

## **Memorial Day Keynote Address**

Mayor Willey, Distinguished Guests, Veterans, NJROTC Cadets, Ladies and Gentlemen: I am honored to be asked to speak to you as part of Easton's observance of Memorial Day.

A couple of years ago, a friend of mine sent me a note at this time of year saying, "Happy Memorial Day." He meant well, but I gently reminded him that there isn't anything happy about Memorial Day. Pride, yes, but not happiness.

He, like many others, had lost the distinction between Veterans Day and Memorial Day. Of course, Memorial Day honors those that died while serving our country.

It occurred to me that, when I was growing up, everybody knew someone personally that had been in the military, and most people knew someone that had died in World War II or Korea. Today, less than one-half of one percent of the population of the United States is on active duty. In those days, no one could expect to be elected to Congress if they weren't a veteran. Now, there are only 118 in all of Congress that have any military experience. That's only 22%—decreasing every year. Two of our last three Presidents have never been in the military. Yet they make decisions critical to the well-being of our Armed Forces—life or death decisions.

So, is it any wonder that the observance of Memorial Day has often taken a back seat?

It used to be called "Decoration Day," and maybe we should bring that name back. It was the day that the graves of soldiers and sailors were decorated with flowers.

It's interesting that in the Netherlands, school children and adults "adopt" the graves of U.S. servicemen that are buried there. There are 8,301 such graves in the Margraten cemetery, and there is a two-year waiting list to adopt one. There are also about 8,000 adopted near Normandy in France. The United States maintains 24 cemeteries in 10 countries for the 125,000 U.S. service personnel who never made it home. I believe it's incumbent on parents, teachers, and leaders in the United States to ensure our children understand and appreciate why it is important for us to institute similar adoption programs here.

But putting flowers on graves one day a year isn't enough. Each of us should spend some time tending to and keeping the memories of those that have died in the service of our country.

In my office at home, I have a framed print called "Reflections" by Lee Teter. He donated the copyright to the Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 172 in Cumberland, Maryland. It depicts a businessman with his sleeves rolled up, his suit coat resting on his briefcase beside him, his head bowed, leaning against the Vietnam Wall Memorial in Washington. Inside the wall are the figures of his comrades whose names are on the wall. They are still in uniform. They are placing their hands at the same spot where he is holding his.

That print says it all.

Please bear with me as I tell you what Memorial Day is for me. It's Bill Boles, Wayne Staecker, Jack Consolvo, Ken Kirby, and Steve Arcana. There are many others, but these were closest to me.

Bill Boles and I were teammates on the rowing team at the Naval Academy when we won the National Championship in 1965. I was the coxswain; Bill was in the engine room. He stood 6' 7" and was as nice a guy as you'd ever want to meet. He flew the same type aircraft that I flew, the F-4 Phantom II, on the same ship that I would be on a year later, the USS Kitty Hawk. Since Bill had graduated a year ahead of me, I wasn't there yet. At night, on Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin, he was vectored to check out a surface craft. On dark nights, it's difficult to tell the difference between stars and masthead lights. He was either shot down or flew into the water. We'll never know. We don't have a grave to put flowers on for Bill.

Wayne Staecker was in my Class at the Academy, and we were in 31<sup>st</sup> Company together. We lived in close proximity for four years and went through flight training together after graduation. During his final training in the A-7 Corsair II before joining his first squadron aboard ship, he was rendezvousing on a tanker for air refueling practice when the plane behind him in the formation lost sight of him and hit him, crushing his canopy. Wayne didn't get out. He was buried at sea.

Jack Consolvo was also a Classmate and Companymate, but he went into the Marine Corps. He, too, was flying an F-4 Phantom out of Danang, South Vietnam. He was in a bombing run in support of Marines on the ground near the DMZ when he was hit by anti-aircraft fire coming from Laos. His Radar Intercept Officer in the back seat ejected and was able to evade capture on the ground for two days

before being rescued, but Jack wasn't found. For many years, we didn't know for sure if Jack had been captured. Ultimately, DNA analysis confirmed that he'd been killed.

Ken Kirby was also a Classmate of mine and a good friend. We had a lot of laughs together. He dropped out of pilot training and chose to become an RAN (Reconnaissance/Attack Navigator) in the RA-5C Vigilante aircraft. During night carrier qualifications, the airplane dropped too low on the glide slope, hit the aft end of the flight deck and blew up. Neither he nor his pilot survived.

