

HEARTS TOUCHED WITH FIRE



VETERANS DAY

11 November 2002



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



Great pride moves through my soul today as I come to you, offering my thoughts about wars long past and the brave Americans who fought them. Yet there's some sadness in my heart as well.

In the mountains and plains of Afghanistan, new wartime veterans are being created today – even as we gather to mark the heroism of the past.

New veterans are also being made...

... in the jungles of the Philippines,

... on the demilitarized zone that separates
North and South Korea,

... in the Middle East and in other hotspots
around the globe.

My heart is heavy because – like other veterans – I know the hardship of military service. I know the agony of war. I know what we are asking, even today, from a new generation in the Army and the Navy ... in the Air Force, the Marine Corps and the Coast Guard.

Yet I know something else about these young men and women, our youngest generation of veterans. I know their hearts are “touched with fire.”

That phrase is not mine. It was coined by a man who knew the meaning of combat, a man three times wounded in the Civil War.

Though Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. went on to become a great jurist on the United States Supreme Court, he never forgot the soldiers he knew on the fields of battle.

Whether they fought for the North or for the South did not matter in his estimation. To his death he held all of them in his highest regard. He saw all of them as heroes, and he said of his generation:

**“In our youth our hearts were touch with fire.
It was given to us to learn at the outset
that life is a profound and passionate thing.”**

I know that fire still burns in the hearts of the veterans who gather here to observe this day of honor and respect for those who have served in our Armed Forces.

Yes, we experience a few troubled feelings as we remember scenes of war and times of great personal trial – as we recall those who no longer march with us in the ranks of life.

Yet with our fellow veteran, Captain Holmes, we can say:

“Some of the associations of this day are not only triumphant, but joyful.

“Not all of those with whom we once stood shoulder to shoulder – not all of those whom we once loved and revered – are gone ...

“On this day, at least, we still meet and rejoice in the closest tie which is possible between men – a tie which suffering has made indissoluble for better, for worse ...

“[We] have seen the best and the noblest of our generation pass away, but grief is not the end of all.”

Captain Holmes was right in all that he said on this point.

We have gathered to honor those who *lived* through our wars.

Even as we revere the dead, we take up our duty to serve those who came home from war *alive*, but scarred forever in body, mind and soul.

Like Captain Holmes, “We know that life may still be lifted into poetry” in times of war and armed conflict. Yet we also know that America’s veterans can be forgotten – left behind like dust in the road as the commerce of life moves forward.

It is happening even today.

As the best of our nation’s youth spends itself on the cold, rocky mountains of Central Asia, the greatest concern of our people seems to be the progress of Wall Street.

I ask the people of my country, how did this happen?

I remember last winter when the DAV’s National Commander asked Congress why *al Qaeda* prisoners at Guantánamo Bay were receiving better healthcare than veterans in America’s VA hospitals and clinics.

Again, I ask the people of my country, how could this happen?

These are not good times for America's disabled veterans – even as our country wages a new and perhaps endless war against fanatical terror.

Year after year the DAV and our other veterans' organizations have gone before Congress, asking the same question:

**“When will our nation remember
its wounded heroes
with respect and dignity and gratitude?”**

Mere words on Veterans Day cannot discharge our country's debt to the men and women whose sacrifices paid the price of freedom.

High-flown phrases on the Fourth of July will never be enough when former members of our Armed Forces sometimes wait years for settlement of claims for earned benefits.

Pious sentiments on Memorial Day will never measure up when a war-wounded veteran is forced to wait week after week, month after month, for an appointment at a VA hospital or clinic.

The most eloquent statements fall short of the mark when a veteran of the Persian Gulf War cannot find a decent job ... when potential employers see only a disability, not a hero!

I'm sorry if what I say today is tinged with strong emotion. But these are the truths that face our nation's 2.3 million disabled veterans in the year 2002.

Such realities represent a disgrace to the United States of America. They are symptoms of a society that, in some respects, has lost its way and many of its values.

I don't blame the people of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs – the VA – for this disturbing situation. Not at all!

For too long – decades in fact – VA employees have been asked to do more with less. They're doing everything they can under very trying circumstances. I don't know what more we could ask of them.

I don't blame VA Secretary Tony Principi, who has tried to move heaven and earth to speed up the VA claims system.

Nor do I blame his predecessor, the great Jesse Brown, who worked day and night to transform the VA's medical programs.

But that leaves us with a hard question: Why are veterans, who served our country, subjected to such shabby treatment?

The answer is simple. Veterans are not very high on our government's public agenda because the American people are forgetful.

Our citizens enjoy their freedoms every day, but they don't often consider that their freedoms are *not free*.

Our veterans paid dearly for every freedom guaranteed in our Constitution, particularly those in the Bill of Rights.

So many veterans sacrificed their health, their limbs, and their mental well being.

Something must be done to help our country's citizens remember what disabled veterans have given for all of us – not only in times of crisis like this, but for all time.

Something must be done to build awareness that disabled veterans are *disabled for life* – that their sacrifices and their pain will never end until their final day!

This is why the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial is being built in Washington, D.C.

More is at stake than simply paying tribute to past sacrifices – or even the sacrifices being made in our Armed Forces today.

We veterans need to share some of the fire that has touched our hearts.

We need to touch the hearts of others with that flame, sparking a blaze of gratitude for our disabled veterans – gratitude and respect!

Building a memorial in Washington can't do the whole job, but it's a start ... and a good start ... in our struggle for simple justice.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of people will see this new monument.

Each time an American citizen views it, he or she will carry away a powerful reminder of the true, human cost of freedom.

Every viewer will remember *that our nation's disabled veterans pay the price of freedom with suffering and hardship that never end.*

Further, with your help and mine, the new memorial will be constructed in the shadow of the United States Capitol – that majestic structure where our nation's laws are made.

As America's leaders drive through Washington, D.C., the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial will give them a frequent *and necessary* reminder of our country's debt to those who bear the marks of war on their bodies, minds and souls.

Such promptings of the public memory are needed today, but they'll be even more necessary in the future.

Please think of this. A young American wounded in Central Asia today will still need the VA healthcare system in the year 2060. He or she will still need VA disability compensation and other benefits.

Yet, as the years go by, there will be far fewer veterans in our population to keep the memory of wartime sacrifice alive.

It will be much more difficult to focus the attention of elected officials.

These are some of the reasons I hope you'll join me in supporting the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial.

Thank you for being here today. Your presence tells me that your heart is touched by the fire of patriotism ... that it is filled with honor and respect for those who have served our nation, and for those who are serving today.

May you be blessed. And, in this difficult hour, may those blessings fall upon the United States of America.

Let me close by recalling one of the middle stanzas of Katherine Lee Bates' glorious hymn of patriotism, the song we know as "America the Beautiful." How could anyone describe America's veterans in words more compelling than these?

**O beautiful for heroes proved
In liberating strife;
Who more than self the country loved,
And mercy more the life!**

Yes, such words are worthy of the men and women who earned our esteem as veterans of our historic conflicts – and of today's war on terrorism.

They are words worthy of Americans whose hearts are touched with fire.

Thank you.