In war, even victories bring loss

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Almost 75 years ago, my Irish grandmother, Nellie Loftus Foley, sent three of her four sons off to fight in what President Roosevelt called the “War for the Four Freedoms.”

My father, the baby of the family, recalls that it was not an easy parting for my grandmother. My uncles’ letters home — which my father passed on to me a few years ago — gave more evidence of that. Her sons wrote to her with reassurances and with pride, and clearly hoped that their optimism and their clear sense of duty and of mission would ease her sorrow, and her fear about what might happen to them.

She had left Ireland — a country whose history is full of heroic battles, patriotic songs and lost wars — thinking she had left all that sorrow and fear behind. For centuries, the Ireland of my grandparents’ birth was a place where, as one Dublin street-ballad puts it, “We fight like devils for conciliation, And hate each other for the love of God.”

I spent two years as a volunteer with a Nobel Peace Prize-winning group in Belfast at the height of Ireland’s so-called “Troubles,” and experienced firsthand the anguish that my grandmother thought she had left behind. In one month — at a time when I still recorded such things, the following happened:

• A 17 year old boy was shot dead by the British Army, for joyriding in someone else’s car.

• A police officer was shot and killed by his own co-religionists, on the steps of a church where he had just attended Mass.

• A prison officer was murdered on his way to church. Again by his own. And in sight of his screaming young family.

• Three young Provisional IRA men traveling in Spain were killed in an ambush by elite commandos from the British Army.

• A 24-year old man, father of three infants, was shot dead, by his own, on the charge that he was “an informer.”

• And nine policemen were murdered in a mortar attack, as they sat in a barricaded police station, enjoying their cups of tea between shifts.

I did not serve in a war, but I in the middle of one. I had some sense of what my grandmother thought she had left behind.

Seventy years ago, she got a letter. It said that one of her sons had died a hero, on a hillside in Italy, and it told her when to expect the body. Two medals came later, a Purple Heart and a Silver Star.
He was her favorite and my father’s idol. He was a handy athlete, a handsome lad, a high school graduate, maybe a future leader. My father named one of his sons for his beloved brother. That was me.

Twenty seven years ago, Michele and I had our first son. Our no longer “little guy” carries the name of Staff Sgt. Thomas Patrick Foley, killed in action—September 22, 1944.

Shortly after his birth, my father appeared on our doorstep with Uncle Tom’s medals, his letters, and that final letter. These were a legacy, like the name Thomas Patrick is a legacy.

There are no earthly riches that go with that name, no inheritance waiting for its bearer. But the name and the medals represent a greater legacy that we pass from father to son to grandson.

On Veterans Day, it is our duty to remember — to remember our own stories and the stories on memorials in our own communities — because it is our responsibility to recognize what war is all about. War is about winning and losing. Someone wins and someone loses. War is also about how even as we win, we are leaving behind — losing — a part of ourselves. Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, who led us in the Persian Gulf War and who died last year, said:

“War is profanity. It really is. It’s terrifying. And nobody is more anti-war than an intelligent person who’s been to war.”

He said those words after leading our troops in the most modern of military battles, where a single computer-targeted Scud missile could take out a thousand lives. I don’t think his message would have been any different after any war.

Siegfried Sassoon, a World War I infantryman who won the Military Cross and was named a commander of the British Empire, also was a celebrated poet.

In his poem “Dreamers,” he wrote:

*Soldiers are citizens of death’s grey land,*
*Drawing no dividend from time’s to-morrows. In the great hour of destiny they stand,*
*Each with his feuds, and jealousies, and sorrows. And later, the poet says that Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin They think of firelit homes, clean beds and wives. And finally, the poet imagines soldiers Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats, And mocked by hopeless longing to regain Bank-holidays, and picture shows, and spats,*

*And going to the office in the train.*

So in this month devoted to Veterans, we celebrate two memories. One is the memory of the glory that our heroes brought home — the magnificence of victories, of battles hard fought, of duties done to the last. The other is the memory of what war is — death and destruction, here and overseas.

We remember the first — the glory — because we want to give thanks to those who put their lives on the line for us.

And we choose not to forget the second — the loss that Schwarzkopf and Sassoon described, almost a century apart — because none of us wants the honor roll of war dead to get one line longer.