

Memorial day 2007 - A Day to Remember

"To those who gave their lives so we could live ours, you are never forgotten. On Memorial Day we honor the men and women who died while defending our country, our freedom and all we consider sacred."

It is a distinct privilege for me to be here today to help you honor those who have sacrificed all they had for our country, but before I continue with my brief remarks, I would like to recognize all veterans who are with us here today. Would all of those who have ever worn a uniform in the service of the United States of America, please stand up (raise your hand high.) I would particularly like to mention those in the 50th class reunion of the Wyoming Memorial High School who saw service after graduation; Bill Thomas, John Kropcho and John Pieszala – US Army; Gil Dominick – US Marine Corps; Arthur Long, John Yurish, Jim Jeffery, Joe Pinen and Al Howell – US Navy; and Edna Hartman, William Johnson, and Jim Salus – US Air Force.

I also want to recognize and thank VFW Post 396 and American Legion Post 904 for organizing this ceremony at a time when parades have become just a memory for many and these cemetery gatherings are few and far between. I am pleased to see so many here today on a day when there is so much else that you could be doing. Unfortunately, it takes a special kind of person to remember the sacrifices of so many others. I hope in this time of war that this observance will grow in number from year to year. I can remember in my much younger days that the entire day of Memorial Day was spent in activities centered on families and patriotic activities because that was what the holiday was intended. It wasn't about long weekends or bargain sales. Families visited the local cemetery, had family dinners or picnics and watched or participated in parades, fireworks displays or other patriotic gatherings just as we are doing here. Today we seem to be a very busy society with lots to do, and honoring our fallen veterans seems to be just one small part of the lots we have to do. However, today is Memorial Day, and this day is not just another day off.

The custom of placing flowers on the graves of war dead began in 1866 in Waterloo, New York. Memorial Day was originally called Decoration Day because it was a time set aside to honor the nation's Civil War dead by decorating their graves with bunting and flowers. On May 5th, 1868 exactly two years later, General John Logan, a hero of the Civil War published General Order Number 11, which proclaimed, and I quote -"Gather around their sacred remains and garland the passionless mounds above them with choicest flowers of springtime..." - end quote and we have been doing this act of remembrance for the past 139 years in places like this cemetery. In 1971, Congress declared Memorial Day a national holiday. Unfortunately, it changed the date from May 30th to the last Monday in May. To me this has diminished, rather than enhanced, the purpose of the day. I hope some day this can be changed to return the celebration of Memorial Day to May 30th similar to the observances of this country's two other annual patriotic events, Independence Day on the Fourth of July and Veterans Day on the 11th of November,.

Nevertheless, those of us who understand the true significance of this time, regardless of the day on which it is celebrated, will continue to honor the memory of the almost one million veterans who have given their lives in service to this country since the beginning of this nation 231 years ago. This is what we do here today as we follow General Logan's general order. This is particularly significant in time of war. This is such a time, a time when our nation's young men and women, who do not know you and who do not know me, willingly go in harm's way because our country needs it. Since September 11th, 2001 almost 3400 have been killed supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom and over 380 have likewise died in Afghanistan in Operation Enduring Freedom. These brave men and women are the most recent of our nation's heroes.

What is the true measure of a hero? In our popular culture, we tend to think of a hero as a comic book super-being who routinely saves the world from some peril, or a muscular he-man who performs impossibly dangerous feats on a movie screen, or a star athlete who smacks a winning hit in the bottom on the ninth. The reality is less glamorous but altogether more noble; in the

words of author Joseph Campbell, "A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself."

By that measure, a hero is Army Sergeant Amanda Pinson, a "model soldier" whose dream of becoming an FBI or CIA agent was cut short when she was killed by an enemy mortar round in Tikrit, Iraq.

A hero is Navy Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Allan Espiritu, a medic for a Marine Corps unit who was on his second combat tour when he was killed by a roadside bomb in Ramadi, Iraq.

