

COLUMN

For so many, Memorial Day is every day

At a luncheon for veterans in Northampton earlier this year, retired Northampton police officer Edward "Red" Morrissey got everyone's attention.

Red described a morning some 74 years ago that the 96-year-old World War II veteran still sees as clearly today as he did that day in September 1944.

He was 23 years old and a Navy cook on a landing ship transport, preparing breakfast for 160 Marines in the invasion of the tiny island of Peleliu in the Pacific, the scene of one of the bloodiest battles of World War II.

Allied commanders, optimistic from recent victories, thought Peleliu would be a two-day cakewalk. They also thought the island was flat. Advance intelligence had failed to discover that it was full of rugged hills and ridges into which the Japanese had bored an elaborate system of virtually impenetrable caves and tunnels.

At this stage in the war, the Japanese were no longer trying to beat back the Marines on the beaches. Instead, the Japanese relied on heavy firepower from camouflaged and well-protected interior positions and the Marines got bogged down. That morning, Red was serving the Marines steak and eggs. By the end of the day, not a single Marine had survived.

To this day, he remembers the echo of the sounds of brave men dying young.

"I think of them every day, yes every day, I'll never forget 'em," he told me recently from his bedside at Linda Manor where he was convalescing after a recent spill. He's back home now in Florence. And although he's moving slower than his usual pace, he's still hopeful he'll make it to be honored at this year's Memorial Day parade in Florence.

Red will be the grand marshal for this year's big commemoration. It's extra significant this year, because the parade dates back 150 years to 1868 and what was then known as Decoration Day because of the flowers placed on the graves of those who died during the Civil War.

Florence has the honor of hosting the longest continuously run parade in our nation on either Decoration Day or on Memorial Day, the last Monday in May.

For this year's observance on May 28, Red will be joined by fellow World War II veteran, Robert Aquadro from



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Northampton, and Howard Andersen, an Air Force veteran who served during the Korean War.

Andersen has only missed a few Memorial Day parades in Florence since he returned home to Northampton from the service.

It's his way to remind the public of the men and women from our nation's armed forces who never made it back from war and to honor men like his father, Soren Andersen, a World War I veteran who was one of the first members of the American Legion post in Northampton. Howard also had three brothers who fought in World War II.

The parade is expected to be the largest in the history of Florence, with more than 12 bands, 35 marching units, an Air Force flyover, and another 50 or so other elements scheduled to participate.

A small group assembles each week at the Michael F. Curtin Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 8006 to plan such a gargantuan feat.

Because of its size, the parade committee moved its start time to 1 p.m. in the afternoon to accommodate people coming to Florence from surrounding towns participating in other ceremonies held earlier in the day.

It's a labor of love for Brad LeVay, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran who was wounded in the Korean War and received the Purple Heart. For several years, he's been the president of the Veterans Council of Northampton, which has been involved in organizing the parade for the past several years.

LeVay says Memorial Day is meaningful for "remembering the comrades you had and lost along with the very young that never got to live to an old age."

And there's Tracy Taylor, who will be

in a horse-drawn carriage that will take her through Florence to the Elks Lodge on Spring Street where the parade will end.

Taylor, a Northampton native, is the president of the Western Massachusetts Chapter of the American Gold Star Mothers, a name drawn from the flag that hung in homes during wartime on which a gold star symbolized a loved one lost to war.

Tracy's son, Army Spc. Kenneth J. Iwasinski was killed Oct. 14, 2007, in Iraq. He was 22. Before the service, he played football at Northampton High School.

"This day is not about picnics, barbecues or the start of summer," says Taylor, who just wants to make sure her son is not forgotten. "This day was created to honor our military who have died."

Memorial Day, in my mind, has always been about the need for those who survived to remember those who did not and to remind the rest of us about events still within living memory, whether it's an island in the Pacific during the Second World War or the day a mother is told her son has died in Iraq.

The least every other citizen can do one day a year is to join gatherings like the one in Florence to pay them homage.

In Florence, Memorial Day has always been extra special — a singularly hometown tradition whose roots go back all the way in time to the Civil War, now 150-plus years.

On May 28, for the 150th year, Florence will have faithfully and honorably completed its mission.

And when the parade ends and the speeches are finished, a bugler will sound taps to conclude this year's ceremony at the Elks Lodge. A three-day weekend will wind down and it will be back to work and back to normal.

But for Red Morrissey, Andersen, Taylor, LeVay and so many others from Northampton whose lives have been forever changed by war, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, it will still be Memorial Day, every day.

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