

Liz Caile Essay Contest 2006

1st place **Sam Tyler**

He stood there holding a small American flag in his hand with a private's name scrawled in black across the red white and blue. "It was an IED. He was driving along on patrol near Karbala when they ran over a homemade mine buried in the soft sand along the roadside. I don't think he ever knew what hit him. We were really good friends. Back when I was stationed in Germany, we hung out all the time. He would come over to my girlfriend's house with me, go up to Oktoberfest or we'd ride bikes on the Autobahn." It was a very eerie feeling watching my uncle recount tales of his friend and fellow soldier whose life, along with almost 2000 others, we were here to commemorate. Although my Uncle would never cry, almost on cue the heavens broke open and began to weep openly upon the earth. I knew then that this was a memorial day that I would not soon forget.

Last year I was a part of the activist group at Boulder High School dubbed Student Worker. We had already been involved in several protests throughout the fall and early spring, but this time we struck a different note when we decided to plant about 1700 American flags with the names of every soldier killed in combat in Iraq emblazoned across them. For two or three weeks we had raised money to buy all the flags and then spent countless hours writing every name on a different flag. When the day finally came, it was dull gray and had been raining on and off for the last six hours or so, as if the sky was shedding tears for all those that this country had lost. About thirty of us gathered on the fields at Boulder High and began flag by flag, row by row to put each name and flag in the ground. No one said a word more than was necessary to communicate how to keep the rows straight. After about twenty minutes or so it was done. Every one stepped back to look at the field now covered in small American flags fluttering in the breeze. We sat and observed or walked amongst the names, reflecting upon the lives that they represented.

Those flags stood for something different for every one of us. Many kids saw this as a protest of the war. "Look at the human cost," they would say. "How could we ever have allowed this to happen? There were no weapons of mass destruction. We're the weapon of mass destruction and this proves it!" There was even a large protest going on at the same time nearby and many of the speakers used our name to say that there was still hope that the next generation could fix what they had screwed up. There were still others who saw those flags in a different light. A man came up to me right after we had finished, shook my hand and introduced himself. "I have served in the United States Marine Corps for the last 11 years and it means so much to me that you would do something like this. There's nothing greater you could do for these brave men than to remember them and the sacrifices they made for you to be enjoying the freedoms you have here. You've brought warmth to my heart. Thank you so much." Another man also came over to me and said he was a Vietnam Vet and thanked me again for supporting our troops. I was truly struck by how one event could mean so many things to so many people. It occurred to me that there was no right answer. They were all right. These flags were what you made them: A memorial, a protest, a remembrance or visual on the cost of this war. There never was, nor could there ever be, just one answer.