

MEMORIAL DAY 2003

REMEMBRANCE: DARK DAYS OF TRIAL



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

In the wake of World War I, a number of people wrote responses to the famous poem, “In Flanders Fields,” by Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae of Canada.

One of the most powerful is R.W. Lilliard’s poem, “America’s Answer.” Here’s his second stanza:

Fear not that ye have died for naught.
The torch ye threw to us we caught.
Ten million hands will hold it high
And freedom’s light shall never die!

How well those words summarize the meaning of what we’re doing today as we honor our wartime dead!

But, now, let's skip ahead ninety years to our current era, and read some news headlines from 2003.

From NBC News: "A military policeman ... is being treated for a gunshot wound to his stomach suffered while on duty in Afghanistan."

From Fox News: "An American paratrooper was wounded Saturday when he stepped on a landmine while on patrol in eastern Afghanistan."

From American Forces Information Services: "Two special forces soldiers were injured ... when a homemade bomb blew up the vehicle they were riding in."

And another story from AFIS: "A Special Forces soldier ... was hit in the lower leg when the mounted patrol he was taking part in came under fire about 50 kilometers southeast of Shindand."

That wasn't the list of the wounded from a whole year for the United States armed forces. These are just a few stories that showed up during the first 2½ weeks of January 2003.

As all of us know, it got a whole lot worse after that.

In March, America and its allies entered Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein from power. Since then, many more of our young men and women have come home sick and injured from the Middle East.

More have sacrificed their lives at their country's call to arms. This gives special meaning to our observance of Memorial Day this year.

In 2003, we honor more than those who died in the World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, and the first Gulf War.

We not only remember those killed in other post-Vietnam armed conflicts, like the attack on the *USS Cole*.

We also pay tribute to members of our armed forces who made the ultimate sacrifice *this* year – *in 2003* – in Iraq, Kuwait, Afghanistan, and other sites of armed hostility.

Just as surely as the World War I doughboys mourned by Colonel McCrae, these young men and women are American

heroes. Like the fallen soldiers in Mr. Lilliard's poem, they held the torch of freedom high.

Today, as America's young men and women carry that torch into battle yet again, let's stop to appreciate the trust, the courage, and the idealism that burn in their hearts.

Times of war are times of national trial – times that test the mettle of our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines. If this is a crucial turning point in the life of the United States, the men and women of our armed forces stand at the edge of history.

As these brave men and women risk their lives, we can learn a great deal from a statement Sergeant First Class Christopher Martin made in a recent story released by the Army.

Sergeant Martin got a surprise recently as he lay at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, recovering from combat wounds. He rolled over on his bed and there stood Secretary of the Army Thomas White.

When the Secretary asked how he felt, Sergeant Martin told the simple truth. "I thank God every day for my life," he said. "Every day – and that's no lie."

People die. That's the reality of war and armed conflict. People die in horrible, painful ways.

And this young sergeant came so close to being another soldier in the ranks of the dead whose memory we honor on Memorial Day.

Without doubt, it is right that our nation sets aside a special date to recall the loss of life that has purchased our nation's liberty and our personal freedoms.

It is good that America's leaders take this opportunity to share our nation's gratitude for the lives that have been lost.

But, on Memorial Day, I must ask this: Can our leaders honor the dead with their words if government actions fail to honor the sacrifices made by those who lived but came home disabled?

The words of our leaders will ring hollow if, in the years to come, our government forgets Sergeant Martin.

We live in a time when there are divisions in our society over issues of foreign policy and questions of war and peace. Reflecting our society as a whole, opinions among the veterans of America's wars vary widely.

Some are troubled by the vitality of the debate. But we, who have fought for freedom, have earned the right to smile at all this turmoil. The democratic institutions we defended are working. The freedoms for which we fought are filled with life.

But this is important: In the competition of ideas and ideals, I hope all Americans can agree on one thing. We must respect the integrity of our fighting men and women.

Our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines are facing grave danger with the courage of heroes. Their idealism is deeply rooted in the cause of peace and freedom.

For the enormous sacrifices they're making today, these heroes deserve all the dignity and all the praise that America has lavished on past generations of veterans.

We have a duty to deliver that respect and gratitude. It is a debt of national honor.

But that obligation is poorly served by a veterans' health care system that's desperately short of resources – a system that must ration medical treatment to America's veterans.

That obligation becomes an empty promise when veterans must wait months – sometimes even years – for settlement of their claims for disability benefits.

