

“A Legacy of Greatness”

Memorial Day was originally referred to as Decoration Day, a name dating back to the Civil War era, taken from the practice of “decorating” the graves—often with flowers and flags—of those who died while in service to their country. At some point, post-World War II, Congress officially declared it “Memorial Day” and fixed the date as the last Monday in May.

But, I believe, there’s merit in the moniker, Decoration Day, which suggests there’s something to do, an action or activity, to honor those who gave so much. Today, appropriately, as we gather on Memorial Day, *our presence* decorates Marshall Memorial Park, a special place, a place of serenity that represents a great story—and a legacy of greatness.

The protagonist in the story is Lt. Colonel George Frederick Marshall. Colonel Marshall, a West Point alumnus of 1935, was typical of his generation: dutiful, patriotic, uncomplaining, resourceful—and determined. These attributes were central to the way that Marshall and his generation got things done. Lt. Colonel Marshall exhibited greatness, but I’m sure he wouldn’t really see it that way-- because humility was also typical of his generation.

My own father, who would be one hundred if alive today, was a mess sergeant in a fast-moving anti-aircraft artillery Army unit that landed at Normandy and wound-up in far eastern Germany by war’s end. Staff-Sergeant Bingham returned to civilian life and rarely mentioned the war.

My father-in-law still lives, now almost 92. He was an army infantry lieutenant who saw significant combat in North Africa, Sicily, and in the first minutes of the Normandy Invasion on deadly Omaha Beach—and later in the Battle of the Bulge. He returned home with two Silver Stars, but for 45-years he rarely spoke of the War until his daughter—my wife—convinced him to join her on a month’s long revisit of his WWII footsteps.

I’m blessed to have known my father and father-in-law, but, alas, Rick and Michael Marshall, the sons of Lt. Colonel Marshall, never really knew their father.

Rick was not yet 3 and baby brother Michael was under 1 when their father was killed in combat.

Lt. Colonel Marshall died just 2 weeks short of his 32nd birthday. He died in Oran harbor, Algeria, early on November 8, 1942, about 4100 miles from where we gather.

After America's entry into the war, our British and Russian allies were anxious for the United States to open up another front in Europe or at least on their side of the world, a place to divert Germany's attention and resources. They had North Africa in mind. The British had already been engaged with the Germans in North Africa, specifically Egypt and Libya, for nearly two years and Allied war planners saw North Africa as a strategic region to control—for its access to oil and as a launching point to invade Sicily, Italy and southern Europe.

During 1942, thanks to the "world" war, Americans were regularly getting a lesson in geography. Far-away places with strange-sounding names. Places at the time that were not well-known to most Americans:

Tulagi in the Solomon Islands

Port Moresby, New Guinea

Tula, Russia

Tobruk, Libya

Midway Island in the Pacific

And in the fall of 1942, Americans would hear of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria in North Africa

Even the popular Humphrey Bogart movie based on the then current affairs in North Africa, "Casablanca," debuted in New York in December 1942.

Though President Franklin Roosevelt and American military planners were very uncertain and wary of a North African invasion—wondering if they shouldn't

merely wait until they were ready for a cross-channel invasion from England to France—they were swayed by their Allies to pursue a plan of attack.

So plans developed for Operation Torch, the joint British-American invasion of North Africa, specifically Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia—in a place so far away, so poorly understood, a place controlled by the Vichy French, essentially a puppet government of the Germans. And elements of the German military itself were also present.

Much closer to home, some significantly hot action took place off the American east coast, and even the coast of North Carolina. 121 merchant and commercial ships were sunk by the Germans off the east coast of the U.S. during 1942. From New England to Florida, explosions could be seen and heard offshore and soon flotsam littered our ports and beaches. Sometimes bodies washed ashore. Think of that—right off our coast in many occasions, German U-Boats attacked and sunk—121 ships—in a single year. American ships with American names: The City of Atlanta, The Dixie Sword, Independence Hall, The City of New York, and the Esso Baton Rouge were among the casualties. The war was not always in those faraway places.

During his military service, George Marshall had seen some faraway places. After finishing West Point in 1935, he did duty at the Presidio in San Francisco (back in those days that was pretty far-away for a fellow from Jacksonville, Florida), and he later served in the Philippines. There, he met Dahlis McCurdo, an officer's daughter; Dahlis became his wife and the mother of Rick and Michael.

The young family wound-up at Ft. Benning, Georgia, as Marshall, who was versatile in both talent and interest in a variety of military undertakings, opted to be an infantry officer. Ft. Benning has been focused on infantry training ever since it opened in 1918.

Young Marshall was an impressive soldier—eager to serve and take on challenges, and he was on a path of impressive promotions. After America's entry into the war, Marshall made Lt. Colonel by the summer of 1942. He was destined to be a general.

Not long afterwards, Marshall's leadership was recognized as he was sought out to lead an important aspect of Operation Torch—the invasion of North Africa. Soon Lt. Colonel Marshall left his family and Ft. Benning behind for England where he would learn of the secret plans of Torch and prepare for his special mission.

