

Remarks
Rededication, War Mothers Memorial
University of Missouri, Nov. 11, 2011
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It was one of the great honors of my life to write the text for the book that came to be known as **FLAGS OF OUR FATHERS**. As all of you know, it tells the story of the six young Marines captured in the most famous photograph ever made as they raised the American flag on top of Mount Suribachi on the fourth day of the battle of Iwo Jima in 1945.

Three of those Marines were killed in action after the photograph was made—three among 26 thousand U.S. casualties in that bloody assault that paved the way for the American victory in the Pacific.

The other three came home as national heroes. All six reigned for a while as symbols of valor in a battle of which it was said, “Uncommon valor was a common virtue.”

And then as the years went on, the six slipped into the shadows of history.

I felt humbly grateful for my opportunity, and that of James Bradley, to bring those six young flag-raisers back out of the shadows and into the sunlight, and to re-acquaint Americans with them and with the uncommon valor that they symbolized.

But something unexpected happened during our research. As Mr. Bradley and I immersed ourselves in the lives of Sgt. Mike Strank, Cpls. Harlon Block, Rene Gagnon and Ira Hays, Pvt. Franklin Sousley, and Corpsman John Bradley, we found ourselves in the presence of six other ghostly heroes—equally courageous and patriotic, yet scarcely celebrated at all in the annals of history.

Their names were Martha Strank. And Belle Block. And Irene Gagnon. And Nancy Hayes. And Goldie Sousley. And Kathryn Bradley.

These were the mothers of the flagraisers.

Six women who came to symbolize for me the mothers of soldiers in all wars throughout time. Six strong, loving, hopeful women devoted to their families and to their country. Who watched their sons leave home and hearth to face the steel and shells and shrapnel of warfare. And who waited for those sons to come home. Waited for months and years.

Three of those women waited in vain: Martha Strank. Goldie Sousley. Belle Block.

Of the remaining three, two saw their sons come home with their bodies intact but their minds disordered by the shock of combat, and by survivor’s guilt. Nancy Hayes and Irene Gagnon. Ira and Rene were dead well before their time.

Only one, Kathryn Bradley, saw her son return home to live out a normal life-span. And John Bradley, the father of my collaborator James, survived by learning never to speak of his memories of the war. It was John Bradley's silence, by the way, that led James to go searching for answers about his father's wartime service after John died in 1994. This search produced the stories that make up *FLAGS OF OUR FATHERS*.

FLAGS OF OUR FATHERS speaks for the dead of Iwo Jima. Other books, other writers—statesmen and warriors and poets and priests—have spoken for the dead men and women of other wars. And brought their sacrifices into the light of history.

But who has spoken for the mothers of the dead?

Here, the sunlight is pushed backward by the shadows. Mothers of the war dead have had few statesmen, or warriors, or poets to come forth and sanctify their suffering with immortal thoughts.

It is not that the statesmen and the poets are indifferent to the mothers' plight. It is more that words have failed them. They do not know what to say. Most lack the rare capacity to penetrate that most daunting and mysterious of all territories—the inner chamber of a grieving mother's heart.

Only a handful have succeeded in achieving this great feat of empathy. I think of the lines given to Constance, mother of the slain Prince Arthur, in Shakespeare's play *King John*:

Grief fills the room up of my absent child,
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,
Remembers me of all his gracious parts,
Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form:
My life, my joy, my food, my all the world!
My widow-comfort, and my sorrows' cure!

On this Veterans day—this day of rededicating the War Mothers Memorial here on the University of Missouri campus—Constance's words seem fitting; they reach out to embrace the war mothers in this gathering and in all such gatherings on the surface of this earth.

And the rest of us, lacking Shakespeare's eloquence, can only add our humble love and respect. And our hope that your sense of loss will always be tempered by the certain knowledge that your sons and daughters. . .and you yourselves. . .will live on forever in the gratitude of your countrymen.

Thank you.