

Air show is not appropriate for Memorial Day

Solemn occasion should not be used to recruit our youth with weapons of war

BY MARY BETH MOORE

Guest essay

The observance began as Decoration Day during the Civil War, when people decorated with flowers the graves of those killed in that conflict.

Later, after World War I, it became known as Memorial Day, a time to remember those who have died in all of America's wars. That is unequivocally what the day is about. It should not be an occasion for using supersonic weapons of war to help recruit young people to fight and die in current or future wars.

For the crowds at Jones Beach every Memorial Day weekend, it's about the excitement of sun, sea, sand, and soaring fighter planes doing

breathtaking maneuvers overhead.

This year's military performers include the United States Air Force Thunderbirds. They are happy to put on the show, but in the detailed manual that they sent out last year to communities interested in hosting their aerobatics, the Thunderbirds made clear what the show is really about: "Recruiting is at the heart of the Thunderbird mission."

The manual went on to say that the Thunderbirds want "prime space for the recruiting display booth to maximize foot traffic — this should be set up as close to show center as possible." The manual also described elements of the actual recruiting effort: "The Thunderbird team members will visit the recruiting booth

throughout the weekend to talk to kids and parents about Air Force opportunities."

Nor is this emphasis on recruiting limited to the Thunderbirds. The United States Navy Blue Angels, another regular participant in the show, have similar language in their 2023 manual.

"Community outreach and recruiting are vital aspects of the mission of the Blue Angels," the manual says. "The Team's air shows and public appearances are Navy and Marine Corps awareness tools. The crowds that the Blue Angels draw provide unique opportunities for officer and enlisted recruiters."

The Blue Angels manual also describes the size and central location of the recruiting area.

Pax Christi Long Island, the local presence of the international Catholic peace movement, has been showing up for years at the air show, not be-

cause we enjoy the noise and the spectacle, but to make the simple point that Memorial Day should be about remembering the dead of all wars — not about recruiting people for current and future conflicts. We carry with us the names of Long Islanders killed in those wars and we attempt to get the air show audience to focus on that loss.

Obviously, the high-decibel, gravity-defying excitement of the show makes it difficult to divert the attention of the crowd from the spectacle to our sobering message. But we keep trying.

What we know about the Forever War of the past two decades is that more young Americans deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan have committed suicide than have died in combat — significant evidence of the life-changing impact of recruitment. But the toll of war on members of the armed forces is not something that

recruiters explain at length. They talk about the financial benefits of enlistment and the training that the military offers in skills that can help in civilian life.

Young people can enlist at age 18 — or, with parental consent, at 17. That's long before the prefrontal cortex, the brain's decision-making center, matures, at about age 25. People should not enlist before they are capable of thinking it through clearly. And they shouldn't walk into a recruiting booth with their almond-sized amygdala, the fight-or-flight lizard brain, still vibrating with air show excitement.

■ **THIS GUEST ESSAY** reflects the views of Mary Beth Moore, a Sister of Charity and a member of Pax Christi Long Island, a chapter of the National Catholic Peace Movement.

