Memorial Day 2014 – My Perspective

By Dr. Richard Kelley

The unusually long and severe winter that has gripped most of the northern hemisphere is finally behind us. We are all looking forward to the arrival of summer. In the United States, summer is generally considered to begin on Memorial Day, observed on the last Monday of May, when, in addition to enjoying typical summertime activities like swimming and picnics, we pause to remember and honor the men and women who died while serving in our nation’s armed services. This year, on May 26, I will join the millions who do that by placing wreaths on veterans’ gravesites, saying private prayers or attending memorial gatherings. But there will also be many other related thoughts on my mind.

More along the lines of my thoughts on Veterans Day, observed each year on November 11 (the anniversary of the armistice that ended World War I – “the war to end all wars,” if only it were so!), I will be expressing my gratitude to all who have dedicated a portion of their lives in one of our nation’s uniformed military services to do what they can to protect our freedom and achieve peace and security for the rest of us. Many gave their lives in the effort. Many others lost one or more limbs. Some endure and continue to experience unbelievable suffering of a different kind. They, and their families, deal with a variety of post-traumatic stress disorders, PTSD, which alter their relationships, their ability to work, relax or even sleep.

Other veterans and their families are also bearing the brunt of an unbelievable scandal that has enveloped the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, which has “cooked the books” to look good while thousands of veterans have suffered and died from incomplete, deferred or even withheld medical services at a VA hospital or clinic. I’ll remember these former servicemen and servicewomen in my Memorial Day prayers too.

I personally knew one of those veterans. Having been exposed to Agent Orange during his service in Vietnam, he pleaded with VA bureaucrats for prompt diagnosis and treatment of the cause of his abdominal discomfort. Each time he asked – and there were many requests – he was given a different story but the same message: His files were lost. His doctor was on vacation. There were no appointment times available. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Not too many months later, I choked up and tears ran down my cheeks as I tried to speak at his graveside services.

On May 26, 2014, I will also say prayers for others in the Outrigger ‘ohana who have quietly served our nation in uniform but seldom mention it.

I will certainly pray for Mort Marks, a wheelchair-bound fellow-columnist who writes each week for The Villager, a family-owned community newspaper serving the Denver, Colorado, area. Just eight years older than I, Mort served in the U.S. Army in Europe during World War II.

On June 17, 1944, “D Day Plus 11,” 19-year-old Mort landed outside the heavily fortified, German-occupied port of Le Havre on the coast of Normandy, in the north of France. The battle for the city lasted until September 12 with incredible loss of life on both sides. Many of the American casualties came from our own bombers which had faulty information about the location of the front lines.
Mort and his comrades then pushed east and soon fought in the Battle of the Bulge, a 1944-45 mid-winter clash along the German border where Allied forces were almost cut off and crushed.

Then they fought their way to Prague, the capital of what is now the Czech Republic. There, Mort related, the American forces met the Soviet Union’s “Red Army,” which had been driving in the opposite direction since its costly 1943 victory at Stalingrad, nearly 1,400 miles to the east. In those precious days before the onset of the Cold War, those soldiers who briefly met on the battlefield were overjoyed to come together.

“What made you all so happy?” I asked Mort. “It’s simple,” he replied. “The Americans had cigarettes but no alcohol. The Russians had vodka but no cigarettes.”

Happy Memorial Day 2014!