

# MEMORIAL DAY 2001

**We Will Remember Them**



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



*Oh, thus be it ever when free men shall stand  
Between their loved homes and war's desolation;  
Blest with victory and peace, may the heaven-rescued land  
Praise the power that hath made and preserved us a nation!*

When we sing “The Star-Spangled Banner,” we seldom get all the way down to the fourth stanza of Francis Scott Key’s glorious poem – the stanza I just read.

Yet it’s the spirit of these words that we hold up today – the noble spirit of American men and women who laid down their lives in our nation’s wars and armed conflicts.

As we ponder the power of that spirit, let’s recall a time, nearly two centuries ago, when American patriots stood their ground at Fort McHenry in the War of 1812.

It's no wonder their valor inspired Francis Scott Key to pen our National Anthem. Their courage under fierce British bombardment stands as a model of American determination.

But the glory of the moment was yet to be discovered as the fighting raged.

During the night, the British rained "fire and brimstone" down on Fort McHenry.

The American soldiers in the fort faced Hell on earth. Typical of their courage was Private William Williams – a simple man from rural Maryland, but a man with a purpose.

In the morning, as Francis Scott Key was writing "The Star Spangled Banner" on the back of an envelope, Private Williams was twisting on a bed of agony.

A British cannonball had ripped a leg off his body. Over the next two months, until death ended his misery, this brave man would sweat and bleed and suffer continuously with a wound that would not heal.

In most ways, the saga of Private Williams echoes the stories of all who sacrificed their lives for our country. Yet there is one way in which it is very different.

Private Williams had to cheat his way into the United States Army. A runaway slave, the Army did not want him, at least not officially. Yet he was determined to serve, and his commanding officer asked no questions.

So the young patriot got his way. And he gave his life's blood freely for a nation *he* claimed as *his* own, even though that nation had not yet claimed him as a beloved son.

What an inspiring tribute! Yet we need not look so far back in history for examples of such patriotism. Just two months ago, a group of sailors gathered at the DAV's Washington Headquarters – sailors who know the meaning of combat.

Representing the broad cultural diversity that defines America today, they were serving on board the *USS Cole* last autumn when two terrorist madmen drove a bomb-laden boat into the side of their ship.

Seventeen of their fellow seamen died that day. Another 39 were wounded, and their lives will never again be the same.

Like Private Williams, these men and women were ordinary people who stepped forward to do extraordinary things in the service of a great nation!

None of the 17 who gave their lives planned to die that day, but they knew the dangers of military service. And they risked their lives daily in the cause of a free nation.

They deserve the salute we offer them today. They have earned it just as surely as the patriots of old, like Private Williams and his comrades at Fort McHenry.

Their sacrifices echo the heroism of those who died in the World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf. They recall the greatness of those whose blood nurtures the soil of freedom in Panama, Grenada, Beirut, Somalia, Kosovo and so many other places.

At our best, we pay homage to our nation's dead all year round, not just on Memorial Day. And we honor the dead most fully when we serve those who lived but came home wounded in body, mind or spirit.

Most people assume our nation has always matched this ideal with action, living up to Abraham Lincoln's charge "to care for him who has borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan." But history tells a different story.

As the Civil War closed, Abe Lincoln had good reason to demand compassion for those disabled in the fighting. If they lacked the money to get home, soldiers discharged due to disability were left stranded in Washington, D.C.

If they were fortunate, they found a spot to lay down in the tent-city hospitals in and around the city. If not, they lived on the streets and begged for food. Abe Lincoln saw them every day.

After World War I, there were programs in place to deal with those who had been gassed, wounded or otherwise disabled. But those programs were so badly managed that they fell into a state of massive confusion.

In fact, the Disabled American Veterans was formed in 1920 for the purpose of demanding necessary improvements in health care and benefits for the disabled of World War I.

And what about today?

Funding of the VA health care system is less than it ought to be, and that has been the case for decades now. As a result, several VA medical programs fall short of the resources they truly need.

