

Memorial Day – Vero Beach

27 May, 2019

I am Lieutenant General Robert Caslen, U. S. Army retired, from New Smyrna Beach – a couple hours north of here. I have served in the Army 43 years, retired last summer, and it is a distinct honor to be with you all today.

To be chosen to address the citizens of this great city of Vero Beach and its surrounding community on this Memorial Day is a personal tribute of unmatched proportions. It is also humbling to know, that today's event in Vero Beach, is repeated in communities across America – as our Nation, through its home town communities, celebrates the lives of the men and women who served our Nation, and to celebrate the meaning of their sacrifice in the defense of the United States of America.

To Terry Treat and the Veteran's Council, thank you for inviting me to be a part of this day with you – it's truly an honor.

To our veterans and service members here today, thank you for your service.

And to the families of those who paid their last full measure of devotion to the defense of our Nation, a very special thank-you and appreciation for your sacrifice as well.

Memorial Day began over 150 years ago as "Decoration Day" when mothers of both Union and Confederate dead placed flowers on the tombs of their lost loved ones. The first national celebration actually took place in Arlington Cemetery on May 30, 1868, and it wasn't until 1968 that Congress passed statute declaring Memorial Day to be the last Monday in May.

So today, as we have for the past 151 years, we pause to honor the men and women of our Armed Forces who served and gave the “last full measure of devotion,” in service of our country...remembering those who, to paraphrase President Reagan, “...fought for freedom where liberty was in danger ... Who sacrificed their lives in the name of duty, honor, and country... who all were patriots who lit the world with their fidelity and their courage.”

One of the great leaders of the 20th century and West Point graduate, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, once said “The history of freedom is never really written by chance...but by choice.”

America’s *choice* of freedom manifests itself in its Constitution. “**We the people**” has always represented the ideals and principles of freedom. From the earliest days of our Republic to today, we remain a people committed to freedom, tolerance and inclusion of all. As President Eisenhower alluded to, we have **chosen** this path of freedom.

Freedom isn’t free -- so the saying goes. But as President Kennedy once said, “the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.” Our freedoms and values are defended and maintained at a steep price – secured only through the blood and sacrifice of the brave men and women willing to confront the dangers of the world in order to protect our values and our way of life.

Since our nation’s founding, more than 42 million Americans have donned the cloth of our nation, to stand in the gap between the American people and the values we hold dear, and the evil that is out there that would threaten those values. More than one

million of them would lose their lives in service to this nation - faceless heroes who selflessly and continuously laid their sacrifice on the altar of freedom to allow us to enjoy the fruits of that freedom.

Those who have served...and those who serve today, come from various backgrounds and values, but all share a few things in common. Within each burned a love of freedom, and the moral courage to safeguard it. Whether career Soldier or Citizen Soldier, all answered the call of duty, and shouldered the responsibility of guarding freedom in its darkest hours – when tyrants and dictators threatened to extinguish it. Their sacrifice was both great and noble.

And yet, if you were to ask each one what led him or her to serve, what drove them to continue to fight at times beyond the limits of physical exertion, each would reply, “Because my friends counted on me.” They fought for the love of freedom, for the love of their Country, and for their comrades. They recognized their duty to serve their Country when their nation needed them the most, and they responded.

Standing in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC is the beautiful Reflecting Pool and at the opposite end of the pool, is the brand-new World War II Memorial, built in honor of the “Greatest Generation”.

This “Greatest Generation” came from a full range of backgrounds and values, and they all shared a couple things in common. Within each burned a love of freedom, and the moral courage to safeguard it. Whether career Soldier or Citizen Soldier, all answered the call, and shouldered the responsibility of guarding freedom in its darkest

hours – when tyrants and dictators threatened to extinguish it. How great was their sacrifice.

Much like those generations past, today's generation of young Americans understand what is at stake and continue to answer freedom's distress call. Those who would cite America as a declining power have not witnessed this generation in action. Rest assured – I have seen their courage, their intelligence and their determination first hand and can promise you that America's future is in very good hands.

Often referred to as the "9-11 generation," these young men and women represent America's best. They are a generation of men and women that saw our nation brutally attacked and they have seen their country at war nearly their entire lives, and yet they volunteered to serve – knowing full well that they would be sent into harm's way to confront the enemies of our nation on obscure battlefields halfway around the world. Yet they never waver or question; they quietly count themselves worthy to stand among the generations of Americans that have gone before them, quietly standing in the gap between the evils of the world and the values of our nation and our Constitution and the American people.

Many in this country don't yet fully realize the incredible value and impact that this 9/11 generation is having and will continue to have on our society. But that's OK...they'd want it no other way, for they are a humble, resilient and focused generation.

President George H.W. Bush once said "If anyone tells you that America's best days are behind her, they're looking the wrong way." I truly believe that our nation's

best days are ahead of us – because of the incredible men and women of this generation who wear the cloth of our nation, who say every day “Send Me!”

