

Many of the students in today's high school classes weren't even born at the time of Al-Qaeda's Sept. 11, 2001, attacks against the World Trade Center and Pentagon, which killed thousands of people in a matter of hours on live TV.

The country is nearing — if it's not already into — a second post-9/11 generation, some of whose members have taken up a call to fight in the latest chapters of the continuous war.

"I don't know that the average American realizes what Memorial Day is for, and that we've been at war going on 16 years now," reflected Maj. Charlie Ledgerwood, Missouri Army National Guard engineer.

"You know we're still at war?" Ledgerwood, 43, has asked, and some students haven't known that.

"It saddens me some, because it's almost a forgotten war," he said. A history teacher at Jefferson City High School for 16 years, he's served in the Guard for 15 years and offers what guidance he can for students considering serving in uniform. He served a tour of duty in Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda is nowhere near what it was on 9/11, when it used Afghanistan as a base of operations. However, the group's ideology has metastasized into vicious offshoots like ISIS, which grew out of the bloody chaos after the U.S. invasion of and withdrawal from Iraq. The scope of where U.S. military and counter-terrorism operations occur has grown to include countries beyond Afghanistan and Iraq, like Syria, Somalia, Yemen and Pakistan.

Local high school graduates heading into the military, interviewed recently by the News Tribune, are not unaware of the wider world, and the violence they see has become a motivation for some to stand up and do what they think is right.

It could be macabre to juxtapose the youthful idealism of those who've joined the military out of high school with the solemn remembrance of the fallen who've gone before. However, Memorial Day might be as good a time as any to remember not only the dead and the survivors who served with them, but the living, fresh faces, too — their motivations for serving, their fears and their bravery.

Flight

"My dad was kind of scared, because he's thinking there's going to be a war coming up, and Mom was like, 'Yeah, I'm happy for you, but I'll be sad at the same time,'" Sheldon Schulte, 17, said of his decision to join the U.S. Marine Corps.

The 2017 Helias graduate chose the Marine Corps over another branch because of the respect Marines merit. "All branches are respected, but I feel like the Marines put more time and effort into how they train people," Schulte said.

He wants to leap out into the world, literally. "I always wanted to be a car guy," but then he realized "being up in an airplane, being really high up in the air, someday I'll be jumping out of one, that'd be really cool."

He figures the best way to be a cargo pilot after his service is to get into aviation mechanics while he's in the service. He expects his basic training will be in San Diego, California.

The thrill of flight is also on the mind of Addison Brown, 18, a graduate of JCHS this year. Brown is going to the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado, where he'll become an officer.

"I've always had this dream of being a pilot, but I am pretty tall, so we'll kind of see how that plays out when I get there," he said.

He knows there's a height restriction, but doesn't know if it applies across the board. For fighter jets — "the real fast, cool stuff" — it's something like 6-foot-5, and he's 6-foot-8.

If he could fly anything he wanted to, it would be fighter jets, like the new F-35.

"But really, just being up there, I think it'd be pretty awesome," he said.

"I feel like this a good stepping-off point," John "Remy" Hanrahan, 18, said of his choice to serve in the U.S. Navy. Hanrahan said the benefits like travel and pay were too good to pass up.

As a new JCHS graduate, he's never been away from home for more than a couple weeks, but the prospect of being away doesn't deter him from dreams of travel to places like Greece and Japan.

"It's not the end of the world," he said of the eight weeks he'll be away at basic training at the Naval Station Great Lakes in Illinois.

There, he'll undergo "sailorization," as the Navy calls it. The Navy will make him into a quartermaster, responsible for navigational duties aboard a ship, like using oceanographic charts, maintaining navigational equipment and determining the ship's position.

"I like the ocean, as much as everybody else," he said.

Nate Leuckel, 18, will be with another Helias friend and 2017 graduate when he goes to basic training for the National Guard at Fort Benning, Georgia, in June. Leuckel and friend Dawson Payne enlisted on the same day.

"I did infantry because I felt like I had a job to do," he said.

His unit, the 138th Infantry Regiment out of Boonville — known as the Spartans — is deployed to the Persian Gulf nation of Qatar right now. Had he enlisted six months earlier, he could be there now, too.

"I talked to God about that," he said. "If I was trained, if it was my time to go, I would go."

Fear

If Brown had enlisted instead of choosing the Air Force Academy, he could be going somewhere closer to home for training, “but instead I’m going to be 10 hours away in Colorado. So that alone is kind of nerve-wracking because I’m not used to being so far away from home. But also, just kind of all the mystery of it. I don’t know exactly what it’s going to be like there, and you can’t really tell until you actually get there.”

