MEMORIAL DAY SPEECH 2012

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, comrades, those serving in our military today and the families of veterans and our troops. I’d like to recognize and thank the dignitaries who are with us seated behind me. It is a special honor for me to speak today about Memorial Day, and about those whose lives and service we pay tribute to today.

Memorial Day is a very different day of reflection than Veterans Day. Veterans Day is the time we set aside to honor everyone who has worn the uniform. But, Memorial Day, is the day when we remember those who willingly laid down their lives for love of Country and freedom.

Last year at this ceremony, Pennsylvania Guard Chaplain Lt. Colonel Doug Etter said, “There is nothing you and I can do consecrate this day or the fallen. It is by the spilling of their blood that this time is made Sacred. But your presence here honors them.” Thank you for being here.

In all wars combined, more than six-hundred fifty thousand Americans died fighting for freedom and another three hundred ten thousand died in theater but not directly in combat. Another two hundred ten thousand patriots died while training or serving in non-combat areas.
The tradition of Pennsylvania’s military involvement in domestic and foreign matters is second to none. We may not have the sprawling active duty military bases like in Texas and California, but the blood shed by military personnel from our Commonwealth in all wars in defense of freedom covers a lot of ground.

As a veteran of the U.S. Army, and a veteran of the Vietnam War, Memorial Day holds a special place in my heart. Some of my brothers in uniform who I served with did not return. I miss them dearly, but I keep their memories alive in my heart. Even the most decorated of veterans will tell you that they themselves are not heroes. The true heroes are the ones who did not return home.

If you drive past the entrance of this cemetery, you will see resources that the National Guard uses to keep America strong as the most powerful and effective military on earth. You will see men and women of all ages refining their skills and refitting their gear to defeat future threats to our freedom. Patriots prepare here to make modern declarations of independence.
Many soldiers trained here. They prepared for battle and left with the skills, dedication and tools to be the best soldiers and airman in the world. Many did not return.

So it is appropriate that there is a National Cemetery here. Since 1931, Fort Indiantown Gap has served as an important facility to prepare those who have defended freedom worldwide.

When you make the turn off of Route 934 and into this cemetery—a serene atmosphere leads your heart and mind on a journey witnessing previous sacrifice and service. Soon you experience a heightened sense of freedom’s heritage —of history’s heroes.

American flags fly over most of this cemetery. When you realize that most of the flags waving overhead once covered the casket of a deceased service member, you reach the emotional point that permeates the entire cemetery—the realization of commitment, service and sacrifice meeting with an immense love of country.

Your heart brings the rest of your body into a state of respect that is offered in gratitude to the men and women put to rest here, and an appreciation for the veterans’ family.
The roads in this cemetery gently guide visitors through turns of emotion—from deep reflection, the pangs of a lonely heart and a sense of loss, to valued memories relived. You crest a small hill and experience an overwhelming lift—a sense of gratitude, patriotism and pride as another neatly patterned section of grave markers come into view, representing yet another theater of war where Americans bravely fought.

Most of you came here to visit the final resting place for a veteran you loved. As you visit that person’s gravesite today, I ask that you also spend a few moments at the graves flanking where your friend or family member’s body rests. Each person buried in this cemetery has a story, friends and family.

We may not know them personally, but the brief information etched into the markers tells us about their commitment to serve. Read their names and when they served. Thank that person, too.

Someone had to stand by your loved one during war as a battle buddy or as a comrade after their military service. No one serves alone. Perhaps this person was one who meant a great deal to your loved one.
Their name might not be familiar, but you know their legacy ... your quality of life in large measure was made possible by those we honor today. Freedom lives because of the nearly thirty-eight thousand patriots buried here.

It’s safe to say that each of us has a very special veteran whose body rests here and that stands out from the rest. Not because of their service record, but because of his or her character or relationship to you. For me, and many others in the veterans community, that special person is George W. Mullen.

George was State Adjutant for our Pennsylvania Department of Veterans of Foreign Wars for many years. He also served on the State Veterans Commission and the Pennsylvania War Veterans Council. George also held numerous positions at the local and regional VFW levels, and national positions with the VFW.

George was a Navy Veteran whose service in World War II, like that of others resting here, brought a war against tyranny to a close. He was a proud man, but not one to brag about his service. Rather than focus on his service, George lived serving others after his military service because he knew he was fortunate to return home. Through the VFW, he served his nation, his comrades and those serving in the military.
I could focus my entire remarks on him, but I won’t because I know you are also remembering someone in your heart. So many Pennsylvania servicemen and women from World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Cold War, Operations Desert Shield and Storm, and the War on Terror are laid to rest here.

