

Suggested Remarks
for
National POW/MIA Recognition Day

September 20, 2002



(Acknowledgment of introduction, distinguished guests, DAV and Auxiliary Officers and Members, as well as others in your audience. A few remarks as appropriate to the occasion.)

We're gathered here to remember those who served our nation as heroes on a day that isn't noted on calendars. But this day is remembered in the hearts of hundreds of thousands of Americans.

They are those who served our nation as Prisoners of War and the families of those who went to war and never returned – their fate mostly unknown.

We commemorate ***National POW/MIA Recognition Day*** by remembering the sacrifices made by those brave Americans who were taken prisoner and then returned, and those who are listed as missing in action.

As we all know, uncertainty is an inescapable part of military service. The turbulence usually associated with military life puts enormous strains on servicemen and women and their families.

From World War I to the peacekeeping efforts in Bosnia and Somalia, more than 142,000 Americans have been held as prisoners of war.

Today, there are nearly ninety thousand U.S. servicemen still unaccounted for from World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf. As a group, they remain in our memory on this hallowed day of reflection.

But for the families of those missing, they are remembered everyday. They are remembered in what they meant to family members, what was lost, and the lack of a final resting place.

It is on special days like today that we are given some understanding of the terror and dedication to life that these great Americans endured in the service of their country.

Every person who has worn the uniform and fought the battle understands the nature of sacrifice.

But as a nation and a people, we owe a special debt of respect and gratitude to those who were captured and yet maintained their faith in our nation and our ability to bring them home.

They did so while imprisoned and many times victimized by brutal torture.

It is only by looking into the eyes of a former prisoner of war, and hearing his story of capture and imprisonment, can you understand the full depth of commitment these individuals have toward freedom and protecting our nation.

They endured the unendurable by believing in all of us. So we must, to repay this great debt, believe in them. To bring home those that we can, and commit ourselves to a full accounting of those missing in action.

Those imprisoned in time of war must not only resist their captors, but they may never yield to the temptation of self-pity and despair.

In the words of former POW, Admiral James Stockdale:

“In the end, the prisoner learns he can't be hurt and he can't be had as long as he tells the truth and clings to that forgiving hand of the brothers who are becoming his country, his family.”

From where does this courage spring? Stockdale asked. “It does not mean supplication or hatred or strength beyond the grasp of any normal person.

It comes down to comradeship, and it comes down to pride, dignity, an enduring sense of self-worth, and to that enigmatic mixture of conscience and egoism called personal honor.”

America's POWs and servicemen and women have gone far beyond commitment and personal honor. They have given their last full measure to the freedom of our country.

They have given up their freedom so that we may enjoy ours. Some have laid down their lives for that freedom.

The families of those still missing from past American wars have wounds that are slow to heal.

For them, there were no joyous reunions -- nor even the solace of certainty of a flag-draped casket and the solemn sound of taps.

There have been no graves to visit and no peace from the gnawing questions that last a lifetime.

For them, there has been only the long and sometimes fruitless search for answers. They have suffered for years when they did not have diligent government support.

Today, our government is expending even greater efforts to find those missing. Our ability to get real answers has improved, but the pain continues for many.

To them, the term, POW/MIA, is not merely an issue or a symbolic figure on a black and white flag. It is a brother, a husband, a father, or a son.

Like those who remain missing, their families deserve our nation's gratitude to ease the burden of their suffering.

Every person who has worn the uniform and fought the battle understands the nature of **sacrifice**.

And so long as Americans are willing to take up the mantle to fight for freedom on behalf of others, our destiny will always involve sacrifice. And it will involve the sacrifice of those who love those who serve our nation.

The Disabled American Veterans and other responsible groups who have never stopped pushing for the answers so desperately needed by families.

Full accounting for those Missing in Action is not a term for us, it is a commitment to the memory of MIAs and their families.

Amid all the uncertainties of war, every soldier is entitled to one certainty -- that he will not be forgotten.

In the long annals of our Nation's history, it has never been said that her citizens deserted her – neither in times of peace, nor in darker hours when she was most threatened.

Before we inaugurated our first president or ratified the Constitution – even before we had written the Declaration of Independence, making us a country – we counted on our soldiers to defend American liberty.

Over 200 years ago, Thomas Paine, one of America's Founding Fathers wrote, "*These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.*"

Today, those former prisoners of war deserve our love and thanks, just as those whom Paine wrote about.

We can never adequately express our gratitude to those who have served our Nation while prisoners of war or to their families who experienced such anguish during years of separation.

But on this day, and throughout the year, we can and should pay tribute to these extraordinary American patriots, thank them for their service and their sacrifice, and honor them always in our hearts.

National POW/MIA Recognition Day reminds us to keep their memories alive, and that America's sacred obligation is to account for its servicemen and women who do not return from the fields of battle will *never* be forgotten.

So, today let us pay tribute to the POWs who returned, to all those who did not, and to the families and veterans who keep that basic principle of personal honor uppermost in their hearts.

Thank you. And God bless America, and God bless those who love, guard, and defend our precious freedom.

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