INTRODUCTION

Arlington National Cemetery

A casual walk at Arlington National Cemetery on a warm spring day turned into a decades-long journey—a search for America's better angels. I was planning a picture book, just a bunch of black-and-white photographs with limited cropping and editing, preserved on acetate, not in the cloud. When I enlisted in the Air Force long ago, my first job was as a photographer. I learned the craft of taking pictures when nothing was automatic or digital. Every setting was purposeful and deliberate. I learned to create photographs, not just take pictures.

You can't see all your heroes in one walk at Arlington National Cemetery. The place is enormous—639 acres with over four hundred thousand people enshrined on its gently rolling hills. As one walk turned into two, then more, the years passed. My wife and I moved away. Life moves on, but Arlington remained. I had too few photographs—not enough for a book, just enough to continue the dream. With no Arlington lanes to walk, I had time to learn about some of the famous heroes buried: Doolittle, Donovan, and Murphy. I explored the selfless deeds of Basilone and Levitow. I relived painful memories of the struggle for civil rights with Evers.

At Arlington, it is said "Every stone tells a story." What follows are a few accounts, my attempt to move beyond the popular facts and share my personal narrative. My goal now is more than the making of photographs. I want to inspire readers to explore some of Arlington's entombed heroes and learn their stories. In this book, you will occasionally travel outside the cemetery and into the places and homes where the heroes lived. You will move beyond the cemetery and explore a better America. This book is as much about the heroes at Arlington as it is about their families and loved ones; you will find America's better angels. When

you walk the lanes of Arlington and move beyond the graves, you experience what the US Constitution calls "a more perfect union." *A Walk Among Heroes* is a portrait of an America worth living in and sadly, at times, dying for.

Arlington National Cemetery is one of the most popular destinations around our nation's capital. Over three million visitors tour Arlington every year. You are confronted with this fact as busloads of tourists unload and mob the visitor center. In the spring and fall, convoys of school buses full of neatly attired students replace

Gravesite of President John F. Kennedy

the tourists. Most children wear uniforms or unique T-shirts to aid their chaperones in herding and minimizing strays.

I've often marched with hundreds of my fellow citizens to the Tomb of the Unknowns or President John F. Kennedy's grave. If you stray from these two sites, however, you are mostly alone among heroes. For several years now, I've walked to the distant graves of the unsung and a few famous patriots. I'm humbled by their sacrifices and grateful they are remembered by a nation that owes them so much. I wish I could learn the stories of all four hundred thousand. Perhaps by remembering a few, I can honor the many.

I used my old Hasselblad camera to take most of the photographs in this book. It's a big, slow, deliberate camera and nothing like today's automatic miracles. Nevertheless, it produces a photograph with silklike qualities. It also creates pictures on film. Using this camera is a slow process—measure the light, determine the exposure, compose, and then compose again. Making a photograph is costly and takes time. The negatives need to be processed. There is no instant feedback. If you mess it up and don't get it quite right, back you go to Arlington to walk among heroes.

Whenever Lillian, my wife, and I go back to our nation's capital, I try to spend some time walking among the graves. I see familiar names, I recall stories of heroes, reminding me that these honored dead were sons and daughters and husbands and wives.

Someday, I, too, will rest at Arlington. But I'm not a hero like these many. I'm not worthy. I'll be there, however. Maybe I can take the midwatch? Maybe those heroes can get some rest, and I'll stand guard. I owe them that. I'll join them at Arlington.

Lillian will join me too. She's always come with me. Why should death be any different? She'll stand watch along with me,

standing *by me* as she has always done, not in front nor behind, but together and by my side. And we will be by their sides.

My gravestone at Arlington will have my name, my rank, and a list of a few of my medals. It might also be inscribed with "Vietnam" or "Persian Gulf" for the wars I served through. The other side will simply have a name. Or maybe just "wife of." What else should there be? Mother? Grandmother? What's appropriate for a wife? How about her many academic and professional accomplishments? None will be listed. Will the headstone cover the brilliant children she raised? Often alone? No. Nothing. Just white stone. Her tombstone will simply say "wife of" when so much more should be displayed. She'll be standing watch over the heroes of Arlington, standing watch in her death as she stood watch over me in my life.

