

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

(Acknowledge any VIPs/special guests)

I think it's all too appropriate to begin by recognizing all our veterans, active-duty service members, Guardsmen and reservists present today. You have gone above and beyond your citizens' duty to volunteer your lives and livelihoods, and to answer when your country called, to defend the freedoms we enjoy each and every day.

I would also like to thank your families: the mothers and fathers tearfully sending their children off to war, the husbands and wives waiting dutifully for their loved one to return home, the children growing up away from mom and dad, and the friends who keep vigil for a safe return.

There is also a tremendous, and often overlooked, labor of love performed every day in this country by the family and friends who serve as caregivers to our nation's wounded, injured and ill veterans. And, of course, today we especially hold dear to us our Gold Star families, who truly know the depths of sacrifice, service and loss.

Today, I'd like to share with you a little story about Navy corpsman Donald Ballard, who served in Vietnam with the 3rd Marine Division. His story is quite a bit different than most of his fellow Medal of Honor recipients.

In 1968, in Quang Tri (Kwong Tree) province, he was rendering aid to several wounded Marines under heavy enemy fire. As he prepared to have the men medically evacuated, a grenade struck his helmet and landed beside him.

Without hesitation, Mr. Ballard bravely jumped on top of it to shield the Marines from the impending blast.

The grenade, however, did not explode.

Unharméd, Mr. Ballard threw the grenade back into the jungle, upon which it detonated. After what I'm sure was a moment of shock and disbelief, he continued his work treating the casualties.

Now that's a story for the grandkids if I've ever heard one.

The story continues that Mr. Ballard's nomination for the Medal of Honor was initially rejected by a major at the higher headquarters in Saigon. A three-star general phoned the major and asked something along the lines of, "Major, what school in the military teaches people how to identify grenades that don't explode?"

Promptly, the major replied, "General, there is no such school," and forwarded the recommendation straight to Washington.

Mr. Ballard was, indeed, awarded the Medal of Honor in 1970. And in the truly humble fashion so common among veterans, he later remarked, "It's harder to wear the medal than to earn it."

Think about those words for a moment. *“It's harder to wear the medal than to earn it.”*

For those of you who have served, you know that sentiment. There always seems to be a sense among our community that “someone is worse off than I am; someone did more; someone deserves it more than me.” Mr. Ballard returned home when so many others had not. He returned with brothers severely wounded in combat. Some chalk this up to a sense of pride and toughness, some may call it humility, and still others may even attribute this to a sort of survivor’s guilt. But in reality, the men and women of our armed forces are simply a special breed of people.

Our military history is filled with stories of bravery and sacrifice, though a vast majority of the heroes perished in their attempts to save the lives of others. Mr. Ballard, while he walked away that day, was no less courageous and is no less deserving of admiration and accolades. His resolve was tested in a way that few will ever experience, and his actions were a testament to the strength of his character.

In the fraction of a second he had to choose between saving himself or shielding the Marines nearby, Mr. Ballard did not falter. One might say it wasn't even a choice, but rather pure instinct to protect his brothers-in-arms.

While I'm sure Mr. Ballard was grateful for the opportunity to walk away alive, for the remainder of his days – like so many other veterans – he likely struggled with being called a hero when he was simply doing his job. He likely struggled with the memories of men he wasn't able to save and of friends he lost. If you are a veteran, or you know one, I'm sure you've uttered or heard something along these lines: "I'm no hero; the real heroes are the ones who never came home."

So many veterans of eras both past and present live with these struggles day in and day out. Their stories and experiences are widely varied, but one clear commonality you will find among them is the desire to have given and to have sacrificed more, especially if it meant saving the life of another.

I would ask you to keep those men and women in your hearts today, and to remember every day the serious emotional and sometimes serious physical challenges veterans face when they return home from service.

For more than 90 years, we at DAV have been dedicated to our brothers and sisters in arms, ensuring they don't have to walk that road to recovery alone.

We make it our life's work to seek these veterans out, to show them they have a friend in good times and bad. Sometimes it takes the empathetic ear of someone who knows – of someone else who has been there – to really get a veteran to open up and begin the healing process.

As friends, family members and neighbors, there's a role for you to play as well. DAV always needs volunteers to help carry out our mission of service to veterans. No matter how much time you have to give, I guarantee we can work to find a place for you to help better the lives of America's veterans and their families.

As an example, last year DAV volunteers gave more than 1.7 million hours of their time to provide veterans transportation to and from VA medical facilities. They logged 716,302 rides for veterans who otherwise may not have been able to get to their appointments. That generosity is simply astonishing.

And I can tell you this – when you help fulfill the promise to our nation’s veterans, you will walk away fulfilled. It’s an incredible mission to be a part of, and as the veteran population grows, we will need increasingly more support from you, the community that cares for its veterans.

Please feel free to visit our website at dav.org to find out more about volunteer opportunities, or give your local DAV Chapter or Department a call.

God bless you all, bless our veterans and bless the United States of America.