

Guest commentary: Remember veterans

By Dennis H. Smith

Other than Thanksgiving and Christmas, Fourth of July is perhaps the most celebrated national holiday. Families go on picnics, visit beaches and parks, and watch the fireworks. However, for many veterans, Independence Day takes on a different meaning. To those who served in the armed forces, often fighting to preserve our freedom in far flung places, Independence Day represents the struggle, sacrifice and service of America's brave men and women.

This year, Baltimore celebrates the 200th anniversary of the victory of the British attack on Fort McHenry during the War of 1812 that gave us our national anthem and confirmed our nation's freedom. The British attack lasted 25 hours, during which they fired 1,500 bombshells, each weighing as much as 220 pounds and each carrying lighted fuses that were supposed to make the bombs explode on contact. The undependable bombs exploded mid-air, missing their marks. The British also fired the then new Congreve rockets that decorated the Baltimore sky with a myriad of red flaming arcs. A simultaneous assault on Washington, D.C., resulted in the White House and the Capital burning, and the future for our country looked uncertain. Yet in the face of their enemies, Americans still raised the flag at Fort McHenry, and the sight of that Star Spangled Banner waving - despite the bombs and rockets - inspired Francis Scott Key to pen his now famous poem. The fight for freedom continues.

One hundred eighty-seven years after the attack that began the War of 1812, a group of men not bound to any particular country, but to a philosophy that opposes our ideals, attacked our home front. As during the Battle of 1812, despite our shock, Americans raised the Star-Spangled Banner in the faces of our enemies at Ground Zero. The site of the flag waving above the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York City affirmed our ideals and inspired our brave men and women to take the

struggle and fight directly to the enemy.

Now the brave are returning to the land of the free, bearing visible and invisible wounds and needing help and support to transition back into civilian life. President Theodore Roosevelt said, "A man who is good enough to shed his blood for his country is good enough to be given a square deal afterwards. More than that no man is entitled, and less than that no man shall have." More than 200 years after our nation declared its independence, our men and women continue to shed blood to protect our freedom, and for this we owe them a great debt of gratitude for their service. If you know veterans who needs assistance, please refer them to the VA Maryland Health Care System where we can help. To locate the nearest VA health care facility or Vet Center, Veterans can visit the VA Maryland Health Care System website at maryland.va.gov and click on "Become a Patient" to enroll for VA health care. If you know a veteran of any war era, please remember to thank him or her for their service on this Fourth of July. Freedom is not free, and only because of the bravery and service of our volunteer armed forces does it ring loud and clear in our nation and around the world.

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