

# Memorial Day and Specialist Caughman

What is Memorial Day? Is it a day at the beach? It is grilling hot dogs and hamburgers on a backyard grill? Or is it a woman way too young to be a widow crying over a tombstone while her children look on?

G.K. Chesterton once said, "The true soldier fights not because he hates what is in front of him, but because he loves what is behind him," and this idea became the central theme to Part I, Chapter VII, "The War of the Gods and Demon" of his book *The Everlasting Man*.

In this respect, Memorial Day is both a time to celebrate and a time to remember. Spending time with friends and family on picnics, as well as other things our culture does for fun, is exactly what the soldier was willing to go to war for. But there is a cost for the freedom to do such things, and the price is paid by friends and family the soldier left behind. We should remember and be grateful for this sacrifice.

I remember waiting for a long time for Thomas Caughman to join my company. The Army Reserves are always short of personnel, and I had two new soldiers in training who would soon be joining us. They finally arrived at my unit in December. Instead of having a normal weekend drill, we had a one-day Christmas party hosted by the Family Support Group. But party or no party, certain things need to be done each month. While most of the soldiers had a short light-duty day before festivities began, some other senior personnel and I were actually busier than usual. And on top of the military duties, I also needed to ensure things were going well with the Family Support Group as far as party preparations and coordinations were concerned.

I always took time each month to personally interview new soldiers in the unit, but that day I was sorely pressed to postpone it until January. No one would have blamed me if I had, but somehow I found some time to welcome them that day. As it turned out, I was awfully glad I did.

Both entered my office wearing sharp, clean uniforms. Caughman was grinning from ear to ear, while the other soldier had a more relaxed look. Both were proper with their military courtesy. I asked why they joined the army, what their goals were, and other routine questions designed to make them feel welcome while also giving me a chance to measure them up. The other soldier appeared to me as one who would do his job well enough, but I could tell Caughman had a calling. He was doing exactly what he wanted to do and was eager for more.

I knew Caughman would be a major asset for the company, so later on I asked the members of his Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) chain about him. All had been delighted to have him under their charge, and told me that his contagious energy helped him fit right in with the other soldiers. My Training NCO was also quite happy, already making plans to get this kid into Sapper School (the engineer equivalent of Ranger School).

After the party was over, and all but a few had left, I found myself with a large stack of papers left for me by my Training NCO that needed my signature. As usual, I would look over each paper to ensure I knew what I was signing, sign it and then move on to the next. But when I got to a certain request for transfer, I paused.

Another unit was about to deploy to Iraq, and needed some personnel to fill up empty slots. A

request for volunteers was announced earlier that day. I had papers like this before. I would note who I was losing, sign it, and go on. But this time it was Caughman. Unlike the others who had volunteered in the past, Caughman was fresh out of training and had no chance to learn how things worked outside of military school. I thought about it for a few moments, torn on what to do. I believed in a voluntary military, and the best way to encourage volunteering was to let people volunteer. But he was so new to the army, and I was concerned about whether he was really ready.

I asked my First Sergeant if he could think of any reason for him to not go. He couldn't come up with a reason. I then asked my Training NCO if he thought Caughman was ready for this mission. He replied that, just coming out of school, Caughman probably had the most current combat lessons applied to his training and therefore might be better prepared than most of the rest of the company. With that endorsement, I approved the request and continued with the rest of my work. I later found out that he was assigned to 3rd platoon, A Company of the 458th Engineer Battalion in Pennsylvania, and that they were sent to Baghdad, Iraq.

I never saw either new soldier alive again. The other soldier committed suicide a couple weeks later. Naturally, I attended his funeral. Caughman was with his new unit before our next drill. He completed his mobilization with them and deployed to Iraq as expected. It was quite a shock a few months later to learn that he had been killed in action.

I got a letter from his platoon leader, and he had a lot to say. Just like with us, Caughman had fit right in with the new unit and was enthusiastic about all aspects of military life. He was promoted from Private to Private First Class in Iraq. During his tour, he not only volunteered for every mission, he volunteered for the most dangerous job on a convoy: the machine gunner in the HMMWV turret.

On the day he was killed, his convoy was ambushed in a city. He did his job and provided covering fire while vehicles caught in the kill zone made their escape. Once everyone was clear of the kill zone, the convoy sped away but was ambushed a second time before they had a chance to reorganize. Again, he provided covering fire, but this time an enemy RPG rocket slammed into his vehicle and killed everyone in it. His actions in both ambushes are credited with saving many of his comrades' lives. He was posthumously promoted to Specialist and awarded the Bronze Star and Purple Heart for his valor and sacrifice.

