

Memorial Day 2012

Fallen, Never Forgotten



<Acknowledgement of introduction, distinguished guests, officers and members of the DAV and Auxiliary, and others who are present>

It is a tremendous honor to stand here with you today, among fellow Americans who share my respect for the men and women who offer themselves up in defense of this nation.

Today, out of all days, I hope that the American people can put aside their own personal strife and take time to remember those who are too often out of sight, out of mind: our brave military members who have put service before self. Without question, the military harbors a unique breed of men and women, whose devotion to a brother-or-sister-

in-arms is unrivaled and unquestioned. It is because of brave, selfless actions that missions are completed, battles are won, and comrades' lives are spared. Many of the people who let Memorial Day pass by without a second thought may very well owe their existence to the courageous sacrifices of a sailor, soldier, airman or Marine on some foreign soil in some bygone time. I would like to share with you now a few accounts of such bravery and valor.

- During the Vietnam War, Marine Private First Class Gary Martini, braving intense enemy fire, raced through an open field to drag a fallen comrade back to a friendly position. Noticing a second fallen Marine just 20 meters from the enemy position, Martini once again risked his life to bring the man back to safety. Upon reaching the Marine, Martini received a mortal wound, but continued to drag his comrade back to his platoon's position, telling his men to remain under cover. As he finally struggled to pull the man to safety, Private First Class Martini fell, succumbing to his wounds.

- Sergeant First Class Paul Smith, while under enemy fire in Iraq, organized the evacuation of three soldiers wounded in an attack on their vehicle. Sergeant Smith manned the machine gun mounted on their vehicle, maintaining an exposed position as he engaged the enemy forces, allowing the safe withdrawal of wounded soldiers. He was mortally wounded in the attack, but not before killing as many as 50 enemy fighters to save his injured comrades.
- During World War I, a time well before today's modern communications equipment, Private Robert Blackwell's platoon in France was nearly surrounded by enemy forces. Private Blackwell volunteered to hand-carry a message calling for reinforcements, knowing full well the extreme danger and likelihood of his death. Unable to get through the heavy shell and machinegun fire, this brave soldier was gunned down.
- Francis Hammond, a Navy Corpsman attached to the 1st Marine Division during the Korean War, found his platoon outnumbered by the enemy and under a barrage of mortar and artillery fire. Despite his own critical wounds, Hammond continued to administer aid to other wounded men for four

hours. He directed the evacuation of casualties and remained in the area to assist the corpsmen of the relieving unit, ultimately being struck by a round of enemy mortar fire and falling, mortally wounded.

- And in the Second World War, First Lieutenant Jack Mathis, flying a bomb run over Vegesack, Germany, was hit by enemy anti-aircraft fire. His right arm was shattered above the elbow, and he suffered a large wound in his side and abdomen. Knowing mission success depended upon him, Lieutenant Mathis, mortally wounded, dragged himself up to his sights and released his bombs on target before he expired.

Certainly every loss of life is tragic, especially when it is a life prematurely ended in the heat of combat. I hope that on this Memorial Day, the American people can direct their attention in remembrance of our nation's heroic defenders whose lives were cut tragically short. May their memories be cherished and their sacrifices noted and appreciated by the country they protected.

I believe today is also a day we should take special note of one man, who may still be in the fight of his life right now. Though days, weeks, and months pass without his name being spoken on the lips of the American people, he is nonetheless in my heart and prayers at this moment.

Right now, the Taliban are believed to be holding prisoner Bo Bergdahl, a 25-year-old U.S. Army sergeant from Hailey, Idaho. He is the only U.S. soldier held by the insurgents at this time. He was taken captive June 30, 2009, in Afghanistan. Over the past two years, we have seen video footage indicating, as we hope, that Sgt. Bergdahl is still alive, despite growing increasingly thin and showing signs of injury. It was reported this past December that Sgt. Bergdahl had made a daring attempt to escape, but was recaptured. No further information has since been released about his captivity, whereabouts, or status.

Imagine being held prisoner for years of your life, not knowing when or if you will ever see your loved ones again. Imagine the fear and the frustration you would feel with each passing day. And imagine what it must be like to face this kind of struggle alone. Ladies and gentleman, Sgt. Berghdal

needs your thoughts and your prayers, on this Memorial Day and every day until he is returned home to us.

Americans, as we know, can be forgetful of the sacrifices made by military members, veterans and their families. Beyond the many citations for valor are the untold, undocumented stories of men and women who live with the scars of war. Many American sons and daughters are returning with amputations, disfigurements, physical illnesses due to environmental exposures, traumatic brain injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder, among other ailments. It is nearly impossible for these veterans and their families to forget the sacrifices they made, so why should we allow our own memories to lapse? They did, after all, stand up for every one of us here today.

For many, Memorial Day stirs nostalgic memories of the past and marks the beginning of a more leisurely, carefree summer spirit. As a deeply patriotic American, it warms my heart to see so many of you here today taking time out of your busy schedule to pay respect to those who have given their lives for this country. This is an uncertain world and no matter how safe we may feel, our freedom is a highly valued

and targeted commodity. Never forget, never let your children forget, how fortunate we are to have a voluntary force of men and women willing to safeguard our freedom so we can rest soundly at night. Your attendance here today is a testament to an American public grateful for the freedoms and liberties supplied through the heroics of men like Paul Smith, Robert Blackwell and Francis Hammond. May we, as their loyal countrymen, never abandon their memory or allow their sacrifices to slip from our national conscience.

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