

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

(Acknowledge any VIPs/special guests)

I am _____, with DAV—Disabled American Veterans—in _____.

As many of you are aware, the work DAV does nationwide—and indeed in this very community—helps to bring justice to the veterans who have earned it in service to this nation. Part of our bread and butter is to connect ill and injured veterans with benefits—including health care and compensation—and the services they require as a result of their time in uniform.

However, perhaps a lesser-known facet of DAV, but still enormously important, is our voice in support of our nation's prisoners of war and those still missing in action.

While we stand with veterans from all eras who have returned from every corner of the world, we must also recognize and fight for those still waiting to come home.

I'm proud to say that America stands alone in the world as a nation that does everything in its power to provide the fullest account of all our soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen.

Not only do we fight for their final homecoming, but we also work to provide better care and a lifetime of support to their families and survivors. Ensuring they are looked after is just one way of honoring their veterans' service and legacy.

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Some of you may be surprised to learn that DAV has former prisoners of war in our ranks. They include Paul Kerchum, who, at 102, is one of the last remaining survivors of the Bataan Death March. If you haven't heard of the grueling trek spanning nearly 70 miles, it is easily some of the most horrendous accounts of World War II.

In spring 1942, Paul and the other surviving members of his unit—with supplies and ammo dwindling in the Philippine jungle—were forced to submit to the Japanese Imperial Army. Thousands of Americans and Filipino allies were killed in the long march that followed. Paul says he just looked at the feet in front of him and kept going.

He may have left the Bataan Peninsula, but Bataan never really left him.

Following the nightmarish trek, Paul remained a POW for the next three and a half years. He was moved around Japanese occupied territory. And he settled in northern Japan at a camp with other American POWs at Mitsubishi mine number 11.

Now, decades later, he travels around his home state of Arizona offering precious and fleeting accounts in talks that he shares with a generation who may never have heard of the march.

Despite being over 100 years old, his recall is nearly superhuman. He can recount the atrocities and remember the sights, sounds *and smells* of enemy captivity.

To say Paul Kerchum is living American history is not an exaggeration. Remarkably, he spent another 21 years in the military, first in the U.S. Army Air Forces, and then in the United States Air Force. Simply put, he has led a life of incredible service and sacrifice.

While Paul came home decades ago, many more are still missing and waiting to make their final voyage home.

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Tens of thousands of U.S. service members spanning across multiple conflicts remain unaccounted for. The families of those still missing in action live with the reality that their loved ones, who never had the chance to be honored as veterans, will never again set foot inside their homes.

An empty chair at every dinner table, parents missing important milestones in a child's life and those who will never know the missing part of their family. These are the costs paid in blood by those who stood up when their country called upon them.

It's hard to wrap your head around tens of thousands missing, but America stands alone in the world in that our nation will move heaven and earth to bring every missing soul home.

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Stories like these are not lost entirely, merely frozen in time until we travel to the beaches, fields and jungles containing missing American service members. These stories become reinvigorated, every week it seems, when the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, or DPAA, announces those whose remains have been identified and returned home decades after their war ended.

I'm talking about stories like that of Marine Corps Sergeant Arthur B. Ervin, who was 22 when he was killed in July 1944. He and other members of the 4th Marine Division invaded Saipan, a remote island in the Pacific. According to the DPAA, Arthur was shot and killed by a sniper while trying to assist a wounded Marine.

Due to the chaos of the battlefield, and the fog of war, his remains weren't recovered until June 21 of this year.

Identifying remains is no easy task. Teams of scientists and excavators travel to where they *think* Americans are buried. Then, the real work begins. They must first locate the remains and carefully bring them back to the U.S. for scientific analysis.

In Arthur's case, his set of unidentified remains had to be disinterred from the Manila American Cemetery. It was at the DPAA laboratory where they were identified as his.

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As the years pass and the memories of those sent off to war become more distant for many, we must keep in mind those whose personal experiences make it ever-present. Those who lived it and those who continue to wait—and wonder about—the ultimate fate of their loved ones.

I hope you will all join me in keeping in your heart our nation's POWs and our missing in action.

Thank you.

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