The chapters and photographs are my samples of the memorials and gravesites scattered over the cemetery's 639 acres. If you spend a few hours and walk to a distant gravesite, you experience the sheer enormity of Arlington. Over 270,000 headstones fill the landscape, creating what Abraham Lincoln called the "altar of freedom."[1]

Spend a few hours and you will hear "Taps," a gun salute, and maybe see a caisson or two. Almost thirty funerals take place each weekday at Arlington, fewer on Saturday. Before the first funeral of the day, the flag is raised to full staff and then immediately lowered to half-staff. It remains until one half hour after the last funeral of the day. She is then raised again to full staff and then retired. You will not find a personal photograph of a funeral in my collection. It just didn't seem right.

If you live near our nation's capital or plan to visit, I encourage you to tour Arlington National Cemetery. Spend some time

walking to distant gravesites and get to know the heroes buried there. Learn their life stories by traveling to their hometowns. Learn how they lived and whom they loved. Find your own better America. If you do, you will see the very best of our nation, where every stone tells a story.

Gravesite of Senator Robert F. Kennedy

HALLOWED GROUND

That we here highly resolve that these dead
shall not have died in vain—that this nation,
under God, shall have a new birth of freedom,
and that government of the people, by the people,
for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

—President Abraham Lincoln

CHAPTER 1

MEMORIAL DAY

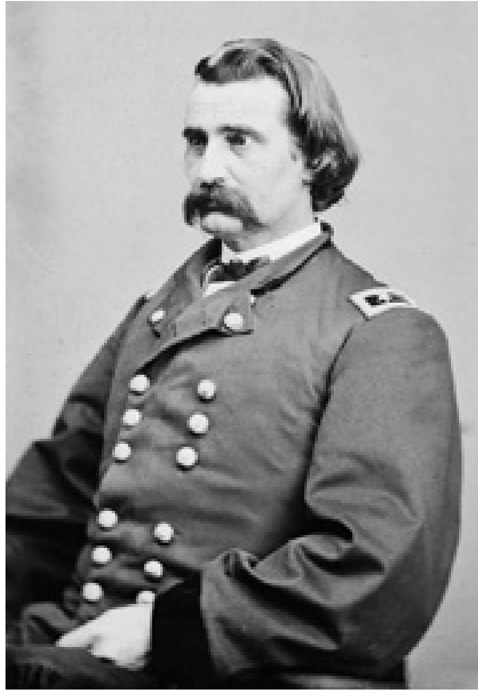
Dogwood trees in bloom

WHO STARTED MEMORIAL DAY? IS THERE A SIMPLE EXPLANATION? Was it the South to commemorate its Confederate War dead? Was it the wives and daughters of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR)? Some say Abraham Lincoln started it with his speech at Gettysburg. But that's just history for convenience. I wanted to use my time on this day to remember the life of one or two heroes buried at Arlington. But their stories would seem out of place without first understanding Memorial Day's larger context—its history and meaning.

At least twenty-five distinct places in the United States lay claim to the origin of Memorial Day. As early as 1861, in Warrenton, Virginia, the grave of John Quincy Marr was decorated with flowers by family and friends on June 3. Marr had died just two days earlier.

Captain Marr was the first Confederate soldier to die in combat. After the Civil War, Southern women and their families cared for the local cemeteries and placed small flowers on the soldiers' graves. Remembering their fallen loved ones, they helped preserve the myth and culture of the lost cause of the Confederacy.