I attended his funeral. His grandfather was the preacher. His six-year-old cousin sang "God Bless the USA" to the full church. According to his grandfather at the service, one of the last things Thomas said to him was, "I'm not married, I don't have any kids. I'm going for those who can't. I'm going because it's right." The funeral was given with full military honors, including a rifle squad for the salute. He was buried in the church's cemetery. I got to meet his parents, and they certainly had to know that I was the one who approved his orders to go to Iraq. They were behind me during the 21-gun salute, and I could hear his mother sob with every shot. It was the most humbling experience I have ever gone through in my life.

I know that considering the short amount of time I actually had to get to know him, it may seem strange that I can make any comments on what he liked. It may even seem difficult for me to relate to him at all, as the 20-something-year-olds of today have more in common with him than I did at that age. He grew up in an age with cell phones, Amazon and Call of Duty; I didn't. But it is amazing how much one can learn about someone in a short time if one is willing to pay attention. I could see that he was very outgoing and active, and he made friends quickly. He obviously had to share many of the likes and interests common among young men to blend in so easily. As I did some research on various

obituary and memorial sites that he is included on, I was proven correct.

Family was clearly important to him, and church was important to his family as the details of the funeral show. But there are even more examples of the love he had for his family, church and life.

He loved outdoor hunting and fishing. According to his mother, the day he was killed, he had called home asking if they sold his pickup truck, and if the fish he sent to the taxidermy was back yet. Every year since his death, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources has hosted the Thomas Caughman Memorial Veterans Hunt.

He had a sense of humor. I originally was going to use a different picture to honor him by, until I learned the history behind it. According to his mother, she was constantly asking him if he was still brushing his teeth. So he had that picture taken specifically to show how white they were, as proof that he was indeed brushing them.

He was very concerned for the welfare for others. In a letter dated March 17, 2004, he has this to say: "...people beg for food. The little children, feel bad, we're not allowed to give them any food or anything."

Finally, it was crystal clear to me from the beginning that he was a patriot, as his calling to serve his country was perhaps the strongest I have ever witnessed. As I did my research, I found out that he was even more of a patriot than I dared to hope for. It was evident from every testimony I ever heard of him, but I'm going to provide two especially touching examples.

I learned that he ended every letter with the words "Freedom isn't free," and I have a copy of a letter that he sent to my company that testifies to this. In this letter, he said things such as:

"Well I really don't think a person knows the full meaning of freedom until the [sic] come to a place such as this. Personally I think freedom is what America is. ... Freedom means to me that you may do your will within the laws of the country and the Laws of the Lord. ... But being free is being able to be happy and love each other and not having someone dictating that. Living the life you choice [sic], not one that is demanded of you."

But perhaps the single best insight I have had on the man is a letter he wrote to be opened in the event of his demise:

Dad, Mom, Sis,

I think sometimes why I did this and if it was worth it. Then I realize how important people like me are, we all know Freedom isn't never free and somebody must protect that, for my family and everyone who enjoys freedom. Sometimes I get angry because I realize that people take advantage of that. But many respect that also, so its worth it; doing my job as an American soldier. I've done many things and seen many things most will never experience. I know the sacrifice to protect the U.S. and more important my family and friends.

If yall are reading this, I guess it means that I have lost my life on this

world but started a new one in Heaven. Don't cry or worry about me, because I have died for my country and yall. We knew what may happen while I was here, but I think it was meant to be...

...I really don't know how to end this but, carry on with your lives and remember you live in a great place, where men and women sacrifice so much for all of us. I love yall so, so much. Sincerely your son and brother,  
Thomas

So yes, Memorial Day is a day of picnics and boating, but it is also a solemn reminder of why we can do such things. These two aspects of Memorial Day do not contradict each other; they require each other to have meaning. Thomas clearly understood this, as can be plainly seen in his final words to those he loved best.

I do not think it is mere chance that Easter and Memorial Day are so close together. Just as Caughman did not hate those who killed him, Jesus did not hate those who crucified Him. Just as Caughman loved those he left behind, Jesus loved those He left behind. Just as Caughman allows us, in no small way, to enjoy the lives we live, Jesus allows us to enjoy His presence in Heaven. Easter Season is a solemn time that calls us to remember the price Jesus paid on our account, but it is also a celebration of all we get to inherit because of it. We can, and should, both enjoy the fruits of the sacrifice and honor those who made the sacrifice.

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