I know many of you have seen the movie “Saving Private Ryan,” which, I feel has left a lasting impression on this generation regarding the debt we owe to earlier generations.

The film opens with a harrowing and realistic reenactment of the D-Day invasion of Normandy, seen through the eyes of Captain Miller – played by Tom Hanks. Throughout the film, Miller leads a search party to find Private Ryan, whose three brothers had just been killed in action. Ryan is the sole surviving son who is to be sent home to his grieving mother.

As the soldiers go behind enemy lines, they open a Pandora’s Box of moral questions. Why are these eight men called to risk their lives to save one? Don’t they have mothers too? Are they pawns in a cynical PR maneuver by the War Department? Just how much is one man’s life worth?

These questions have no easy answers, but in the final scene, we witness the only possible one. Miller and most of his Soldiers have been mortally wounded, and as the captain takes his dying breath, he pulls Private Ryan close and says “earn this....earn it,” referring to the sacrifice he and his men made to find Private Ryan and to bring him to safety. In other words, men have died for you. Now live a life worthy of such a sacrifice. Such an incredible weight of moral duty to be placed on one man’s shoulders.

The movie then jumps to the present day – about 50 years later - with an older Private Ryan and his family visiting the American cemetery at Normandy. As Ryan kneels at the graves of Captain Miller and the others, with tears in his eyes, he says “I lived my life the best I could. I hope that, in your eyes, I have earned what all of you have done for me.”

As we pause to reflect on the fallen, we – the living – today have an obligation. We have an obligation to remember their sacrifices. To share their stories...not just of the fallen, but also of those who have come before us – upon whose shoulders we stand today. And we have an obligation to always be worthy of their sacrifice, or to echo the words of Private Ryan: “I hope that I will have earned what you have done for me”.

Standing in the mud on the banks of the Euphrates River in Iraq during the ground war of Desert Storm was the 3rd Brigade Rakkasans of the famed 101st Airborne Division. The morning after they had air assaulted 150 miles behind enemy lines, Iraqi women came out of a nearby hamlet taking their veils off their face and lifting up their burqa’s to show off a little of their legs – all in an effort to entice the Soldiers. The Rakkasans leaders asked them what their motive was, and they said they were offering themselves as prostitutes so the troops would not steal their children or kill them. Instead the Rakkasans gave them food and told them they had no plans to rape them. The Iraqi women could not believe that these Rakkasan Soldiers were not going to rape them, and when they found that to be true, they said the 101st Airborne was the first army they had ever seen that *gave* instead of *stole* from them.

The Rakkasans took a 16 year old POW during some close fighting to blow a bridge over the Euphrates River. The boy was asked why he was so young to be in the Army, and responded that he had no choice, that 2 years earlier, the Iraqi Army went through his town, kidnapped him as an inductee, and killed his father. He had not seen or heard from his mother in 2 years.

You know, most of us have no idea how great a country we have here in America.

When the Army was in Haiti in 1995, they saw children lying dead in the streets from hunger and malnutrition. Little babies – you want to go pick them up and hold them. The people of Haiti would look up to and respect the American Soldier so much – it was unbelievable. Why? Because we represent to them a *hope* – the hope of a future, the hope of life.

Ours is truly a great country. And when you travel and these distant countries, to these god-forsaken places, you truly appreciate the greatness of our nation. And whenever you go to these places, you cannot help but get on your knees and thank God, for His hand that has provided the blessings we have received here in America.

When a veteran puts his or her hand over their heart to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, or to face the flag during the Star Spangle Banner, just take a second and watch them. The words are alive to them. The bond created between the veteran and his or her country, represented by that flag, is indelible. Selfless service to their country; and to the principles which set it free, and for which it now stands. The Veteran knows it well.

I pray we never become numb to the meaning of Duty, Honor, and Country. These high ethical values have inspired ordinary common Americans to conduct not so ordinary, great and heroic deeds. And as a result, they have secured the great freedoms and privileges we enjoy today. And as our Country's values are tested again, we must be grateful for the men and women from across this great Nation, who continually rise to the occasion to preserve our values and our way of life.

And let us also remember those that are, at this very moment, standing watch for us around the globe in the name of freedom and democracy, as well as their families back home.

I'd like to leave you with a brief thought, one that sums up the reason that so many of us are gathered here today, and that is the belief that America is the greatest country in the world. The reason for this belief is simple; it is because brave men and women, including many of you standing watching today's ceremonies, have stood up and defended freedom, sacrificing so much in the process.

Thank-you for taking the time to remember them all here in Vero Beach today. As Steve Spielberg challenges us, "let us *earn* the right to the freedoms we enjoy here in America, and let us never forget the sacrifice of the men and women who paid the last full measure of devotion for these freedoms, and let's ensure that we make their sacrifice *matter*. Let us *earn* what they have done for us.

May God bless each and every one of you here today, and may God bless the United States of America.

Thank you.