Without all these resources, VA health care professionals find themselves hampered in many ways as they deliver care to veterans.

And too often they must say “no” to veterans who arrive at their doors seeking medical attention – some of whom have few if any health care options other than the VA.

The situation is no better when it comes to processing VA claims. A veteran’s claim can take months and years as it crawls through an understaffed system of adjudication.

For a few years, the situation was improving thanks to the leadership of former VA Secretary Jesse Brown. But after Mr. Brown’s departure, things slipped backward.

When Tony Principi took over the helm at the VA earlier this year, he learned that the claims backlog was once again on the rise, climbing to 385,000 last year.

By the end of this year, there could be 600,000 backlogged claims. That means many veterans will die before the VA decides the claims.

Anger and frustration strained Mr. Principi's voice at the DAV's Midwinter Conference last March as he explained how veterans were dying before their claims were resolved.

With hope and the support of the veterans' organizations, Mr. Principi will be able to reverse this disgraceful trend. But he knows – and we know – that this stubborn problem will not be solved easily.

We, the veterans of America, have a role to play as well. We are our brothers' keepers. We are our sisters' keepers.

It is a pleasure to watch all of America's veterans' organizations as they respond to the needs of their brothers and sisters. However, in my capacity I can only speak for one, the Disabled American Veterans.

Just this year, the DAV mounted two brand new programs to help make sure all of our fellow veterans get the assistance they need.

First, we initiated a new Mobile Service Office program. In office-equipped vans, DAV veterans' benefits experts travel the nation, visiting small towns and rural communities.

They're bringing the help of DAV National and Department Service Officers directly to the veterans who need that assistance.

Second, the DAV's new Transition Service Program is offering DAV assistance to men and women as they prepare to leave military service.

As veterans of previous times know all too well, this kind of preparation and assistance can make an enormous difference as a new veteran returns to civilian life.

Not only will this project make service members aware of the programs that are available to them. It will help clear the path for future claims for VA benefits and services.

Such new programs bring hope – great hope – into the world of veterans’ affairs. But there is also cause for concern.

Between the 1940s and the 1970s, Americans saw action in three large-scale wars. Since then, with the exception of the Persian Gulf War, smaller military conflicts have been the order of the day.

Yet, the men and women of today’s armed forces face danger every day. One need only read the newspaper to know that the military remains a dangerous profession.

Some of America’s young people are coming home sick and injured from service in the world’s most troubled areas. And, like their older comrades, they’ll need veterans’ benefits, services, and health care entitlements.

To date, we’ve been able to demand that our government meet those needs thanks to the large numbers of veterans in our nation’s population. But the strength of those numbers is dwindling.

World War II veterans are passing from the scene at the alarming rate of one thousand a day.

The veterans of the Korean War are just a few years behind them. And Vietnam veterans follow by only two decades.

Those who served during these three wars make up the bulk of the veterans' population. When they're gone, protecting veterans' programs will become a far greater challenge.

This is why new outreach programs, like those I just described, are so necessary. They'll not only assist young veterans today, they will help organize those veterans for the struggles of tomorrow.

In the future that these young veterans face, it will be more difficult to build and maintain public awareness of what our country owes to those who carried the burden of its defense.

Yet I have confidence that our new generation of veterans will be ready to carry the day well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Half a century from this moment, they will keep the flame of memory alive:

- honoring those who have gone before them,
- assisting those who served during their day of military duty, and
- looking after the men and women who will make up our armed forces in times to come.

The tradition of remembering, however, must continue from one year to the next. So your action, in joining us here today for the observance of Memorial Day, is very important.

You have done your part to remind the American people of the millions who accepted duty in our military forces, giving their lives over to something larger than themselves at the call of our nation.

A million and a quarter of those men and women breathed their last while serving our country. Let us hold up the example of their courage for all to see.

And let us carry the message of their great sacrifice to the generations to come.

In closing, let me return to the words of Francis Scott Key as we remember why we're gathered here today:

*Oh, thus be it ever when free men shall stand  
Between their loved homes and war's desolation.*

Thank you.