Eight days before that morning, in the North, Colonel Elmer E. Ellsworth led a group of Union soldiers into Alexandria, Virginia, to retake the city. A large Confederate flag was flying atop the Marshall House, an inn in Alexandria, Virginia. On May 24, 1861, Ellsworth and a few of his men entered the building through an open door. They scrambled to the top and removed the flag. Upon descending a flight of stairs, Ellsworth was shot in the chest by the Marshall House innkeeper. He died instantly. In return, one of the Union soldiers shot and killed the innkeeper. Ellsworth was the first Union casualty of the Civil War.



General John A. Logan (by Mathew Brady 1860-1864
Courtesy the Library of Congress)

In 1863, after the Battle of Gettysburg, Lincoln's 272 words would form the ethos of our nation and begin the healing we still hope for today.

On May 5, 1868, General John A. Logan, the commander in chief of the GAR, issued a proclamation for a national day of remembrance called Decoration Day. This was a day to place flowers on the graves of soldiers and loved ones who had died in the war. The GAR was formed after the Civil War to aid northern veterans and advocate for pensions and voting rights for Black Americans. In addition, the GAR urged family members to do what they could to help keep their surviving war veterans sober. A

central focus of the GAR was to create a national day of remembrance for the more than 360,000 Union Army dead.

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, May 5, 1868, is officially recognized as the first Memorial Day. However, the following decades saw numerous towns throughout the North and South laying claim to the honor. For example, Columbus, Georgia, claimed it celebrated Memorial Day in 1866, as did Waterloo, New York.

How did we settle on the last Monday in May for Memorial Day? To commemorate some famous battle or to mark the turning point in the Civil War? No, the end of May was selected because that's when flowers are in bloom throughout the North.

As Civil War veterans grew older and their comrades began to die off, they complained that the younger generation was using the holiday as a time for games, picnics, and revelry. Memorial Day took place at the beginning of summer, after all. In 1923, the GAR and the Indiana state legislature introduced a bill opposing the running of the Indianapolis 500 motor race on Memorial Day. But local officials and the American Legion wanted it to continue. The Indiana governor vetoed the measure, and the race went on. Begun in 1911, the Indy 500 celebrated its hundredth annual race in 2016. The race was suspended only twice, once during World War I and again during World War II.

In 1968 and not leaving well enough alone, Congress passed the Uniform Monday Holiday Act. The act moved four federal holidays, including Memorial Day, to a Monday, thus creating three-day weekends. That, as with most things in history and everything in this story, was subject to controversy. The law took effect in 1971, but it took a few years for all fifty states to comply.

As late as 2002, the Veterans of Foreign Wars opposed holding Memorial Day on a three-day weekend. They believed that "Changing the date merely to create three-day weekends has undermined the very meaning of the day. No doubt, this has contributed a lot to the general public's nonchalant observance of Memorial Day."[1]

On every Memorial Day, flags across the country are raised at sunrise and then lowered to half-staff, where they remain until noon. They are raised again to full staff at noon and stay until sunset. Before every Memorial Day, hundreds of soldiers from the 3rd US Infantry Regiment (also known as the Old Guard) place small flags at the over 270,000 gravestones of Arlington National Cemetery. Flags are placed at each headstone precisely one boot length from the base. Seven thousand more flags are placed at the foot of the Columbarium Courts and Niche Wall. Throughout the United States, volunteers place thousands more flags at the gravesites of our honored dead. They do so at the 172 national cemeteries and many others scattered throughout our nation and overseas.

It's not just Memorial Day's placement at the beginning of summer or its creation of a three-day weekend that makes this holiday abstract. The sheer enormity of our war dead hides our connection. Most of us have no direct or firsthand relationship with the 1.35 million service members who lost their lives defending our country, beginning with the Revolutionary War through today. Over 600,000 Union and Confederate soldiers died in the Civil War. As with most numbers or dates in this chapter, there is plenty of disagreement. An analysis in 2011 using census-based research places the Civil War service member dead at closer to 750,000. And the number of soldiers and sailors killed might have been as high as 850,000.

