

Memorial Day Remarks
Fort Leavenworth National Cemetery
LTG Robert L. Caslen, Jr.
31 May 2010

Thank you all for coming today to honor the sacrifice of our veterans. Thanks to those who sponsored and organized this event – I know it took a lot of hard work and planning. And a special thanks to the band, the color guard, and the salute battery for honoring us with their professionalism on this special day of remembrance.

There are many distinguished guests here today – retired general officers, civic leaders, politicians, businessmen and women, citizens, veterans' service organizations, Soldiers, and Families – thank you all for your attendance. I would like to express a special welcome to the Gold Star Mothers and families who are present and seated among us today. Although they are not here to be honored, we are honored by their presence. The fact that you came here today, to honor these men and women, says volumes of the values and attributes you and your families aspire to -- and for that, we are grateful for you to be here.

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 they stir in all of us in uniform a commitment, a resolve, to honor them with our best efforts each day.

I would also like to take a moment to remember COL John Michael McHugh, who was laid to rest this past week. Colonel McHugh was a dedicated Soldier and a loving family man. COL McHugh's wife, Connie, and his children and other family members are here today. John's ultimate sacrifice for the preservation of our way of life will never be forgotten. Please join me in a brief moment of silence to remember this great American.

For many, Memorial Day is a time for backyard barbecues, an extended weekend to spend time with family, and the official start of the summer season. However, Memorial Day has a much deeper meaning. It is a time to remember those who not only answered the call to arms, but who were willing to risk everything, to defend America and its interests.

Memorial Day was originally called Decoration Day, which was a day set aside to remember those who have died in our nation's service. Memorial Day was first proclaimed on 5 May 1868 by General John Logan in General Order #11. On the first Decoration Day, flowers were placed on the graves of Union and Confederate Soldiers.

General Order #11 is, in itself, a magnificent tribute to why we celebrate this significant holiday.

“Let us, then, at the appointed time, gather around their sacred remains and garland the passionless mounds above them with choicest flowers of springtime; let us raise above them the dear flag they saved from dishonor; let us in this solemn presence renew our pledges to aid and assist those whom they have left among us as sacred charges upon the Nation’s gratitude - The Soldier’s and Sailor’s widow and orphan.”

Many of us have spent Memorial Days in Military Cemeteries. They are all extraordinary places. In silent but powerful ways they speak volumes about sacrifice and courage and bravery. The simple headstones and crosses address us all with powerful eloquence.

Here at Fort Leavenworth their markers tell a history no less compelling. This cemetery was one of the first twelve established under the Presidential order of Abraham Lincoln in 1862 that established the federal cemetery system. There are over 22,000 service members registered on these 36 acres. These great individuals all served their country with honor and dedication. Eight Medal of Honor winners rest here in honored glory. Throughout this cemetery are the memories and the legacy of America’s military past. Each memorial tells a story of courage and sacrifice.

A couple of months after the famous Battle of Gettysburg, President Lincoln rode out to Pennsylvania to dedicate a cemetery at the battlefield site. In a short, 3 minute speech, his eloquent words honored these men and their sacrifice as no other world leader had done before:

“It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated to the great task remaining before us; that from these honored dead, we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.”

Our commitment to the fallen must be to live our own lives as fully as possible, and always to be willing and able to give back to our families, our communities, our Nation, and our world. This is a primary message of Memorial Day.

I know many of you have seen the movie *Saving Private Ryan*. Without a doubt, the film has left a lasting impression on this generation regarding the debt we owe to earlier generations. We see the movie through the eyes of Captain John Miller, played by Tom Hanks, who is

charged to lead a search party to locate Private James Ryan whose three brothers have just been killed during the D-Day invasion.

As the soldiers penetrate behind enemy lines, they open a Pandora's box of moral questions. Why are these eight called to risk their lives to save one man? Don't they have mothers too? Are they just pawns in some cynical PR maneuver by the War Department? How much is one man's life worth?

There are no easy answers to such questions, but in the end, Director Steven Spielberg shows the only one possible. With Captain Miller dying, he whispers to Private Ryan, "Earn this. Live a good life. ***Earn this.***"

In other words, men have died for you; now live a life worthy of such sacrifice. What a weight of moral duty to lie on a man's shoulders! Fifty years later, the former Private Ryan, now an old man, visits the military cemetery at Normandy. "I lived my life the best I could", he speaks anxiously to the gravestones. "I hope in your eyes I have earned what you have done for me."

Here at Fort Leavenworth we do not forget the sacrifices of those who have gone before us. In another part of this historic post, we prepare each year to renew our commitment to selfless service. In two weeks, we will graduate over one thousand field grade officers from the Command and General Staff College, and send them on their way to leadership positions around the globe. All of them are guardians of the ideals of freedom. Sixty-seven of those graduates are from fifty-nine countries around the world. Their devotion to the cause of democracy is equal to our own, and we share a close bond in the profession of arms, joined by a common set of democratic values. In August, another 1000 officers will gather here to start yet another class. The noble legacy of those officers is the same one we honor in this cemetery today.

Freedom is not free – you can ask anyone who has a Family member serving in the military. Sacrifice and selfless service make our country what it is – the greatest country on earth.

Today, we are 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. This current generation is giving so much. The "9/11" generation is not unlike previous generations who were called upon to sacrifice – every generation must take part in the continuous struggle of good vs. evil. But, today's serviceman or woman has chosen to join the all-volunteer military knowing they have a high likelihood of getting deployed or being sent to a combat zone. And yet, we continue to exceed our re-enlistment and recruitment goals. Veterans of our past wars can be proud of how today's generation sustains their legacy.

This generation knows there are some things worth dying for: whether it is country, democracy, liberty, or the ability to worship as we choose without fear of prejudice or persecution.

I would like to conclude by reading an excerpt from the prayer that President Franklin Roosevelt read to our country the day after the D-Day invasion.

“Almighty God: Our sons, pride of our Nation, this day have set upon a mighty endeavor, a struggle to preserve our Republic and our civilization, and to set free a suffering humanity.

They will need Thy blessings. Their road will be long and hard. For the enemy is strong. He may hurl back our forces. Success may not come with rushing speed, but we shall return again and again; and we know that by Thy grace, and by the righteousness of our cause, our sons will triumph.

They fight not for the lust of conquest. They fight to end conquest. They fight to liberate. They fight to let justice arise, and tolerance and good will among all Thy people. They yearn but for the end of battle, for their return to the haven of home.

Some will never return. Embrace these, Father, and receive them, Thy heroic servants, into Thy kingdom.

And for us at home - fathers, mothers, children, wives, sisters, and brothers of brave men overseas - whose thoughts and prayers are ever with them - help us, Almighty God, to rededicate ourselves in renewed faith in Thee in this hour of great sacrifice.

Help us to conquer the apostles of greed and racial arrogances. Lead us to the saving of our country, and with our sister Nations into a world unity that will spell a sure peace, a peace invulnerable to the scheming of unworthy men. And a peace that will let all of men live in freedom, reaping the just rewards of their honest toil.

Thy will be done, Almighty God. Amen.”

Ladies and gentlemen, as we gather to remember today, let us give thanks for the veterans, for the sacrifices they have made.

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.

And may we each live our lives worthy of their sacrifice, and the sacrifice of all who have served this great Nation.

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