



NANCY VANDERMEER

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 70TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

May 19, 2020

Memorial Day 2020 – Taking Pause

In 1868, Commander in Chief John A. Logan of the Grand Army of the Republic issued General Order Number 11 designating May 30 as a memorial day “for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village, and hamlet churchyard in the land.” The first national celebration of the holiday took place May 30, 1868, at Arlington National Cemetery, where both Confederate and Union soldiers were buried. Originally known as Decoration Day, at the turn of the century it was designated as Memorial Day. ¹

On the first Decoration Day, General James Garfield made a speech at Arlington National Cemetery, after which 5,000 participants helped to decorate the graves of the more than 20,000 Union and Confederate soldiers buried in the cemetery. By the late 19th century, many communities across the country had begun to celebrate Memorial Day, and after World War I, observers began to honor the dead of all of America’s wars. In 1971, Congress declared Memorial Day a national holiday to be celebrated the last Monday in May. Today, Memorial Day is celebrated at Arlington National Cemetery with a ceremony in which a small American flag is placed on each grave. It is customary for the president or vice president to give a speech honoring the contributions of the dead and to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. ²

On Memorial Day weekend, throughout Wisconsin and throughout our part of the state, one can partake in and observe a variety of events, observances and ceremonies ranging from community parades and festivals, to local VFW and American Legion observances, to community-wide ceremonies held at local parks or cemeteries. The purpose of Memorial Day is for Americans to honor the sacrifice of members of the Army, Air Force, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, and Navy and pause to remember the fallen. Service members, veterans and their families, especially, know there is a big difference between Memorial Day and Veterans Day. While Veterans Day, Nov. 11, is a day set aside to celebrate all veterans, Memorial Day is a somber holiday dedicated to honor military fallen, with a special focus on those killed during military service or through enemy contact. ³

This year, Memorial Day weekend will look and feel a lot different for a large number of individuals and families locally and throughout Wisconsin as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of the public health crisis originating from abroad, many local communities have cancelled their parades, festivals, observances, recognition events and ceremonies, and although some will partake in traditional activities, a large number of individuals and families will alter their activities by not traveling or partaking in these types of community events and observations. For me, this year’s Memorial Day weekend will be quite a bit different as well.

As an elected official, I not only have the opportunity to attend community recognition events, but I also usually have the opportunity to speak and offer my thoughts on recognizing those that have made the



NANCY VANDERMEER

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 70TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

ultimate sacrifice for us. It's a particularly meaningful time of year for me, in particular, because I have the opportunity to have a unique vantage point on the day of remembrance and recognition for a variety of reasons, including my official duties as a state representative and because of the unique demographics of the 70th Assembly District and Monroe County. There's an active military base in Fort McCoy and Volk Field Air National Guard base in Camp Douglas and there are a number of veterans and their families that live in local communities throughout the 70th District who either lost someone close to them during military service or through enemy contact, or know someone who has.

I would suggest that this year on Memorial Day, whatever one chooses to do, that we make a special effort to pause and honor the members of the Army, Air Force, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, and Navy that have served, fallen, and made the ultimate sacrifice for us, so that we may enjoy the freedoms and independence we hold dear. The absence of formal events and ceremonies need not prevent us from taking pause for ourselves and others to show appreciation for those that have lost their lives in service to our county.

Nancy VanderMeer represents the 70th Wisconsin State Assembly District, which includes portions of Monroe, Jackson, Portage and Wood counties and serves as the Chairperson of the Assembly Committee on Rural Development and Vice-Chairperson of the Assembly Committee on Veterans and Military Affairs.

¹ The Library of Congress. 2020. Today In History - May 30. [online] Available at: <<https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/may-30/>> [Accessed 18 May 2020].

² HISTORY. 2020. Civil War Dead Honored On Decoration Day. [online] Available at: <<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/civil-war-dead-honored-on-decoration-day>> [Accessed 18 May 2020].

³ Military.com. 2020. Memorial Day 2020. [online] Available at: <<https://www.military.com/memorial-day>> [Accessed 18 May 2020].