

Memorial Day Remarks

National Cemetery

Leavenworth, Kansas

25 MAY 2009

CSM Philip Johndrow

Thank you all for coming this morning to honor the sacrifice of our veterans. Thanks to the band and color guard for helping honor our veterans. Thanks to those who sponsored and organized this event – I know it took a lot of hard work and planning. To Bill Owensby and the crew that maintain these hallowed grounds – well done. They look so beautiful this morning, and you all truly honor our heroes by your care and attention to detail.

Laura, thank you for that beautiful rendition of our National Anthem. It is one of two songs that evokes strong emotion in me....the other is Taps. Both give me a strong sense of pride and belonging – one of strength...the other of sorrow.

As we drove in this morning, and we came up the flag draped road over the rolling hills, I could see the white headstones on the hills behind us....and they served as somber reminders that our Nation is at War, and that in our profession of arms, the ledgers are kept in neat white rows....and they stir in all of us in uniform a commitment, a resolve, to honor them with the best that we have each day.

We are surrounded by more than 33,000 headstones and numerous monuments to our brave Soldiers which set a stage I'm afraid I'm not worthy of speaking from.... yet it reminds us of the leadership, selfless service, and heroic virtue they represent.

There are many distinguished guests here today – retired general officers, civic leaders, politicians, businessmen/women, citizens, veterans' service organizations, Soldiers, and Families – thank you all for your attendance. I would especially like to thank our Gold Star Families – those who have lost loved ones who were serving our country.

Just as we would never leave a fallen comrade behind, we must never leave a Gold Star Family behind. We're not there just for the first month, or the first year, but for a lifetime. They will forever be a part of our military Family.

Our community is blessed to have such a humble, dedicated servant leader like Diana Pitts leading our local Northeast Kansas Gold Star Mothers Chapter. Diana, thanks for what you and your ladies do in your chapter to honor the fallen and to serve our community and our Nation.

Memorial Day is a special day to me for many reasons. I remember as a young sergeant, I got married to a very beautiful and wonderful Lady on Memorial Day weekend 24 years ago because we thought we would always have the weekend off. I think that's what a lot of Americans think of when they think of Memorial Day....the swimming pools open marking the beginning of summer, and everyone plans a barbeque.

Now, after 30 years of service, and most recently, 42 months of combat in Iraq, this day is the most sacred day of the year for Vickie and me. During the last deployment to Iraq as the Division CSM of the First Cavalry Division, and Multi National Division Baghdad, we lost 498 Soldiers. It was an honor to be a part of each of those memorial ceremonies. Sometimes I flew two hours in a helicopter to be at those ceremonies. Some of you may have lost loved ones in service to our Nation.

It is for our fallen men and women that we take a moment this morning to reflect upon their service and their sacrifice. Today is the day we remember all that they have done for us, and we must never forget what has kept us free from this day on.

Please join me in a moment of silence in their honor.

Edmund Burke, a British statesman and orator, once said, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” Look around you. These gentle, rolling hills are dotted with the simple white headstones of men and women who were determined that good would overcome evil....and they put their lives on the line to ensure our way of life. To all of our veterans, we are deeply indebted.

Just a few weekends ago, my wife (Vickie) and I were both humbled and honored to participate in the “Walk to Remember” event held in nearby Weston, Missouri. Vickie and I took over four hours to complete the three mile walk because we stopped and read every plaque with the stories of our brave Men and Women who paid the ultimate sacrifice.

Each one of these Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines died protecting Our Country and what it stands for. They lived defending a way of life that they felt was worth offering their lives for, Families, children, freedom, morality, values, and responsibility.

We had the privilege to speak with Families like the Farnans and the Hemenways, both of whom have lost sons since 9/11. They know all too well the price of freedom.....their sons sacrificed on the altar of freedom.

On this Memorial Day let’s all remember those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice for our country, and those who fight for our freedoms today around the world. We gathered here today know that America is the Land of the free because of the Brave.

As you know, our country is at war on two fronts. We face insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. This generation is giving so much - over 4,000 Americans have given their lives to preserve our freedoms. This “next greatest” generation is not unlike previous generations, like the six Congressional Medal of Honor recipients from the Civil War buried here, who were called on to sacrifice – every generation must take part in the continuous struggle of good vs. evil.

FDR said at the onset of WWII, “When we resort to force, as now we must, we are determined that this force shall be directed toward ultimate good as well as against immediate evil. We Americans are not destroyers - we are builders.”

Today, we are again fighting a global ideology that seeks to destroy our way of life. We will win this conflict, and we will reassure the world that we will protect democracy regardless of whether Al Qaeda and other extremists attempt to destroy it. Let us pray for the safety and strength of Our Troops who are in harm’s way and for God’s blessing on their Families who are keeping the home fires burning.

On this Memorial Day, we must never forget that:

"It is the Soldier, not the reporter, who has given us freedom of the press.

It is the Soldier, not the poet, who has given us freedom of speech.

It is the Soldier, not the organizer, who has given us the freedom to demonstrate.

Long after the folded flag is presented on behalf of a grateful Nation to the Family of a fallen Warrior, we must remember their sacrifices.....we must remember that Families continue to live with holes in their hearts, and we must continue to love and support these Families.....and honor their memory.

It is our sacred obligation to our dead and wounded.....it is a sacred obligation to their children and our children to never forget what they have given. I hope you and your Families can take a moment today to remember a loved one or neighbor you know who proudly served, or a fallen comrade who has forever left our ranks.

George Washington once said, "The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive veterans of early wars were treated and appreciated by our Nation."

Freedom is not free – you can ask anyone who has a Family member serving in the military, especially those who have lost a loved one in service to our country. Sacrifice and selfless service make our country what it is – the greatest country on earth.

And so today, we gather here to pay tribute to the honor and sacrifice of our veterans – living and dead. Let us honor their memory, and may we each live lives worthy of their sacrifice.

May God bless each of you and your Families, and may God bless America.