Marshall was asked to lead a significant force of infantry, a battalion, to seize control of the port of Oran in Algeria. Marshall's forces were to take the port, secure the port, and keep it open—and keep any French ships from falling into enemy hands.

Meanwhile over a hundred thousand troops—mostly American, some British, would be landing spread over several hundred miles on either side of Oran—all along the coast of Algeria and Morocco. Among other participants in the invasion were some big names, such as General Teddy Roosevelt, Junior (the former president's son), General George S. Patton—and the chief commander of Operation Torch—based in the isle of Gibraltar—was Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Meanwhile, Allied planners were uncertain as to how the Vichy French would react to the invasion. Intelligence indicated that some would welcome the Americans, maybe even the British—though relations were not especially good in general between the French and British—but clearly some of the Vichy were regularly and happily compliant with the Germans. Indeed, it was tricky to anticipate just how the Vichy French would react to the Anglo-American invasion.

It was concluded that the Invasion force would not fire unless fired upon—and that a significant effort to NOT engage the French would be made. Shipboard loudspeakers were to announce in French that these are friends not foes—Americans aboard—we come to your aid. The small ships bearing Lt. Colonel Marshall and his forces flew both the British and American flag, but the Stars 'n Stripes flew foremost. The Brits calculated that the French would be more receptive to the U.S. banner.

The Oran harbor invasion force—about 600 men—was to enter the harbor on two lightly-armored and lightly-armed former U.S. Coast Guard Cutters. However, these cutters were now British ships—under the Lend-Lease Program developed

by Roosevelt and Congress to offer aid to Great Britain through military hardware and ships—this enacted even before the U.S. had entered the war. The cutters had once plied America’s Great Lakes; in British hands they were renamed the “Walney” and the “Hartland.”

As George F. Marshall arrived in England, eventually London, to learn of his coming role, also arriving were several American journalists who had volunteered for special assignment—to prospectively go into harm’s way with combat troops. One of the reporters was Leo Disher, Jr. of the UP—the United Press. Disher, coincidentally, had North Carolina heritage; he was a Winston-Salem native who had gone to Duke University. Disher’s employer, United Press, said of itself: “The World’s Best Coverage of the World’s Biggest News!”

Leo Disher wound-up embedded with Colonel Marshall’s invasion force and even though he broke an ankle in a shipboard stumble en route from England to the Mediterranean that put him on crutches; he still planned to be aboard the Walney for the Oran Harbor assault. After several weeks of meetings, planning, and practice, the invasion force left the U.K. for Gibraltar on the tip of Spain. The entire force would embark from there.

As midnight November 8 broke, the men of the Walney and Hartland were put on alert. They neared their objective. Their action at Oran was to commence at 3 a.m.

As the soldiers checked their weapons and painted their faces black. The surf was heavy. Little could be seen in the darkness. Disher wrote that it was quiet, and all that could be heard was the hissing sound from the cutter’s large bow—a bow designed to push through ice in the Great Lakes that now pushed through the Mediterranean Sea.

As the Walney led the way, the Hartland followed, along with two smaller boats or launches. Further offshore remained several British naval ships with some significant firepower. At 3 a.m., to divert the attention of the harbor’s defenders from the closing invasion force, one of the British ships well offshore fired its guns harmlessly. But the French defenders were on full alert as they had already

learned of elements of the invasion occurring all along the North African coast—though they didn't yet understand who the invaders were.

Soon, spotlights from ashore swirled and the Walney was discovered. The beams of light were quickly followed by streams of machine gun fire, followed by coastal artillery. The Walney pushed forward, successfully breaking the strong chain booms strung across the harbor entrance. But then soon French ships in the harbor directed fire at the invaders. All hell broke loose. The hoped-for "little or no resistance" from the Vichy French was now only a dream. Instead, the invaders were caught in a nightmare.

As the infantry aboard the cutters attempted to climb up their ladders to the deck, shells burst and bullets pinged against the Walney. Casualties galore covered the Walney's deck and soon the Hartland's deck, too. In the chaos, the Walney and one of the British launches collided. A shell burst and the Walney lost its engine—lost its power—and was adrift.

Colonel Marshall was on the bridge of the Walney inspiring and leading—putting himself out front just as George Washington often did 160 years earlier when he rode to the front lines with his Continental Army--the first American army. As Marshall fought and assessed matters from the bridge of the Walney, Marshall's aide, a Lt. Cole from Kentucky, wearing 2 pistols around his waist that would never leave their holster, repeatedly shouted through the loudspeakers in his best French—Cease Fire—We Are Americans—We are Your Friends. The French either didn't hear or didn't believe.

Colonel Marshall and several of his men fired away with their tommy guns and hurled hand grenades at very close-by French ships. British sailors manned the small deck guns of the cutters and had some success. But soon, the French machine guns and artillery from shore and ship doomed the entire invasion.

