

'Don't waste what you've been given'

Vermillion honors war dead with Monday service

By David Lias

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"It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain..."

This excerpt from Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, according to Andy Howe, helps explain why Monday's Memorial Day observance in Vermillion is important.

The quote also reveals a paradox that at times Howe and other veterans like him struggle with at times.

Howe, known to the community as the Clay County sheriff, served in the U.S. Marine Corps as part of the multi-national peacekeeping force in Beirut, Lebanon in 1983. It was a military action that at times seemed to have no clear mission.

"How do you prevent people from dying in vain when they didn't even have an objective when they died?" Howe asked during his keynote address at

Vermillion's Memorial Day observance, held Monday in the Vermillion Public Library. "That's a real tough one. How can we all make sure that all of our servicemen that go overseas, do their duty, and die ... don't die in vain?"

In the fall of 1982, because of increasing political unrest and a civil war in Lebanon, President Ronald Reagan organized a new "multinational force" with France and Italy. On Sept. 29, 1982, this new force entered Beirut with about 1,200 Marines. Their stated mission was to help the new Lebanese government and army with stability.

Howe, a member of the Bravo Battery, was scheduled to be discharged from the U.S. Marine Corps in April 1983. He learned, however, that Charlie Battery needed an ammunition technician, so he decided to add six months to his enlistment and transfer to Charlie Battery.

On April 18, things changed rapidly for Howe and other Marines. That day, the U.S. embassy in Beirut was targeted by a suicide bomber. Sixty three people died, mostly

embassy and CIA staff members, several soldiers and one Marine. Seventeen of the dead were Americans. It was the deadliest attack on a U.S. diplomatic mission up to that time, and is thought of as marking the beginning of anti-U.S. attacks by Islamist groups.

"We knew what we were going in there (Lebanon) for — we were going there to keep the peace," Howe said. "And I thought a lot of what I was in it for was to have the opportunity to use the skills that we had spent all of these years learning," he said.

Howe landed in Beirut on May 28, 1983, with the 24th Marine Amphibious Unit. He described it as a "gleaming white city" as he viewed it from the deck of his ship.

"In Beirut, at that time, we had a mission of keeping the peace," he said. "Another mission they talked a lot about was keeping the airport open. I'm not going to get into the politics of what is going on or analyze this and try to break it down to decide if we were right or wrong to be there.

"I was a corporal, and I didn't get to decide why we were in Beirut, or whether

or not we should be in Beirut," Howe said. "I was there because I was sent there."

For months, life was routine, made up of patrols in portions of the city. Life for Howe and his fellow Marines remained, for the most part, fairly calm for a time.

"Every now and then we'd have a mortar drop on us, and every now and then, people would take a shot at us," he said. "We had rules of engagement that we needed to follow, and we were there to keep the peace and hope that people would follow the rules and be nice to each other. Of course, that didn't happen."

Israeli forces left Lebanon in August 1983, "and rather than us moving out to Israel's positions, the militias moved into those positions, meaning they were closer to us. All of sudden, we were right next to the militia units," Howe said.

Soon, the multi-national forces were being pounded by artillery, and began to suffer casualties. "Things changed right there, and as far as the Marines, we were snarling bulldogs at that point," he said.

Soon, Howe and his fellow Marines found themselves engaged in military action around the clock.

"There were times, I swear, I would go six or seven days in a row without sleep," he said. "It was non-stop, from late August through October. It was constant — the shooting and the shelling never really let up."

On Oct. 23, 1983, just as Howe was getting ready to go to bed, he and his fellow soldiers were shaken by the sound of a loud explosion.

"I thought we had an artillery round hit just on the other side of the little wall we were behind,"

Howe said. He and other soldiers suddenly realized the landscape had changed, and something was missing.

An entire building was suddenly gone. Two truck bombs struck separate buildings housing United States and French military forces killing 299 American and French servicemen. The organization Islamic Jihad, later known as Hezbollah, claimed responsibility for the bombing.

Many men from Howe's unit who were on mess duty or serving as forward observers were killed, he said.

Approximately a month later, he and many of the surviving members of the unit were on their way back home to the United States.

"That was the end of my time in the Marine Corps, and my time in Charlie Battery," he said. "Here we are 30 years later — it's a time I would never give back; I'm glad that I did it. At this point, you wonder about the unclear objectives, because we're still doing that now — all the time we're sending our people over(seas) with not really having an idea of what they're supposed to do or what is expected out of them.

"The Beirut Marines are always a bit angry that there was never a military response to this," Howe said. "President Reagan intended to, but there just wasn't because of the politics that were going on then."

He said he will never forget the servicemen who lost their lives in Beirut.

"I've always thought about how I can best serve these guys, who we lost overseas," Howe said, "I've always thought the best thing to do is live well — do a good job, raise your kids, serve your community. Live well because they can't. It's as simple as that."

It's a view that Howe

said he hopes everyone keeps in mind as they remember their fellow citizens who gave their all so that Americans may live free.

"I think it's important, as you go out every day ... just don't waste what you've been given," he said. "That's the message I hope to leave here today."



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