Steve Arcana was a couple of years behind me at the Academy. He joined my squadron after I had come back from my first trip to Vietnam. He and I hit it off, and he became my teammate—my RIO, my Radar Intercept Officer. We trained together and flew hundreds of non-combat flights, as well as almost 100 combat missions together. I left him in the Western Pacific about a month before the squadron returned from that Vietnam deployment so that I could make my class commencement date at the U.S. Naval Test Pilot School at Patuxent River across the Bay. A couple of months later, I got the word that Steve had been killed. He had made it back to the States, and he was flying an introductory training flight with a brand new, replacement pilot. Because I had graduated from Top Gun, I had been responsible for the squadron training syllabus. I had designed the flight they were on to demonstrate the edges of the flight envelope in preparation for advanced dogfight training. He and his pilot were alone—without a wingman, the way it was designed—completing the training requirements, just as Steve and I had done a year earlier. A pilot from another squadron called the radar controllers and reported seeing a large splash out in the ocean. We can only assume that they departed from controlled flight or went into an unrecoverable spin. I told Steve over and over never to trust me or any pilot, but he stayed with the airplane too long.

You see, there are no graves to decorate for most of these guys. But they are my Memorial Day.

There are still over 1,700 U.S. servicemen unaccounted for from Vietnam; over 8,000 unaccounted for from Korea; and over 74,000 unaccounted for from the Second World War. During the First World War, there were no “dog tags,” so identification was very difficult, and there are still over 3,000 unaccounted for from that short war. Just two years ago, in 2009, a mass grave from World War I was discovered in France with over 250 allied soldiers.

So, the very nature of doing our military duty quite often means that there is no headstone with a name for future generations to stand over and remember. If there is a marker, it may not be in this country.

If we can't stand at their graves with flowers in our hands, then the question arises, "What can we do? What would they want us to do?"

I've thought about that a lot, and it's clear that it must be a great deal more than putting a bumper sticker on a car that says, "We Support Our Troops." It seems to me that we have to make sure that we preserve the nation they served. We should use Memorial Day to remember them and their sacrifices as a way to renew our commitment to keep our country free and worth dying for. That's the only way we can ensure they did not die in vain.

President Ronald Reagan said it far more eloquently:

*"Our pledge and our prayer this day are those of free men and free women who know that all we hold dear must constantly be built up, fostered, revered, and guarded vigilantly from those in every age who seek its destruction... To keep faith with our hallowed dead, let us be sure, and very sure, today and every day of our lives, that we keep their cause, their hope, their prayer, forever our country's own."*

We in the military took an oath to "support and defend the Constitution of the United States, against all enemies, foreign and domestic." It behooves all of us to spend some time on Memorial Day asking ourselves whether we have betrayed the trust that our military has preserved for us. Do we support and defend the Constitution of the United States?

One of the ways in which citizens can do our duty to our country is through the power of the ballot box. Do we exercise that power? Do we do our duty?

Last year, in the primary elections in Maryland, more than three-quarters of eligible voters did not vote—even with early voting and absentee ballots. Is it because they don't care? Is it because it's inconvenient? Is it because they don't feel they can make a difference? Do they think that a soldier refuses to run across that open field in the face of enemy fire because he's just one person and can't make a difference? Does a pilot refuse to take off when the weather is bad and the mission is dangerous because it's just one airplane, and it can't make much difference?

For our Constitution to be preserved and for us to do our part to ensure our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines have not died in vain, each of us has a responsibility. We have to pay attention to the issues and candidates; we have to be active in what is happening in our County, our State, our Country, and around the world; we have to run for office; we have to hold our elected officials accountable; we have to do our duty; at the very least, we have to vote.

If paying attention to and participating in our political process sounds like a burden to bear, then the last words in the Declaration of Independence should give pause: ***And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, We mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.***

Voting and being an informed, involved citizen might not sound like much when compared to what Bill and Wayne and Jack and Ken and Steve did. As Ronald Reagan said, "Each died for a cause he considered more important than his own life. They didn't volunteer to die; they volunteered to defend values for which men have always been willing to die if need be, the values that make up what we call civilization."

Just remembering them one day a year isn't enough. I knew them well. I know what they believed in. The least I can do is to do my duty. I couldn't face them, if I didn't.

I hope you'll remember them and all the others, as well, and take an active role in keeping our Country worthy of the price they paid.

My Naval Academy Class has lost 141 of our Classmates. Their names are listed on our website Memorial page. Next to those names is this excerpt from *The Fallen* by Laurence Binyon:

"They shall grow not old as we that are left grow old;  
Age shall not weary them nor the years condemn;  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,  
We will remember them...."

Thank you very much for letting me share my memories of my friends with you.