Hanrahan said he’s not afraid of anything, although he did caveat that statement with “them cutting off all my hair.”

“The gas chamber — that does not sound appetizing,” Leuckel answered. He explained recruits don gas masks and stand in a room while the space is filled with tear gas. Then they have to take off their masks and experience the effects of the irritant firsthand, sometimes while reciting the Soldier’s Creed.

Breathing tear gas will be a far cry from when he said his ideas of service started in late elementary into middle school. He and his friends enjoyed playing with air soft guns and the “Call of Duty” video games — specifically the title “Modern Warfare” and its first sequel.

“What if we actually did this?” he said of their thinking at the time. Finally, he felt frustrated with just talk: “I’m tired of saying this. Let’s do this.”

“Commitment was a scary word for people to think about,” he said of his high school experiences when it came to other people contemplating the **military**.

“To me, it was a no-brainer,” he said. “I was ready to accept it, I guess.” He’s been inspired by the autobiography of former Navy Seal Chris Kyle (“American Sniper”), and a speech at last summer’s Republican National Convention by former Navy Seal Marcus Luttrell (“Lone Survivor”).

Schulte said his overriding reason to serve is something he hasn’t even shared with his parents yet — the brutality of ISIS and his worries about it even as a distant viewer.

In about eighth or ninth grade, he saw ISIS execution videos.

“I just kind of thought to myself, one of these days, what if it’s someone like a family member or someone close to me that’s on that video?” he said. “I couldn’t live with myself, just sitting back as all that happened, and so I kind of want to be out there, trying to stop them, from that ever happening.”

Even if he failed, he said, he would at least be able to tell himself he tried and did the best he could.

Bravery

Hanrahan’s definition of bravery isn’t about how big or tall someone is. It’s about “taking that first step to do something bigger,” not knowing if it will work or whether it’s right or wrong.

"I want the best for the people around me, especially my family, and I feel like being part of the **military** is a way to keep my loved ones safe and know I'm doing something good for them," Brown said.

That love doesn't have to be bonded by familial blood.

"Bravery to me would be willing to put yourself before the next person; say like you see a grenade. Marines are taught to throw themselves — the person in front has to throw themselves onto that so everyone else can be saved," Schulte said. "That's what bravery is to me: willing to be the first person out there, even if it kills you or hurts you; make sure everyone else can stay alive or well."

This came from a 17-year-old who doesn't even know for sure if or when he'll be able to join the Marines. He showed a scar on his lower left leg, from when he broke his leg in six places playing football his junior year. After surgery, he played again his senior year, but still has a plate in his leg.

"If I get (another) surgery, I'll be able to go in," Schulte said. If he doesn't, the recruiter gives him about a 75 percent chance.

"The recruiter told me not to get it unless I absolutely needed to, so right now we're just going to keep it in, and just hope (I) get in, and if (I) can't get in with the plate in, they might just take it out."

That kind of selflessness is something all of the recent **graduates** hope people recognize on Memorial Day.

"Someone is out there doing something every day, without you knowing it," Leuckel said.

"It's not always about celebration, especially Memorial Day; it's more of remembrance, and I feel like people celebrate it more than what they should. ... This one is to remember just the people that have served or are serving, and give them some thought," Brown said. He added the time of year is special for his dad especially, who is an Army veteran, like his grandfather who is also an Army veteran, and Addison's other grandfather who was in the Navy.

Both of Hanrahan's grandfathers served in the Navy, about the time of World War II, he said.

Leuckel's father was in the National Guard for 23 years, and his grandfather fought in the Korean War as a combat engineer in the Army. He received a Purple Heart and went into the Guard later.

"Actually, he was kind of upset when I told him, because I guess he told my dad he wanted the **military** thing to stop with him," Schulte said of his grandfather's reaction to his **decision**. His grandfather was a Marine who fought in Vietnam and had a "rough time" after his service, using alcohol to cope. If his grandson was going to go in, he wanted him to join the Air Force.

However, Schulte said he told him, "I want to do the same thing you do."

Ledgerwood said he always asks students who approach him for advice why they want to serve, "because I want them to come to terms with themselves."

“Find something to do in the **military** that you like,” Ledgerwood advises students, and get the **military** to train you to do something you can use as a career in the civilian world. “Get the **military** to train you to become a more productive member of the community.”

He also directs students to explore other service options, like being a first responder or a politician.

“I am continually amazed by the support for police, fire, EMTs and **military** in this area,” he said, noting he sees it around bases elsewhere, but not everywhere in the country.

“It’s refreshing to see it here in Central Missouri. Sometimes it’s overwhelming, but it’s nice. It’s a reassurance.”

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