In World War II, we lost half a million service members. A walk along the Vietnam War Memorial Wall in Washington, DC, contains the names of over 55,000 lives lost. As of January 4, 2024, America is numb after more than three years into a global pandemic. We've lost over 1,163,040 to the novel coronavirus so far. Just like our war dead, the pandemic and the more than one million lost are abstract unless one of those who died was your relative, friend, or colleague.

In 1973, the US Selective Service's authority to induct ended. The lottery, or draft, was suspended in 1976. I turned eighteen in 1974, and like every other eighteen-year-old male, I registered for the draft. My lucky number was 112. Had the war continued, I would've been on the shortlist. Many of my generation alternatively chose Canada over the Southeast Asia rice paddies of President Johnson and President Nixon's War. Who knows what the right choice should've been? Most people I know who had the "right answer" were never faced with that decision. After all, the television and living room couch make patriots of us all. Now, almost fifty years since the draft ended, we seldom know anyone who served in the military, let alone someone who died while on active duty.

According to the casualty status from the US Department of Defense (DOD) as of August 21, 2023, Operation Iraqi Freedom cost us 4,418 service members and another 13 DOD civilians. Operation Enduring Freedom, also known as the war in Afghanistan, all twenty-plus years of it, cost us 2,219 service members, 131 who died in other locations, and 4 DOD civilians.[2]

Today, instead of the draft, we have a system I call "Let someone else's kid go." As fewer and fewer of our nation's youth are needed to serve in uniform, there is an ever-widening divide

between the military and civilian communities. Unless you live close to a major military installation, it is quite possible not to know someone actively serving in uniform. Without this personal connection, the meaning of Memorial Day becomes an abstract concept. When the two communities do meet on holidays such as Memorial Day, fireworks and hot dogs add a nice touch.

The flag is flown at half-staff

CHAPTER 3

THE GOOD SON

Robert Todd Lincoln is buried with his wife, the former
Mary Eunice Harlan, and their son Abraham II

Surviving childhood was not a given in the 1850s and 1860s. In 1863, Emily Dickinson wrote about the inevitability of death and her calm acceptance of it. There would be no calm acceptance for Mary Todd Lincoln.

> Because I could not stop for Death—
> He kindly stopped for me—
> The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
> And Immortality.

Robert Todd Lincoln was born on August 1, 1843. As he grew up, his father traveled on the judicial circuit, so Robert and his father were never close. Robert was the eldest son of Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln. Abraham was born into poverty, educated himself, and learned the law. Mary Todd was born into privilege and came from a wealthy Kentucky family who owned slaves. For a time, Abraham's political rival, Stephen Douglas, courted Mary. Abraham and Mary Todd would marry and go on to have four sons, Robert Todd in 1843, Edward Baker in 1846, William Wallace in 1850, and Thomas "Tad" in 1853. Sadly, only one of them, Robert Todd, survived to adulthood.[1]

In 1859, Robert Todd took the Harvard entrance exam and promptly failed fifteen of the sixteen subjects. Undeterred, he enrolled at the Phillips Exeter Academy, a New Hampshire prep school designed to groom young men for the Ivy League. Harvard admitted him the following year.[2]

Robert Todd had not yet turned eighteen when in 1861, the South Carolina militia fired on the Union troops at Fort Sumter.[3] Confederate sons in the South and Union sons in the North rushed to enlist. Robert begged his parents for permission to join the Army.

His father wanted him to postpone his schooling and accept a commission, stating, "Our son is not more dear to us than the sons of other people are to their mothers."[4] But Robert's mother wouldn't hear of it. She didn't want to lose another son, especially to that damn war.

Abraham and Mary Todd had lost their son, Edward Baker, in 1850. Eddie was not yet four when he succumbed to tuberculosis. Then, in 1862, the Lincolns lost William Wallace. Willie died of typhoid fever shortly after his eleventh birthday.[5] At the start of the Civil War, the Lincolns had already lost two of their four sons. Mary Todd couldn't bear the thought of losing another child, so Robert remained at Harvard until the last year of the Civil War.

