

By **WILLIAM C. KASHATUS**

Honor vets by getting out of Iraq

MEMORIAL-Day weekend will be especially bitter-sweet for me this year.

The dedication of the National World War II Memorial in Washington will bring back memories of two veterans I came to know and love. But the continued U.S. presence in Iraq and the growing toll of American lives there convince me that the Bush administration has learned little from the greatest generation this country ever produced.

The World War II veterans I loved were my uncles. Ironically, they convinced me to become a devout pacifist.

Dick Femino was a "Pearl Harbor Avenger." Like many other young men, he enlisted six months to the day after the attack. He was sworn in at the precise time of the bombing. He served on the USS Randolph, an aircraft carrier that took part in the first combat strike against the Japanese homeland.

On March 11, 1945, a kamikaze pilot crashed into the ship, tearing a huge hole in the flight deck. Ammo began to detonate. Planes burned while wounded men lay bleeding on the hangar deck.

Among the wounded was my uncle, who had two broken feet and a badly sprained back. Still, he managed to assist in getting the wounded to sick bay.



Associated Press

Len Valaitis, my other uncle, was a Marine who fought on Okinawa. On April 1, 1945, he joined the largest Pacific invasion force in a two-month bloodbath with nearly 50,000 U.S. casualties.

He often told me that he must have had nine lives because he lost most of them on Okinawa. He returned from the Pacific with a chest full of ribbons, in-

cluding a Purple Heart, and post-traumatic battle syndrome.

My uncles were lucky enough to live long, productive lives. And I was fortunate to be the beneficiary of their wisdom.

In many discussions over the years, I came to understand that they, like so many other WWII vets, left me with a precious legacy — the freedom I enjoy. It was

forged by men who believed in duty, honor, country, and, as important, that war is a last resort only to be undertaken for a just and moral cause; not a political one.

That legacy compels me to question the continued U.S. presence in Iraq.

That presence is about many things — oil, geopolitical interests, President Bush's refusal to admit a mistake — but it certainly isn't for a just and moral cause.

While Americans were fully supportive of a war against terrorism in the wake of 9/11, the Bush administration lost faith with us by diverting attention away from Osama and onto Iraq. The failure to prove the existence of weapons of mass destruction in that country, repeated lies about the financial and human costs, and, more recently, the indecencies committed against detainees at Abu Ghraib are all indisputable proof that honor, duty and morality were among the first casualties of the so-called "War on Terrorism."

What's worse is the smug assurance with which this administration conducts foreign policy and its cavalier attitude about war itself.

We all know the saying that "war is hell." Because my uncles experienced that hell, they offered an important corollary: "combat tends to forge the most devout pacifists." Maybe that's why they never wanted their sons to go to Vietnam, and discouraged me from enlisting in the '80s. U.S. troops were embroiled in a "no-win" situation in Lebanon.

Why should I expect President Bush, Vice President Cheney, or Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld to understand that kind of wisdom when none of them ever experienced combat? Only Secretary of State Powell, who has quietly and consistently opposed military involvement, can appreciate my uncles' advice — because he has.

I will be forever grateful to my uncles for teaching me what it means to be an American. But I can only feel resentment toward the Bush administration for refusing to honor the lessons it should have learned from the thousands of men who gave their lives on the battlefields of Europe and in the Pacific during World War II.

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