

# PROVEN TRUE IN THE THRUST OF HISTORY



## MEMORIAL DAY 2004

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

Those who have felt the heat of battle know this about warfare: There's nothing glorious about war, nothing noble. Combat is cruel and brutal.

War tears the human body apart, and destroys the mind.

War is hell. That's what General William Tecumseh Sherman said back in 1880. At certain times in our history, we have had to fight. But war is hell.

As we mark Memorial Day, we remember that warfare has claimed the lives of more than a million and a quarter young Americans in uniform.

As we think about that figure, our minds stagger. And we see the point General Sherman was making as he refused to glorify war.

But that's not what we came here to do today. Instead, we gathered to honor those who stood up to the terrible trials of war ... and met the challenge in the defense of liberty.

In particular today, we pay our tribute to the heroism of those who died in our nation's wars, advancing the great cause of human freedom.

Certainly we hold these men and women in our hearts as we observe Memorial Day in 2004. This is the year during which we dedicate the World War II Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

During the Second World War, we certainly saw the brutal face of warfare. The United States faced two enemies:

- *In Europe, we confronted a hated political doctrine that had taken over a nation ... and much of a continent.*

*Worse yet, the Nazis were trying to exterminate a whole race of human beings. Their victory would have spelled the end of Western Civilization.*

- *In the Pacific, we faced a power that sent the flower of its youth off in junk airplanes to commit suicide by crashing into our ships – all for the worship of an emperor and the love of empire.*

*And who can ever forget the horror of the Bataan Death March?*

Truly, in times of war, human beings can sink to inhuman depths.

Yet, under the extreme conditions of armed conflict, we often see the human heart soar to heights of incredible nobility.

This was surely the case in a story that comes to mind as we mark the dedication of the World War II Memorial. It's a story from the front, during the late days of the fighting in Europe.

The odds were hopeless as a platoon of Americans tried to capture a bridge in Holland. The Germans had the numbers and the guns.

But that small group from the American 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division didn't know that – not until the Germans had them cut off and surrounded.

Then one scout – Private First Class Joe Mann – risked it all. Joe crept forward ... aimed a rocket launcher at a large artillery piece ... and took the big gun out.

But that wasn't enough for Joe. He kept going, killing enemy soldiers one-by-one with his rifle until he took four bullets himself.

His buddies pulled him back and patched up his wounds. The next day would be tough. Joe's injuries were severe.

He would not be able to fight. So he took guard all night, in order give his buddies a chance to rest.

As morning drew near, the enemy attacked. A grenade landed near Joe. As he warned the other men, he threw his own body over the grenade ... and it exploded.

Joe Mann — He died saving the lives of his friends. He was a great hero, proven true in the pitch of combat.

And during the war, America was proven true yet again in the thrust of history.

Joe Mann — During the Second World War, he was one of more than 400,000 Americans who lost their lives.

History reached a turning point. The whole world had come down to a stark choice between civilization and

barbarity. And, like so many in World War II, Joe Mann took his stand.

This scout from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne died. And Western Civilization lives on. Truly, he earned the Medal of Honor that was awarded after his death.

Such is the heroism we honor on Memorial Day this year as America finally dedicates the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C.

There is dignity in the way the National Mall in Washington brings the story of our nation to life – a deep, profound dignity.

Eloquent memorials have already been built on the Mall to tell the stories of two other wars fought during the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the Vietnam and Korean Wars. And these memorials make powerful statements about our history.

But a great chapter of America's history has been missing on the Mall ... one that makes a nation's statement about the largest war the world has ever known.

Global in its impact and enormous in its scope – that was the Second World War! And it will forever hold its place in the memory of our people.

The sheer historical weight of this war demanded that we place its memorial between two of the most revered symbols of our country.

And there it stands today – between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument.

It's a commanding sight – perhaps the most impressive historical monument ever built. Its great pillars and planes of granite are matched by towering sculptures in bronze!

Everyone who passes along its walkways will feel the power and reverence it inspires. Every potent impression will last a lifetime.

This is a place worthy of the soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines who served our nation in World War II. It expresses the patriotic fervor that fired their hearts. It takes full measure of their selfless sacrifices.

The spirit of Joe Mann will find a home in this memorial ... a home of honor and peace ... of dignity, respect, and yes, of glory.

Much will be said in praise of the veterans of World War II before the festivities are over. And many will hark back to Tom Brokaw's name for them: "The Greatest Generation."

This is just as it ought to be. The veterans of the Second World War have richly earned the honor that is coming their way.

This is their moment. It is time – and far past time – to honor them with their own memorial and all the celebration that surrounds its dedication.

But through my involvement in the Disabled American Veterans, *I know* the men and women of World War II.

And *I know the deep concern they feel* for another – and much younger – generation of men and women in uniform:

- *They see young Americans the ages of their grandchildren and their great-grandchildren.*
- *They are looking at the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan ... and the cruelty of the enemies we face in these far-off lands.*
- *They see the danger American forces face in troubled places like Haiti, Korea, and Liberia.*

They know today's American troops are just as heroic as the fighting men and women of their own generation

... just as courageous ... just as patriotic ... just as committed to the cause of freedom.

And they're worried about the future of these young soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines.

For a time last year, there was a rolling cry to "Support our Troops." But that loud cry has died down to a low rumble.

And it never did translate into anything like a real demand to give the troops decent benefits when they came home as disabled veterans.

- *Even while young Americans were fighting and bleeding and dying overseas, the White House sent Congress a budget for veterans' programs that falls way short of the mark.*
- *Even as our nation's heroes were earning our gratitude in combat, the veterans' organizations were forced to fight for adequate VA health care funding.*

*If we don't win this battle on the home front, our youngest veterans will continue to face the same shortfalls that have plagued the VA health care system for decades past.*

When we talk about supporting our troops, let's make sure our nation's leaders mean what they say!

Empty words will not do – not when we've asked people to shed their blood for America!

There's a declaration we often hear at Memorial Day, and it goes like this: ***The best way to honor the dead of our nation's wars is to serve those who lived.***

That's far more than a pious sentiment. It's a high moral obligation.

I believe the people of our nation take that duty seriously. They don't have to be convinced of this. No one has to remind them of the meaning of the sacrifice made by a soldier like Joe Mann.

They understand that America's men and women in uniform have been proven true in the thrust of history.

And the dedication of the World War II Memorial will help keep the memory of our veterans fresh in their minds.

It's my hope, however, that this beautiful memorial will also spur our elected leaders to meet the nation's obligations with realistic programs. This is a simple necessity.

Today – as we honor those who served and died in World War II and all of our nation's wars and armed conflicts – let me close by thanking you for coming to this observance.

You have remembered the men and women who stood up to the hellish trials of war. You have honored those whose lives purchased our freedoms in this great land, the United States of America.

And I thank you.

