

VETERANS DAY:

Where the Spirit Fought Remains a Scar



11 November 2004



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

Those who have witnessed the horror of war can tell you the truth: The carnage of combat deeply troubles the mind.

- To face the grim prospect of your own death.
- To see your buddies blown to bits.
- To watch friends carried from battle, their bodies bleeding and broken.

These are dreadful sights – visions that forever haunt a veteran's memory.

The scenes of war hit Harold Applebaum's heart with enormous force during World War II.

And he tried to make sense of his feelings by writing poetry in the lulls between the battles. In a poem called "The Good Fight," he makes this statement:

"Where the spirit fought remains a scar, and blood.
And though my lungs are filled with freedom's breath, I
shall not lose this keen respect for death."

It gives me strength to see such a lofty thought growing out of the grime, the sweat and the blood of battle.

As we observe Veterans Day 2004, this idea has the power to pulse in the heart of every man and woman we honor at this gathering.

Like our World War II poet, each of us once struggled in spirit. When we put on that military uniform, we understood the cost of duty.

We were being asked to give up years of our lives to serve our country. Not one of us knew if we would come home in one piece ... or even alive.

But as Harold Applebaum said in his poem, we found ourselves “braver for the test.” And frankly, most of us were very surprised in the depths of our hearts.

Many of us here today know the meaning of the poem’s reference to scars and blood.

I represent the Disabled American Veterans – the DAV. As our name implies, our whole purpose is focused on men and women who came home sick and injured from war and armed conflict.

But you don’t have to be a member of the DAV to respect the sacrifices of our wartime disabled veterans.

Each freedom-loving person at this gathering cares about those whose bodies and minds bear the scars of war.

And every veteran among us can echo Corporal Applebaum's last line. Each can say, with great personal conviction: "Though my lungs are filled with freedom's breath, I shall not lose this keen respect for death."

The human cost of war is high – appallingly high. And this year on Veterans Day, my heart goes out to the young Americans who are paying that price even now in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I remember reading an Associated Press story about one of these soldiers, Sergeant Paul Brondhaver.

He was leading a convoy between two towns north of Baghdad when one of the vehicles broke down.

It was bad territory, so he ordered his troops to form a box formation – sort of like circling the wagons in the Old West. But it was not enough to prevent an attack.

Suddenly a rocket-propelled grenade whistled in.

The explosion took one man down. The blast sprayed Sergeant Brondhaver with shrapnel from his eyes down to his legs. Yet the sergeant stuck to his duty.

He called in reinforcements ... and fought on with his troops ... until a Medivac helicopter came and carried him away to a field hospital.

Back in the States, surgeons pulled hunks of metal from 300 holes in his body.

One particularly delicate operation removed a piece of shrapnel from his eye. His hearing was badly affected.

But still, this brave soldier thought of nothing but his troops in Iraq. Oh yes, like Corporal Applebaum, it can be said of Sergeant Paul Brondhaver:

“Where his spirit fought remains a scar, and blood. And though his lungs are filled with freedom’s breath, he shall not lose this keen respect for death.”

He and his troops are courageous Americans. They have earned ... and *continue* to earn ... our deepest respect and gratitude. This must be said of all the men and women who wear the uniforms of our armed forces.

On Veterans Day this year, we fellow veterans honor them as the newest members of our band of brothers and sisters. We welcome them into a proud fraternity of those who served our nation well in times of peace and peril.

Their sacrifices remind me about the full range of those who served our nation ... and how they reflect the total scope of our American society.

A few of the veterans we honor today are over one hundred years of age. Yet there are others still in their late teens and early twenties on the wards of our hospitals.

Sergeant Brondhaver was 35 years old when he was wounded.

There's scarcely a home in the United States that's untouched by the cause of America's veterans. In almost every family, there's someone who served.

In many families, military service is a tradition, from one generation to the next. Let's face it, our nation owes a great deal to the patriotism that flows in the blood of these families!

My point is simple: The veterans' cause is America's cause.

"To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan." When it comes to the men and women who served our land, those are the words Abraham Lincoln chose to state the nation's obligation.

And this obligation is everyone's moral duty. Yet I'm disappointed in America's response to those who have carried the torch of freedom and paid the high price of liberty.

The recently ended political season serves as a case in point.

A great deal of bitter division surfaced in America. A lot of finger pointing was done. Each side was quick to say it has the *best interests* of veterans at heart ... and that the other side did not.

Many Americans wanted to believe the best of the political faction to which they belong ... perhaps that's true of most of us. But, if our wishful thinking were correct, the world would be a better place for America's veterans.

Both parties have had their shot at fixing the problems faced by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Both have placed committed leaders at the helm of the VA – people like Jesse Brown and Tony Principi.

But serious problems persist, despite the best efforts of these leaders. Due to lack of vision elsewhere in government...problems continue.

Veterans still face rationing in the delivery of health care. Too many still wait too long for their claims to go through the VA system.

This is not what the American people want. Our citizens are grateful to those who defended their freedom. They understand the debt America owes to those who served.

The people of our country want our nation to treat its veterans with something *more* than respect. They want veterans *to receive* timely, compassionate care and services.

In January, when the President takes the Oath of Office and a new Congress begins, I hope we'll see a new start in Washington.

And let me adapt a phrase from scripture as I share my feelings about what we need from our elected officials:

Praise without action is dead!

We must have leadership in Washington, not just words. We must have funding focused on the real needs of veterans.

If funding levels don't keep pace with medical inflation and the increasing patient load, they do not truly benefit veterans!

We must do better. Our elected leaders must get to the point where they can join the people in saying:

“Though our lungs are filled with freedom’s breath, we shall not lose this keen respect for the true cost of war. We shall not lose the memory of the price our veterans have paid in blood and health.”

Can we meet the challenges that confront veterans’ health care in today’s overheated political environment?

I'll not only say, "Yes!" I'll be very emphatic about it!

When House Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Christopher Smith spoke at the DAV's National Convention last summer, he talked about how well the Republicans and Democrats on his committee get along.

This was no empty boast. It's a reality.

Sure, there are disagreements on the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees. But they're seldom about politics. They're about what's best for those who served our country.

It can truly be said of these Committees: They have not lost their keen respect for the true cost of war. They have kept the memory of the price veterans have paid for our freedom.

If only we could extend that kind of bipartisan thinking to the Budget and Appropriations Committees!

Then there would be no problem with the funding of veterans' programs.

If only that kind of statesmanship could spread throughout the whole political process!

For now, we must think of our veterans ... those who fought in the World Wars, Korea, Vietnam and the Persian Gulf ... as well as those who saw combat in many smaller armed conflicts.

Today, we must look to the future for men and women who come home injured and sick from Iraq and Afghanistan.

They'll still need VA compensation and medical care in the years 2060 and 2070.

Corporal Harold Applebaum, writing in a lull between battles during World War II, told us the truth about the

price these men and women are paying today ... the truth about the cost our veterans have paid in all of our wars:

America is a land where people can fill their lungs with freedom's breath. We must never let them lose the keen respect for death.

We must constantly remind them that freedom is not free. Because, as Corporal Applebaum has told us, “Where the spirit fought, remains a scar, and blood.”

Thank you.

One volume of Harold Applebaum’s poetry, *Solo and Other Poems*, was published following his service in the U.S. Army during World War II. “The Good Fight” and three other poems by Corporal Applebaum can also be found in *Reveille*, an anthology of poems by members of the armed forces that was published during the Second World War.