

LEST WE FORGET



Suggested Remarks for the Use of
DAV Speakers at Observances of

MEMORIAL DAY 2009

(Acknowledgment of introduction, distinguished guests, officers and members of the DAV and Auxiliary, and others who are present.)

There is a reason for our gathering today ... a solemn and sobering purpose.

Perhaps it's best captured in the refrain of an old poem many of us read as school children at this time of year – “Recessional” by Rudyard Kipling.

“Lest we forget – lest we forget!” warned Kipling.

This poet knew the meaning of war all too well. And he sends those phrases back to us five times in this short elegy to the dead of a war fought long ago.

Yet those words hold the same haunting power for us today, as young Americans fight – and die – in Afghanistan and Iraq.

You and I are gathered here today “lest we forget” ... lest our nation forget those who sacrificed the breath of life in all our wars right up to the present day.

Let me begin with a couple stories about people who have not forgotten ... who are determined to remember.

The first takes place at a beautiful cemetery for our American war dead outside of Florence, Italy. A retired doctor stands beside the grave of his brother. With great sorrow, he looks into a camera and says ...

“My brother was only twenty when he was taken from us. He was a natural born skier. He was told he was going to be on the first Olympic ski team after World War II.”

But that would never be. Corporal Bud Winter was killed in Alpine combat one month before the end of the war in Europe. More than sixty years later, his brother shared the burden of grief he still carries in his heart, saying ...

“All of us were devastated. We’re so thankful for you, Bud.”

That’s one scene from a film that many across the United States are watching over Memorial Day weekend this year – a documentary made with major funding from the Disabled American Veterans.

This scene – and many others – makes two serious points.

First, when a young person makes the ultimate sacrifice for our country in war, it’s the most extraordinary gift a human being can offer – the gift of one’s own life.

The measure of such a sacrifice can never be taken. It cannot be matched by anything else one human being can do for another. The sacrifice of one’s life is eternal; it lasts forever.

Second is the cost paid by the families of the dead. For them, the wars of the past don't just pass into the pages of history books.

Losses from the World Wars, Korea, Vietnam and the Gulf War still weigh upon the hearts of families today.

Even as new burdens of grief are taken up by the families of those killed in Afghanistan and Iraq, old sorrows are carried by those who lost loved ones in countless small conflicts like Beirut, Somalia, Panama, Kosovo, Bosnia, and on and on.

Let's go back to Kipling's poem: "Lest we forget – lest we forget."

Even though we're in the midst of two wars, there truly is danger that we will forget.

Except for our military families – especially the families that grieve the dead and care for members who came home disabled – few feel the actual cost of our nation's defense.

That's the big reason the Disabled American Veterans supported the film, *Hallowed Grounds*. In most places across the country, it's scheduled for broadcast on PBS stations on the evening of Monday, May 25, the official observance of Memorial Day.

Here in our community, this documentary will be shown on Channel _____ at _____ on _____.

Don't worry if you miss it this year. Public Broadcasting Service plans to air this beautiful, deeply moving film each year

for ten years. So you'll have nine more opportunities to see it...and to remember those who pay the human cost of war.

We've been at war in Afghanistan for eight and a half years now. We've been in Iraq for more than six.

These are two of the longest wars in America's history. But the personal impact of these wars has fallen on a smaller percentage of American families than in any war for more than a century.

Americans say they love their men and women in uniform. I don't doubt that for a minute, but some disturbing realities have surfaced.

Remember all those yellow-ribbon magnets from the beginning of the wars? Most of them have fallen from America's cars, never to be replaced.

The wild enthusiasms of that period are gone, and that may be good.

Whether individual Americans are for or against the wars, they're more thoughtful now.

But could we have more public display of support for the troops ... and the veterans?

Could people still feel comfortable, walking up to someone in uniform to say, "Thank you?"