A hero is Marine corporal Carlos Arellano Pandura, who died on his third combat tour when a terrorist ignited an explosive-filled car in Haqlaniyah, Iraq.

A hero is Air Force Major Duane Dively, who died when his U-2 aircraft crashed on a mission supporting US forces in Afghanistan. Major Dively could have retired the year before his death but stayed in uniform because, as his brother said, "he believed in what we were doing in that part of the world."

These four Americans from diverse backgrounds and hometowns, like all of the rest, had one special bond: a selfless willingness to serve our country. To me there is no greater measure of a hero.

We are indeed fortunate to have men and women like these volunteering to wear the various uniforms of this great country. We should honor them and their sacrifice not only today but every day.

So, have we followed the guidance General Logan gave us those many years ago? We have, but only in part, because there was another charge in General Order 11. Our additional obligation is this, as he wrote, and I again quote - "Let us in this solemn presence renew our pledges to aid and assist those whom they have left among us as sacred charges upon the nation's gratitude, the soldier's and sailor's widow and orphans."
- end quote.

So today we pay homage to our war dead, but tomorrow and daily thereafter, we must help and support the spouses and children that many of those almost 4000 heroes have left in our care. Our flowers of gratitude, our flags at the headstones are not enough. We must look after those left behind. If they are close in our communities, we need to reach out to them. If we know them not, we must contribute to those agencies beyond our federal government that know who they are and what is their need. We can do no less.
By being here today we have only accomplished half of our mission. We cannot fail to accomplish the rest, which I consider the most important part.

I would like to leave you with one final thought, a picture really, which I hope you can visualize from my inadequate words. It is something not mentioned in General Order 11, although every bit as important.

It has become a tradition since the war in Vietnam that at every formal gathering of military personnel when a meal is served, a place is reserved for a special guest. Before describing the guest, let me describe the reserved place. There is a small table with a chair near the rest of the dining tables. The table is covered with a white table cloth and there is a folded white napkin beside the dinner plate. On the dinner plate is a small pile of salt. Next to this plate there is a butter plate which contains a wedge of lemon. There is an empty wine glass but it is placed upside down. There is also a tall narrow bud vase with a yellow ribbon tied around it in a bow. The vase also contains a single red rose. The most prominent item on the table is a folded American flag. This place is called the Remembrance Table.

Prior to the start of the meal the following narration is read:

The table behind you is set for someone special.

The seat is empty because it is reserved for an American service member, one who could not be here with us for one of many reasons. This person is serving away from home in a hostile war zone, or missing in action or a prisoner of war. Remember.

The wine glass is inverted because he cannot toast with us this day. Remember

There is salt upon the dinner plate representing the tears that have been shed by his family and friends since his departure. Remember

There is a wedge of lemon on the butter plate representing the bitter taste of being absent from family and friends. Remember

There is a single red rose signifying the love of someone special. Remember

The yellow ribbon signifies the hope of his eventual safe return. Remember

The folded American flag signifies his love of country and all that it stands for. It will eventually cover him when his duty is done, and he is carried to his final resting place.

Never forget his service or his sacrifice.

I add this tribute because in addition to the many who have sacrificed their lives since 9-11, there are now four service members who are missing as a result of their service. They are Army Sergeant Keith Maupin, who has been missing since April 9th, 2004; Army Specialist Ahmed Altaie, who has been missing since October 23rd, 2006; Army Specialist Alex Jimenez, and Army Private Byron Fouty, both who have been missing since this May 12th.

Their families cannot mourn the loss of these fine young men as we mourn others here today. They can only hope for their safe return. These four who are missing deserve a special place in our hearts. We should pray for their safe return as well. On this day there are no greater heroes.

Again, thank you for being here to show your respect and may God continue to bless our fallen and the United States of America.

LT GEN Dennis Benchoff, Retired
Wyoming, Pennsylvania
May 28, 2007