

Memorial Day Speech

ARLINGTON AMERICAN LEGION

Arlington, South Dakota

Monday, May 25, 2020

Thank you:

COMMENTS: It great to be among friends . . .

A few days ago Della and I attended the twentieth reunion of the Battalion I served with in Vietnam for twenty months. On Saturday, a Navy Chaplin addressed the group during our services of remembrance and behind him stretched across the long wall were the names of seven hundred and seventy-four members of the Battalion who lost their life serving this great nation. Some of the names are dear to me because I was with them when they were killed and I will always remember their sacrifice.

Today (Memorial Day) is about honoring those warriors who never left the battlefields and our duty to never forget their sacrifice and honor their memories.

One such warrior was Lance Corporal Kenneth L. Worley, USMC who sacrificed his life on August 12, 1968 in South Vietnam. In the early morning hours while on a night time ambush, his squad was hit by several grenades landing on their position. Worley fully realizing the inevitable result of his action, instantly threw himself on the grenade nearest him and his comrades. The explosion tore his body apart, while saving his fellow marines. For his gallant effort he was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

Our debt to heroes like Kenneth L. Worley can never be repaid, but our gratitude and respect must last forever. I will always remember Lance Corporal Worley because we served together in platoon 396 for eight grueling weeks during Marine Corp boot camp.

Author, James Wright in his book titled, ENDURING VIETNAM makes this statement: *"Casualties of war cry out to be known . . . as persons, not as abstractions called casualties nor as numbers entered into the books, and certainly not as names chiseled into marble or granite."*

Their lives were filled with smiling human faces, remarkable accomplishments, engaging personalities, and with dreams to pursue. What we do here today . . . is for them, for history, and for those in the future who will send the young to war.”

One hundred fifty five years ago, President Abraham Lincoln stood before a war-weary nation at his second inauguration and uttered some of the most famous words ever said about veterans, he said, ***“Care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan. Take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure.”***

Therein lies the **key** to the fundamental reason why we honor our nation’s war dead. Because by giving their **last full measure** they gave all of their **tomorrows**, so that we could have our **today**s.

Those men and women of uniform we honor this day came from all walks of life, but they shared several fundamental characteristics. They possessed

courage, pride, determination, selflessness, dedication to duty and integrity – all the qualities needed to serve a cause larger than one’s self.

Even as we gather here today service men and women are defending us 365 days a year in over 140 countries. Placing the ideals of our country before themselves has been demonstrated time and again from the American Revolution to the Global War on Terrorism. Yet, far too often they go unnoticed by those of us who enjoy the security that their sacrifice has provided.

An unknown Vietnam veteran once said, *“The core reality of war isn’t that you might get killed out there. It’s that you’re guaranteed to lose your brothers.”*

There’s a surreal truth to his statement . . . Because warriors understand death can happen, but when you lose a buddy . . . you lose a special part of life.

On June 18, 1968 I lost the closest friend I ever made during my twenty months in the mountains and rice paddies of South Vietnam. His name was James A. Salisbury, I called him Jim and he called me by my nickname “Bird.” We would

share food our mother's mailed from home and talk about what we would do when our time in the Marine Corps had ended. Flippantly, we would banter about who stood the greater chance of being killed; him walking point or me with an eight foot radio antenna.

We understood no one really wanted to die, but levity about death was how you learned to cope with its reality. **Why? Because in combat, the locomotive of the Lord can run anyone down . . . and when it does . . . someone loses a brother.**

Jim grew up in Lebanon, Oregon and like me graduated from high school in 1967. He told me he always wanted to be a marine because he liked their dress blue uniforms. He told his best friend (John) he wanted to join the marines, go to Vietnam and die for his country. I met John in 2012 . . . the year our Battalion Honored Jim as one of our fallen brothers . . . It was then John told me what he said, I assured him it wasn't true. I said to John, "He might have said it, but I know . . . he didn't mean it." I told him how three days before Jim was killed I had a

round shot thru my radio while carrying it on my back. When Jim heard later that night what happened he came me in the command post and said, "You got lucky Bird. Remember, were not going to die in this hell hole." John seemed surprise by my words because he always believed in Jim's mission. I guaranteed John, "death by the enemy in combat is not produced . . . it just happens."

Jim's life ended with a single rifle round to the chest as he was leading the last thirty three men of our company along an eerie trail. We all heard the crack from the AK47 . . . Jim had no clue where it came from . . . he just dropped. His squad leader (Corporal Richard Skaggs), a few steps behind him hunkered down and stared as Jim's body lay motionless. Skaggs returned back down the trail to the company commander and said, "*Salisbury been hit . . . he's my man . . . I want to go get him.*" I looked into Captain Mitchell's eyes as he hesitated . . . then he said, "Go." Within seconds we heard a second round crack . . . Skaggs fell dead next to Jim.

I will forever remember Jim for his bravery, his selflessness, his commitment to “walk point” under the most dangerous conditions, but most of all . . . his sacrifice.

If you have fought under the flag of this nation, no further proof of sacrifice is necessary. For those who have not, I ask you to never forget their willingness to sacrifice on our behalf.

Washington DC is home to some of the most heart wrenching monuments of war anyone will ever see. Some are monuments depicting historic battles, another depicts soldiers walking the frozen earth of Korea, there’s Arlington National cemetery filled with many of our fallen heroes, and a wall with 58,318 names carved in black granite.

Millions of visitors each year stand staring at the wall filled with the names of those “declared dead” during our country’s Conflict in Vietnam. For many Vietnam combat veterans, the wall comes alive as a *reflection* of buddies inside the wall with arms reaching out as if to say, “*Come get me.*”

The first names to appear on the wall are from an event that happened on July 8, 1959 and the last names listed are from an event that happened on May 15, 1975. What you might not know is:

97 National Guardsmen

8 female

31 sets of brother

3 sets of father and son

54 from one school (Thomas Edison High School in Philadelphia, PA)

6 are from Beallsville, Ohio (population 475)

997 died on their first day in Vietnam

1,448 died on their last day

245 died on January 31, 1968 (the most killed in one day)

2,415 died in May 1968 (the most killed in one month)

40,042 died in 1967-1969 (more than the total deaths in the Korean War)

Youngest is age 15

Oldest is age 63

And . . . 192 . . . are from South Dakota

Most of those who die in war are young. . . Whether teenaged troops or commanders a few years older . . . they left us too early. But can any of us who are living . . . say that we accomplished more in our fuller life span . . . than those who we honor today.

Our fallen have given what President Lincoln called their “last full measure of devotion.” They did it to serve America. They did it to serve us.

Let us live up to their sacrifice.

Once again, thank you for being here to honor those who gave the greatest sacrifice in our nations armed forces. May you be blessed, and in this time of continuing war may those blessings fall upon the United State of America.