

MEMORIAL DAY REMARKS 2005

State Representative Tom Tangretti

Monday, May 30, 2005

I am honored and humbled to be here today.

Since 1868, communities like ours all across the country have come together on this day to place flowers and flags on the graves of those who gave the last full measure of devotion to their country.

We remember and honor those who did their duty as they saw that duty.

In some ways, the facts associated with Memorial Day tell the story better than any anecdote or historical article.

Let me list some of those facts:

In 80 months of the Revolutionary War there were 4,435 American deaths in combat.

In 37 months of the Korean War there were 33,651 American deaths in combat.

In 90 months of the Vietnam War there were 47,369 American deaths in combat.

In the 1 month of the first Gulf War, 293 Americans died in combat.

So far, in the current war on terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan, more than 1,600 American soldiers have died in combat.

These alone are staggering numbers.

But even more staggering are the numbers from World War II, and I think it is appropriate today, as we marked this month the 60th anniversary of V-E Day, and prepare to mark in August the 60th anniversary of V-J Day, to focus on that war, and the soldiers who fought in it.

World War II was truly a time when good and evil were competing for control of the world.

And the cost of preserving good and defeating evil was particularly high for America -- 407,316 soldiers died in that war: 6,639 Americans every single month.

But American soldiers in the field never faltered; their courage and sacrifice knew no bounds.

And we all know that their courage, sacrifice and perseverance was the difference in the war.

Freedom in most of the world simply would not have survived if the United States had not entered the war, and if our citizen-soldiers had not prepared as they did and fought as they did.

Sixteen million Americans put on a uniform to fight against evil in World War II.

Thankfully, millions of them survived, and some of them are still here with us today.

They are the soldiers who survived the long war and the many hard battles.

They are the soldiers who live daily with the memory of those who did not survive.

So as we take this one day a year to remember our soldiers who have died, I think it is also important to take a moment to look at our soldiers who live.

It is hard to tell now that they were once soldiers in a great cause.

But that is not because 60 years have passed, but because after they won the war, they hung up their uniforms and weapons as monuments, returned quickly to civilian life and prospered under the freedom they fought so hard to win.

Winston Churchill once said that the United States is like a gigantic boiler.

“Once the fire is lit under it,” he said, “there is no limit to the power it can generate.”

When Churchill heard that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor, he famously said that that night he "slept the sleep of the saved."

He knew that victory was certain because he knew America had been wronged, and he knew the American spirit and character.

It is amazing what free people can do once they decide to act, and when they are acting according to the best of their nature.

Our peaceful democracy mobilized; men and women labored; toy factories produced the stuff of war.

Citizens from all walks of life – farmers, bankers, businesspeople and laborers, became warriors.

Common men and women became heroes.

And many of those heroes are among us today.

Look at what they have become, what they have been, and what good they have done for their country and for the entire world.

Honor them, as well as their comrades throughout history whose graves we visit today.

Look to them for guidance in the present and in the future.

And look to them not as you would look in a museum or at an archeological site, but as a living example of courage, sacrifice, excellence and honor that we should all strive to emulate.

They have left us the legacy of freedom; they have taught their children, their grandchildren and their

great grandchildren the value of sacrifice, hard work and virtue.

And they continue to teach all of us love of country.

Their presence here reminds us of human excellence, of the things for which we stand, and of the courage and sacrifice that is necessary to maintain those things.

They thought themselves ordinary, but we know better.

They ended up being great because much was expected of them, and they responded to those expectations.

They did not let the free world down.

Even after the war, many of them turned around and helped rebuild the nations and the people they fought against.

Instead of enslaving the defeated, they set them free – something our nation's men and women are still fighting just as hard to do today.

How is it possible to honor such people, both those who are still alive and those who have gone before them?

Perhaps we cannot do any better than to call them the Greatest Generation of the greatest nation in the world.

Perhaps we cannot do any better than make sure their stories are told to the young.

Perhaps we cannot do any better than imitate their lives, both in war and in peace.

Perhaps we cannot do any better than a sincere "thank you" for making sure that this nation, this island of liberty, continues.

Abraham Lincoln once said: "Gold is good in its place; but living, brave, patriotic men, are better than gold."

Today, we gather to remember and honor the brave, patriotic men and women who have died in our conflicts.

But to do that, we must also continue to recognize and honor the brave and patriotic men and women who fought in those conflicts and are still alive.

Today, we owe them – particularly those survivors of World War II – a special and heartfelt thank you.

What they, and the many friends of theirs who are no longer here among us, gave the world can never be repaid.

We are in their debt and we thank them.

May we always remember to do so.

Thank you.

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