So I hope you'll take a moment this Memorial Day observance to recommit yourself to doing those small things that make a big difference:

- Fly your American Flag, not just on national holidays but often.
- Put that magnet back on your car.
- Greet men and women in uniform.
- Volunteer at a VA hospital, nursing home, or clinic.
- Take veterans to VA medical centers in a DAV van.
- Help that older veteran who can't do chores around the house.

You get the picture. Do that concrete stuff that gives real meaning to the phrase, "Support Our Troops." Hey, you'll feel great, no matter how you help.

Another thing that alarms me – that needs to change – is the order of our national priorities.

What concerns me turned up in a nationwide survey of public attitudes that was taken before the economic meltdown.

Even though our nation was at war on two fronts at the time, this survey showed the American people were most deeply concerned about their own, pocketbook issues.

The mortgage issue, which was beginning to emerge at that time, was the top concern. Second came gasoline prices, which were then rising.

Americans gave these and several other issues far more weight than the wars our young heroes were fighting or their well-being as veterans.

Yes, as this survey was taken, we were beginning to move into a more difficult period. Though no one really knew how harsh times were going to get, most everyone was growing nervous about the future.

However, I have to ask myself:

- What happens if war and the impact of war can rate so low on the public agenda while the troops are still fighting and bleeding and dying in combat?
- How quickly will those troops be forgotten when the roadside bombs stop exploding?

Yes, these are distressing questions, and I think we're already seeing the answers.

True, the American people do love their troops and their veterans. They're grateful. But the needs of the troops and the veterans are decidedly not at the front of most people's minds.

“Lest we forget – lest we forget!”

The tendency to let the memory of war dim is the American way. It happened after the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. It happened after all the big wars of the 20th century.

And the tragic fact is, it's already happening now with Iraq and Afghanistan, while the troops are still on the field of battle.

An American kid who is killed in Kandahar today is a statistic in the news tomorrow. And on the following day, the memory of

the incredible sacrifice he or she made for you and me begins to fade.

It's hard. It's wrong. It should never be that way.

But this is the reality we face. But simply complaining will do nothing to change this reality in a society that honors its war dead by going to the mall for "Memorial Day Sales."

What we must do is act ... as you've done by coming to this observance today. We'll act again on Veterans Day in the autumn, and on Memorial Day a year from now.

In the meantime, we'll remember that we honor the dead by serving those who lived through our wars but need our help today.

Each of the veterans' organizations has terrific programs that help America's heroes and their families, so take your pick.

If you want to get involved in the DAV's volunteer programs, let me know. I'll get you in touch with the right people, and you'll be on your way.

But let me close with this. I'm grateful to you for coming here today, truly grateful.

The deep sentiments of Rudyard Kipling's great poem ring true in your heart.

You have not failed to remember the great sacrifice represented by the death of a soldier, sailor, airman, Marine, or a hand in the Coast Guard.

You have honored that sacrifice today. You have carried the message to others: “Lest we forget.”

Thank you.



HALLOWED GROUNDS

Around the world 125,000 American military men and women are buried on foreign soil. Thousands more are still missing. But none has been forgotten.

The new PBS documentary HALLOWED GROUNDS provides a rare look at 22 of America’s overseas military cemeteries. With stirring images and details, the 1-hour program tells the story of these remarkable commemorative shrines. The film is the first major documentary of any kind to be made about these remarkable fields of honor, and includes historical sequences about the wars and battles that created them, as well as moving vignettes and interviews about the men and women who rest in them.

Created by the U.S. government after World War I and World War II, these cemeteries represent some of America’s great national treasures. Dignified and serene, they were created to honor America’s fallen, but they also evoke gratitude and teach important lessons of history to all who visit – foreign citizens and Americans. They are located in England, France, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Belgium, Italy, Tunisia and the Philippines.

Sponsored by a grant from DAV’s National Service Foundation, HALLOWED GROUNDS will air on PBS stations nationwide on Memorial Day, May 25 at 10:00 pm ET. Check your local listings for broadcast times in your area.