

Don Vruwink: Remembering those who gave all

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Stephen E. Ambrose, one of Wisconsin's most famous authors, was raised in Whitewater and graduated from Whitewater High School. He attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison, played for the Badger football team for three years, and earned his doctorate at UW in 1963.

While at the University of Wisconsin, Ambrose was a member of the Navy and Army ROTC. His interest in war history was inspired in part by his father, who served as a physician in the U.S. Navy during World War II.

The younger Ambrose was a history professor from 1960 until his retirement in 1995. His early works centered around the American Civil War. He later focused on World War II. His book on President Eisenhower's war years, "The Supreme Commander," was published in 1970. He went on to write Band of Brothers, D-Day, Citizen Soldiers, and – breaking from war stories – Undaunted Courage, about the Lewis & Clark expedition.

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As this Memorial Day approaches, we remember all of those who gave their lives during our nation's wars. In the American Revolution, colonial settlers battled the British Army while ill-clothed and undernourished.

The Civil War brought our democracy to its greatest test. Both the North and South believed it would be a short war, but that was not to be. Antietam, with 23,000 casualties and an ambulance train 20 miles long, is still the worst one-day battle in U.S. history. Gettysburg, where President Lincoln would later dedicate the

battlefield, is the overall bloodiest battle site, with 50,000 casualties over three days.

The United States entered the first World War to support our British and French allies. It cost 110,000 American lives, with 43,000 deaths coming from what was then called the Spanish Flu.

World War II stands starkly in our national history, with 40-50 million deaths. One out of every 10 Americans were involved in the war, by serving in the military, working in factories, maintaining victory gardens, and other war efforts.

The Greatest Generation saw America attacked at Pearl Harbor, witnessed the Holocaust, survived or died through D-Day, and island-hopped in the Pacific. The world breathed a great sigh of relief at the Japanese surrender.

During the Korean War, fought from 1950-53, more than 36,000 U.S. troops died. The demilitarized zone between North and South Korea is still the most fortified place in the world.

The Vietnam War, fought by my generation, many of them not yet 20 years old, ended with more than 58,000 American casualties. It was a war that divided our nation, with unprecedented protests on streets and college campuses.

Thousands of American troops died in our most recent wars, from Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm to the war in Afghanistan.

Although he died of lung cancer in 2002 at the age of 66, Stephen Ambrose's delve into American military history lives on in his words and writings. He gave half a million dollars to the University of Wisconsin to assist future military history scholars. His books have been the inspiration for movies and documentaries. I'm sure his work will continue to inspire others.

Thankfully, American troops are not involved in fighting Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but let's remember the Ukrainian soldiers and citizens who have already died in the fight and keep in our prayers those who continue to defend the freedom of their nation.

On Memorial Day and every day, let's thank those who continue to serve our country, and remember those who gave all.

- Vruwink, D-Milton, represents the 43rd Assembly District.