Colonel Marshall died and many others died valiantly fighting until the end. Eventually, the Walney was engulfed in flames and was aground deep into the harbor. Reporter Disher recalled seeing the Stars 'n Stripes still flying even as the Walney was mostly submerged. The Hartland suffered a similar fate, but more of

her men were able to make it to shore. From there, they were either jailed or hospitalized.

During the chaos, Leo Disher, on crutches and with a life preserver tied to a leg, managed to stay on the main deck to take in the action. Disher reported it was a devilish symphony of machine gun and artillery fire, accompanied by explosions, fire, and smoke. Disher saw the explosion that took out the Walney's bridge *and* Colonel Marshall. Badly wounded himself, Disher along with anyone who could eventually went overboard. Miraculously, Disher swam, and then crawled to shore, before a spent bullet ricocheted across his head, knocking him unconscious. He was out for a good 90 minutes before the French discovered him and carried him to medical aide.

The Oran Harbor assault was not successful, but ironically within 24 hours or so, Oran was in Allied hands as the invasion forces on either side of Oran had moved inland to take the port town. Ironically, the French soon joined in with the Allies in restoring Oran Harbor in the aftermath of the battle.

Leo Disher was transferred to London to recover from his wounds, but not before becoming one of the first civilians—maybe THE first civilian—to receive the Order of the Purple Heart. From World War II, until recent years, the military allowed civilians to receive the Purple Heart. Disher had suffered 26 wounds, 15 of them deemed significant—bullet and shrapnel wounds. Of Col. Marshall's 393 troops, 189 were killed and 157 wounded. Only 47 went unscathed. Marshall was perhaps the highest-ranking officer killed in the entire invasion of North Africa that night of Nov. 8.

Back in the States, Mrs. Marshall was soon notified of her husband's death. Then living in Augusta, Georgia, Mrs. Marshall—as were many others of that time--were left to wonder of the exact circumstances surrounding the loss of their loved one.

Like her husband, Mrs. Marshall was a person of action. She read accounts of *and* by Leo Disher in the newspaper and she went to the editor of the Augusta Chronicle to see if he could get in touch with Disher. Perhaps Mr. Disher knew her

husband and more about what happened. Mrs. Marshall wanted to know more—to be able to tell her sons as they grew older about their father's service and about his death.

Exactly one year after Pearl Harbor—Dec. 7, 1942—the Augusta newspaperman used his connections to try to reach Leo Disher. Soon, the connection was made. And Disher gladly and happily wrote Mrs. Marshall of her husband's final moments, of his gallantry.

Disher wrote, "I'd follow him anywhere. He's one of the best! Tell the boys that they will be very proud of their father. You need never fear the boys' questions. Col. Marshall tackled a job of greatest importance to our armies and he never quit fighting against impossible odds, and that he never struck the ship's colors. I hope this letter may help a little. But it is wrong for you to say you are asking a great deal of me. You are one whom a great deal was asked and proudly given. You and a great many others at home."

Leo Disher went the extra mile to do his duty as a reporter. He reported and wrote under the most strenuous and challenging of circumstances. He graciously obliged the widow of the commanding officer on her appeal to learn more.

Mrs. Marshall to her credit was not content until she tried to learn more of the circumstances in Oran Harbor on the night of November 8, 1942. She was a great mother, a great wife, a great citizen.

And though some soldiers might have scoffed at some of the plans made by superiors for the risky Oran Harbor assault, Lt. Colonel Marshall embraced them. He was a positive thinker—a do-er, not a doubter—a leader, not a whiner. He gave it his all—literally. He was a great soldier. He was a great man.

Except for the tragedy at Oran Harbor, the North African invasion went fairly well with relatively light casualties. On November 10, 1942, Winston Churchill said of the Anglo-American invasion of North Africa: "Now, this is not the end, it is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning. "

In March of 1943, the late Colonel Marshall was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross—an American military honor second only to the Congressional Medal of Honor. And, of course, too, Marshall was awarded the Purple Heart.

Disher's account of the battle and the story of his correspondence with Mrs. Marshall were featured in two 15-minute radio shows for the series "Soldiers of the Press," dramatizations of stories from various war correspondents. Disher continued in the newspaper business, dying of cancer in his late 50s in 1969 while living in Washington, DC.

Dahlis Marshall remarried a West Point classmate of Colonel Marshall's, who made a very fine husband and step-father—and father, as 2 more sons were added to the family. Dahlis enjoyed a long life and loved those 4 sons: Rick and Mike Marshall and Bob and Bernie Booth are here today.

All of the characters in this story left a legacy of greatness. All went beyond the call of duty. A parade ground at Ft. Benning, Georgia is named in memory of Lt. Colonel Marshall and now we have Marshall Memorial Park in Raleigh. May these special places long serve to honor him and those like him who made the ultimate sacrifice; we all are the beneficiaries of their greatness. In gratitude each year at this time, we should remember to decorate their resting places. It's a way to honor our past, enrich our present, and inform our future.

Warren L. Bingham for Dedication of Marshall Memorial Park, Memorial Day 2013