In January 1865, his mother finally relented, and Lincoln's eldest son, Robert Todd, was commissioned as a captain in the Union Army. In a letter to General Ulysses S. Grant, the president urged Grant to consider Robert for a position on Grant's staff. The posting all but assured Robert Todd would never see combat.

Captain Robert Todd Lincoln was present at Lee's surrender to Grant at Appomattox Court House.[6] At the end of the war, Robert returned to Washington. The covered wagon trip lasted for days and exhausted him. At least that's what he said when he turned down an invitation to sit with his parents at Ford's Theater.

He rushed to his father's bedside when word of his father's shooting reached him. His vigil lasted all night until his father, President Abraham Lincoln, passed away.[7] After his father's assassination, Robert Todd took his mother and his youngest brother, Tad, home to Springfield, Illinois.

Abraham had nicknamed the boy Tad due to his large head and how he was as "wiggly as a tadpole."[8] Tad Lincoln died on

July 15, 1871, before his eighteenth birthday. The cause of death was a combination of tuberculosis and pneumonia. After three of her four sons died, Mary Todd Lincoln became increasingly depressed, despondent, and reckless with money. She bought expensive items but never used them. Mary Todd purchased colorful dresses, even though she wore only black. She took to sewing into her undergarments the $56,000 in government bonds President Lincoln left for her.

Robert Todd, convinced his mother would hurt herself, petitioned the courts to commit her to a psychiatric hospital. After three months, Mary Todd engineered an escape and moved in with her sister. The mother and son's relationship, however, would never be repaired. Mary Todd Lincoln remained with her sister as her health declined. On July 15, 1882, eleven years after the death of her youngest son, she lapsed into a coma and passed away.[9]

Robert graduated from law school at Northwestern University and in 1868, married Mary Eunice Harlan, the daughter of Iowa senator James Harlan. Robert and Mary had three children—two daughters and one son.

After Robert's short stint as the town supervisor for South Chicago, President Rutherford B. Hayes offered to appoint him secretary of state. He turned the position down but later accepted a cabinet position as the secretary of war. He also served as minister to the United Kingdom during the Benjamin Harrison administration.

While in England, Robert and Mary's son, Abraham Lincoln II ("Jack"), died of sepsis at age sixteen. Weeks after Jack's death, Robert wrote to his cousin: "We had a long & most anxious struggle and, at times, had hopes of saving our boy. It would have been

done if it had depended only on his own marvelous pluck & patience now that the end has come, there is a great blank in our future lives & an affliction not to be measured."[10]

When Robert's time in England ended, he returned to private practice and, in 1897, became the president of the Pullman Palace Car Company after George Pullman died. In 1911, he became Pullman's board chair and remained in that position until 1922.[11]

While Robert Todd served as secretary of war, he witnessed the assassination of President Garfield at the Baltimore and Washington railroad station on July 2, 1881. At the invitation of another president, he was at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, when President William McKinley was assassinated. Not an eyewitness, Robert Todd was just outside the building.[12]

He would never accept another presidential invitation.

"No, I'm not going, and they'd better not ask me because there is a certain fatality about presidential functions when I am present."[13]

On May 30, 1922, Robert Todd did, however, attend the dedication of his father's memorial in Washington, DC. Chief Justice William H. Taft oversaw the memorial's commissioning and presented it to President Warren G. Harding, who accepted it on behalf of the American people. That event was Robert Todd Lincoln's last public appearance. He was seventy-eight years old.[14]

Robert Todd Lincoln died in his sleep on July 26, 1926, at his home in Vermont. He was interred at Arlington National Cemetery with his wife, Mary, and their son, Jack Lincoln.[15]

Neither fame nor fortune make for a good son. Surviving your mother does.

To visit Robert Todd Lincoln's sarcophagus, take a right out of the visitor center paralleling Eisenhower Drive on your right, which turns into Schley Drive as you pass the Women in Military Service for America Memorial. Take a left at the first sidewalk, Custis Walk. Section 31, S-13 is on the left.

Robert Todd Lincoln's sarcophagus