was thinking about my speech for Memorial Day. I view Memorial Day as the most sacred holiday as it corresponds with our daily work as funeral directors.

I was asked to speak on Memorial Day at the North Braddock Amvets service at Braddock Catholic Cemetery. That was one of 4 Memorial Day gatherings within 2 miles of my home and our funeral homes. Memorial Day is important around here. But still many folks regard it as just another holiday to honor veterans, celebrate our country, have a parade, open the pool and have a family barbecue. As I hiked my hometown hills, I wondered how my mere words could have an impact on Memorial Day as we honor those military men and women who gave their lives for our country, since America's birth.

I thought, if only one of these heroes could be here to say, "Thanks for coming"! Then, as I puffed up Filmore Road, I thought, why not have one of them make an appearance to give thanks? How could I bring one back? How do I tell his story? The more I thought of a guest appearance of one of our dead heroes, the more enthused I became and the quicker the hike proceeded.

I knew the story of Leo Maloney of East Pittsburgh, my boyhood hometown where our 113-year-old funeral home still serves the surrounding communities. Leo was killed during World War II and my grandmother served his family as the funeral director. I also knew the story of Michael Estocin of Turtle Creek, Pa. who was a Navy pilot and was shot down over Vietnam. His body has never been found. The scenes raced in my mind. Aha! I would imitate both at separate Memorial Day services, as time would permit. I would be Michael Estocin at the 11 a.m. Memorial Day service at Church Hill Cemetery in Wilkins Twp and then I would dart 2 miles to Braddock Catholic Cemetery and be Leo at 12 noon.

As I trekked along the Greensburg Pike, I started to wonder where I would get appropriate clothing to personify these heroes. Dr. David Blinky is a friend and neighbor, and a World War II memorabilia collector. David Friez is a part-time co-worker and a Vietnam Navy veteran. They would be my sources for apropos clothing.

After my morning journey through Forest Hills, I called Dr. Blinky and told him of my Memorial Day brainstorm. He loved it. He also had an authentic WW II Army uniform for me to wear as Leo Maloney. Next, I contacted David. He too loved it and had a Navy ball cap, a navy polo shirt and aviator sunglasses. He also thought it would be memorable to bring these 2 heroes back to life, even just for a few minutes.

I was not on the agenda for the Church Hill Cemetery service but our funeral homes provide that service with a singing group, chairs, water and cemetery tent. So, I called Bob Kravetz, the Chairman, and asked if I could have a brief spot on the agenda, explaining my acting as Michael Estocin. He gave immediate approval.

At the 11 a.m service at Church Hill, I lurked in the background, behind a stand of large pine trees. Midway through the printed agenda, Bob Kravetz announced that we had an unscheduled guest that would like to address the group of about 200 folks. I walked forward, dressed in the Navy garb and sunglasses, and largely unrecognized by most folks.

At the podium, I announced, "Good morning everyone. I am Michael Estocin". I heard a gasp or two as I saw many faces twisted in wonderment. Most folks there knew of Michael Estocin, a local hero who was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. I, as Michael, continued, "I was raised in Turtle Creek, just over the hill from here. I graduated from Turtle Creek High School in 1949 and Slippery Rock College in 1954. I then entered the Navy and became a fighter pilot. In 1967, as I was flying over North Vietnam on a bombing mission, my jet was hit and I was mortally wounded. They never found my body. I never had a funeral. The government did place a marker at a spot in Ft. Rosecrans National Cemetery in San Diego. There was a ceremony when my wife received the Medal of Honor at the White House. And until last year, I had no memorial service. But last year, at the 125th Anniversary of Turtle Creek, those good folks organized a Memorial Mass for me at my hometown church, St. Colman. It was a beautiful, prayerful Mass celebrated by Fr. John Dansak, a retired Navy Chaplain. The Navy was present and accorded me full Military Honors which I had never received. That was richly appreciated by me and my family. So, I just want to say to all of you good folks here today, and the good people of Turtle Creek, thank you for showing up today. Thank you for remembering, not only me, but all my comrades from all of the wars who sacrificed their lives for our country. We are all appreciative and we would do it all over again for the United States of America. Have a wonderful Memorial Day."

I walked away, retreating behind the pine trees, and quietly left the Church Hill Cemetery to go to the Braddock Catholic ceremony. I arrived in time to use the empty chapel to change into the all-wool WW II Army dress uniform. And on a hot early summer day.

I lurked with the crowd of hundred or so folks until I was called to give my address. The moderator, National Vice Commander of the Amvets, Rege Riley, announced that Pat Lanigan could not be here, but there was a substitute speaker. I took the microphone, again largely unrecognized in the World War II uniform, and announced, "I am Leo Maloney from East Pittsburgh. I graduated from East Pittsburgh High School in 1939 and went to work in the Westinghouse plant. In 1943, I was drafted into the Army for World War II. I was in one of the first units to land on the beachhead of Anzio during the invasion of Italy in May of 1944. My left leg was shattered by gunfire. I was treated at a field hospital and then shipped to Walter Reed hospital in Washington, D.C. I died there from my wounds and infections. My body was shipped to Lanigan Funeral Home in East Pittsburgh for viewing. On the day of the funeral, my

procession travelled up Linden Avenue, to Bessemer Avenue, and up Main St. to St. William Church. The route was lined with people on both sides of the street to honor me and profess their support to my family. St. William Church was standing room only for my Requiem High Mass and over 100 servicemen also attended. After Mass, the procession travelled the 1.5 miles up Brinton Road to this cemetery, again lined on both sides with folks paying respects. My body is buried just over that ridge with my Mom and Dad.

I am honored to be here today on Memorial Day and I want to thank each and everyone of you for coming to this place to remember me and all my comrades who were killed in all of this great country's wars. We fought to keep our country free and to spread liberty to the world. And we would all do over again. Thank you all, from all of us!"

And then I walked into the crowd and quietly back to the chapel to shed that all-wool uniform.

Of all the hundreds of Memorial Day services that I have attended and participated in, 2018 Memorial Day is one that will last in my mind and the minds of folks who attended the services at Church Hill and Braddock Catholic Cemeteries. My imitation of 2 heroes was well received and appreciated.

Now I need to resurrect 2 military who were killed in action for a guest appearance in 2019.







