

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

(Acknowledge any VIPs/special guests)

First and foremost, let's begin today by recognizing all those among us who have given themselves in service to the nation—our veterans, active-duty service members, guardsmen and reservists. All your sacrifices, and those of your families, have helped to keep our country safe and free.

The American experience is unique because we have rarely experienced the enemy on our soil or at our gates. Our citizens do not live in fear of the atrocities of violent conflict, experienced daily by so many others around the world. And we have our military men and women to thank for that.

They never give up the fight for us.

There's something to be said for that kind of tenacity. Babe Ruth once said, "You just can't beat the person who never gives up."

If that doesn't capture the spirit of the American warfighter and the American veteran, I don't know what does.

Next month we commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Bullet holes remain in the hangar windows of the Pacific Aviation Museum on Oahu's Ford Island. Remnants of the sunken USS Arizona still peak from beneath the ocean waves. And oil still floats to the water's surface from the war grave that rests below, nearly three-quarters of a century after the ship's demise.

More than 2,400 people died and more than 1,100 were wounded in that attack, with nearly half the casualties aboard the Arizona. And we know that date, Dec. 7—which has indeed lived in infamy—was a turning point for this nation's involvement in the war as well as for many of her sons and daughters.

The USS Arizona Memorial has a unique shape to it. If you've ever visited it or seen photos, you know it's a sort of enclosed bridge spanning the hull of the ship. Its sides are high with a noticeable dip in the middle of the structure. The architect who crafted the memorial noted the following:

“Wherein the structure sags in the center but stands strong and vigorous at the ends, expresses initial defeat and ultimate victory.”

I believe this rather poetic description applies not just to the attack and the ensuing world war, but also to the lives of so many American veterans disabled before, during and long after.

For those forever changed as a result of their military service, there is often a period of darkness, sadness and grief—the initial defeat of their lives being suddenly, often violently, taken off course.

But slowly, hope begins to replace doubt. That fighting spirit emerges, pushing the veteran gradually upward toward a place of triumph—the ultimate victory of a life fulfilled and restored.

At DAV, we're in the business of not giving up the fight for veterans. We want to see every veteran touched by illness or injury elevated to that peak.

We see that in veterans like Mariela Meylan, the recipient of DAV's Freedom Award at this year's National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic in Snowmass, Colorado. Mariela is only alive today because her family kept the faith and continued to fight for her. After being critically injured by a hit-and-run driver in Kuwait, Mariela fell into a coma for eight months.

Doctors advised Mariela's mother that she would likely not survive and urged her to withdraw life support for her daughter. But they knew she had yet to give up the fight.

Mariela proved her mother correct, and after 10 years of intense physical rehabilitation and therapy, that soldier is once again on her feet. An avid swimmer and horseback rider, Mariela also took up skiing and sled hockey at the Winter Sports Clinic. She's not just surviving; she's thriving.

We see this time and time again in veterans of all eras: that unbeatable, unbreakable spirit of someone who just won't let life's hardships beat them.

We at DAV want every veteran to find his or her victory.

Now victory, of course, means something different to everyone. For some, like Mariela, it's discovering the inner strength to overcome a traumatic injury and push through perceived limitations. It may be finding a meaningful new career after closing the book on a military career.

To others, it could be that sense of accomplishment when they finally hold a degree in their hands, knowing they've met their educational goals. Some may find victory in being there for their families after many years of lengthy absences and deployments.

And for some veterans, it might simply mean getting help and finding peace from the emotional scars that linger from years of stress, uncertainty, loss and sometimes guilt.

Every veteran is different, but we believe they are all capable of achieving those personal victories when they are armed with the right tools and resources; backed by the support of friends, family and the American people; and willing to face down the challenges and obstacles that come their way.

We, the citizens of this nation and especially fellow veterans, have a sacred obligation to make those victories possible.

It starts right here, in our very own communities. Are you a veteran yourself? Are you looking to find that victory in your own life? Or do you know a veteran? It might be that neighbor across the street, a teacher at your child's school, a friend at church or a mom in your book club. Reach out to them, get to know them and, if they need some assistance finding that victory, send them our way.

DAV exists solely to help veterans achieve a more fulfilling life by helping them attain their earned benefits and health care, finding employment and providing volunteer opportunities through which they can give or receive assistance.

Please feel free to visit our website at dav.org to find out more about what we do for veterans and ways you can help, or give your local DAV Chapter or Department a call.

Thank you for taking the time to remember our heroes.

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

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