Sadly, this is what's happening in today's U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. These are the realities that await Sergeant Martin and others who become disabled while they serve America in Iraq and other war-torn corners of the world.

Nothing can justify this failure of America's will to meet the needs of its sick and injured heroes. But who is to blame for this moral tragedy? Well, I won't cast blame on the leaders who have held the post of Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

The late Jesse Brown, who headed the VA in the Clinton Administration, worked day and night to build up the VA's medical programs.

He was a true champion of our nation's veterans. He never stopped trying to make the VA a model of modern health care delivery.

Yet Secretary Brown faced stiff opposition in other parts of the government, and his work is not yet done.

Justice is still out of reach. America has not honored the dead of its wars by serving those who lived, but came home disabled.

Tony Principi, who heads the VA today, has made a great cause for change in the VA claims system. He's determined to make sure no veteran waits longer than 100 days for a decision on a claim for benefits.

Secretary Principi is making progress. Yet he too faces political forces that resist spending money on our veterans. His work is not yet done. Again, America has not honored the dead by serving the living.

In response, the veterans' groups have grown more vocal in demanding justice. And they've achieved great unity in their message.

Recently every member of the United States Congress received a powerful message from America's three largest veterans' organizations: the DAV, VFW, and American Legion.

Deeply worried about the future of *all* veterans, these organizations stated their message with great clarity.

Let me quote:

“A new generation of young Americans is once again deployed around the world, answering our nation’s call to arms. Like so many brave men and women who honorably served before them, these new veterans are fighting, to the death when necessary, for the freedom, liberty and security of all.

Also, like those who fought before them, these veterans deserve the due respect of a grateful nation when they come home.”

The respect demanded by the veterans’ organizations goes well beyond the pious sentiments I mentioned a little earlier. On Memorial Day this year, veterans do not want empty rhetoric.

If our leaders truly mean to honor the dead of our nation’s wars, let them prove their words with action.

If one disabled veteran is treated to anything short of justice, praises offered on Memorial Day will echo in the darkness like the sound of a hammer beating an empty barrel.

Our government must fulfill its promise of medical care for veterans. Our government must guarantee adequate funding for the VA health care system.

Nothing short of that is morally responsible:

- There is certainly no moral vision in the current system, which leaves VA health care subject to every shifting whim that wafts through Washington, D.C.!
- There is no moral foresight in a system that sends young men and women off to war, while cutting every corner in the medical programs they'll need when they come home!

By contrast, there is a vision of moral reality, one that spells out the necessities of justice for the future of America's veterans.

That vision has taken form in the Independent Budget that the veterans' organizations have forwarded to Congress and the Administration.

The DAV, VFW, AMVETS, and PVA worked together to formulate this document. And a host of smaller veterans' groups signed on to support this national plan for positive change.

It addresses the medical needs that were so important to the late Jesse Brown. It joins Tony Principi in calling for timely decisions in veterans' claims.

It presents an agenda for success in delivering the respect America owes its veterans. It's a plan that serves the living in

meaningful ways. Thus, it gives meaning to Memorial Day's message of honor for the dead.

One may ask how these things came to pass in the world of veterans' affairs, and some would like to blame the media. However, in recent years, the media have been coming through on Memorial Day as well as Veterans Day.

In most communities, coverage of local events has been good on both holidays. On both, editorials have asked all Americans to think about the human cost of war.

This is very welcome, but most people won't be turning to the editorial page when they open their newspapers over Memorial Day weekend.

They won't be looking for coverage of events that honor our war dead. *Instead they'll be looking at ads for Memorial Day sales.*

They won't be heading for the cemeteries or the public squares. They won't be watching parades. *They'll be driving to the malls.*

Something's muddled in the thinking of a nation that honors its war dead with a lost weekend of buying and selling.

I think most veterans share my dismay at this trend. But this leaves me all the more grateful to you. I thank you for coming here today to properly recognize the many who have sacrificed their lives in the defense of liberty.

You have not forgotten the men and women who purchased America's freedom. You have remembered all those whose blood was spilled – from 1776 right up to 2003.

Through your loyalty, you have earned the appreciation of America's veterans.

You are paying tribute to our honored dead through service to those who lived. In recognition of your work, let me return to R.W. Lilliard's poem:

Fear not that ye have died for naught.
The torch ye threw to us we caught.
Ten million hands will hold it high
And freedom's light shall never die!

Thank you for lifting freedom's torch in these dark days of trial.

