THE FEW, THE PROUD -- THE ARCHAEOLOGISTS:

The difficult working conditions for field soldiers are widely appreciated. Those of field archeologists are not. Though never in danger from enemy fire, their work environments -- baking sun, cold drizzle, attacking bugs, dust, poison ivy -- can actually be quite hostile. Real foot soldiers risk their lives for freedom. Cultural foot soldiers risk physical comfort and the loss of more lucrative jobs. They know that the world's heritage is worth struggling to preserve and are willing to work under lousy conditions to protect something precious for us all. They are patriots for prehistory.

In the bad old days, archaeologists were often high-brow academics, complete with pith helmets, smoking pipes and tweeds. They came from colonial powers and hired local diggers to uncover cultural treasures that were then exported, as if trophies of war. Today, most archaeologists dig their own pits, in addition to keeping track of various technical details and soil interpretations. Archaeology today is more a permit-driven natural science than an imperialist looting of cultural antiquities.

Most prehistoric sites today are discovered by what amounts to an exercise in cultural minesweeping. Before building or transportation projects proceed, archaeologists sortie out ahead of construction equipment to assess whether hidden cultural remains exist. If something merely important is found, a field crew will be dispatched to excavate the site, saving what they can. If something of critical scientific value is discovered, the original project plans may be revisited. This change has taken place since passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 as part of a growing concern for environmental damage caused by large-scale development projects. In effect, a small industry was created, something called "cultural resource management," which now employs the majority of professional archaeologists. Their crews operate like trained special forces, moving out from their bases to secure and protect our cultural heritage.

A recent story from Stonehenge -- the early Bronze Age circle of stones on England's Salisbury Plain -- provides a case history for this new theater of operations. Near this famous ruin, a construction crew was excavating a ditch for a new water pipe when they struck something unusual. Rather than trying to hide the discovery so they could continue without interruption, they brought in CRM field archaeologists who carefully excavated the site.

They unearthed a gravesite containing five skeletons -- a child, an adolescent and three men -- that seemed related to each other based on the shapes of their skulls. Having been buried with arrowheads, the men were called "the bowmen." Other grave goods included a specific type of ceramic pot made between 4200 and 4400 years ago, the time when Stonehenge was being built.

Because the chemical signatures of a person's teeth can help determine where that person has lived, the archaeologists had the bowmen's teeth examined by scientists from the British Geological Survey. After analysis, the archaeologists concluded that the bowmen probably lived in Wales or the English Lake District in childhood and later relocated to Stonehenge.

Knowing that the bluestones from the ruin's inner ring were likely from a quarry in southwest Wales, the archaeologists concluded that the bowmen had probably come from Wales to help build this magnificent, and endlessly fascinating, world heritage site.

This story from Stonehenge provides a stunning example of the CRM archaeology taking place more routinely throughout the world today. Most archaeological reconnaissance patrols turn up little more than stone flakes, broken tools and campfire hearths. But occasionally something remarkable turns
up -- for example, early archaic spear points at the Mashantucket Pequot reservation and a buried 18th-century farmstead in Andover.

Some may view federal and state mandates for archaeological testing and salvage as further unwarranted intrusion of big government into our lives. Others might see the policies as make-work programs for archaeologists. I don't. I think field archaeologists are underappreciated.

More important, I believe there are different ways to serve one's country. CRM workers serve by digging and offering answers to universal questions about who we humans are and where we have come from. They use their skills, efforts and knowledge to benefit us all. Field archaeologists are as committed to global heritage as soldiers are to global security. Both are valuable. Both serve the common good. Neither diminishes the importance of the other.

I challenge anyone who might complain about an archaeological clearance to take a break from his or her clean, climate-controlled life and walk a mile in a fieldworker's shoes. Perhaps that would help them appreciate that history is so much more than endless war.