With this being the first Memorial Day since the end of the Iraq war, we are reminded about the full cost of war. Operation Iraqi Freedom lasted over eight years. We lost nearly forty-five hundred of the finest men and women our nation has to offer. America suffered far more casualties than any other nation fighting alongside us. We remember them on this day.

And the same grim facts also hold true when we speak of our efforts in Afghanistan. Just last year, three Pennsylvania National Guard soldiers of the 131st Transportation Company based 20 miles from here, were killed in action in Afghanistan.

One of those heroes was 49 year old Sergeant Brian Mowery of Halifax whose memorial service was held here. He is one of 39 Pennsylvania Guard members who gave their lives since September of 2011.

This sacred cemetery holds the remains of Pennsylvania Guardsman Master Sergeant Scott Ball. He was killed while serving in Afghanistan.
in 2007, the first Guardsman from our state to give his life for freedom in Afghanistan during the War on Terror.

At the age of 38, Master Sergeant Ball was killed while on a re-supply mission in a six-vehicle convoy. He was attempting to rescue two fallen soldiers under heavy fire. He was part of an embedded training team assisting the Afghan National Army. He received the Bronze Star, Purple Heart, Good Conduct Medal, Combat Action Medal, Global War on Terror Medal, Afghanistan Campaign Medal and the Pennsylvania Distinguished Service Medal.

As a civilian, he was an eight-year veteran of the Pennsylvania State Police and a former active duty soldier. He was also a volunteer fire fighter. He was a father and loving husband. His family and friends noted after his death that he always had something bigger and better in mind. In other words, he was living for more than himself like many of those here today do and like all who gave their lives for freedom have done.

I wanted to profile Master Sergeant Scott Ball and Sergeant Mowery because every person that we honor today on Memorial Day has a personal story. I also wanted to focus on two National Guard soldiers because their role in our military has taken on much greater importance in the modern defense of freedom. The VFW thanks all Pennsylvania National Guard troops for their service just as we thank all Active Duty and Reserve personnel for their service.
Regardless of where veterans who died in war served—in Afghanistan or Anzio, Kuwait or Korea, Vietnam or Vienna—each gave the rest of their life so we, and generations of Americans to come, could spend our lives enjoying freedom.

We must also remember those who honorably served and died during unknown special operations missions, peacekeeping missions like in Beirut, and smaller military engagements like in Somalia, Panama and Grenada.

We should also realize that there are heroes resting here whose service dates back well beyond anything we can remember. Walter Pleate (Pleete), who was born in 1876, became the oldest veteran buried at this cemetery when he was laid to rest in 1985. When he died, he was the oldest military veteran in the country, having fought in the Spanish-American War and the Boxer Rebellion.

History lives here today, and in all other cemeteries where veterans are buried. Also remember those who in the American Revolution became the first patriots to die for America, when our first challenge to freedom arose.
Just think of the impact that their lives have had on the world. Imagine what would have resulted from this grand experiment called freedom if they had not said, “I will serve, defend and if necessary give my life” for freedom.”

Being surrounded by one of the nation’s busiest National Guard training sites, the stillness and solitude of this cemetery is occasionally blended with the sounds of soldiers and airmen preparing to defend America.

Pilots fly overhead perfecting their support mission maneuvers. The popping of M-4 carbines, the grunt of an A-10’s main gun and the vibrations of artillery shells impacting down range remind us that guarding freedom sometimes requires use of deadly force.

These sights and sounds remind us that those who died in battle did so witnessing the worst that humankind can do to itself. They were far from their spouses and children. Their minds had to think past the terrible images of war that no eyes should see. And, they knew that if they lived through the night, tomorrow would require them to do it all over again. But they had the inner strength and resolve to bring out the best in humankind—sacrificing one’s life so others could live on.
On this Memorial Day, we thank each soldier, sailor, Marine, airmen or coast guardsman who died in service to America. We cannot shake their hands or give them a hug today, but your thoughts and prayers will be known to them.

The VFW mission honors those who have died in service to America, and those who passed away after their military service. We do this through service to others—in part by joining with other veterans groups to provide military details for funerals in cemeteries. We also serve all veterans and our troops, our youth and entire communities through many activities and programs.

The heroes we honor today performed a tremendously valuable service to all of us, and paid the ultimate sacrifice for freedom’s future. Without their service, we might live in a country where public assemblies are broken up with arrests. We might live under a government that tells citizens how to vote. We might not have the freedom to live, work and worship as we wish. Thank God, and thank them, for the freedom that surrounds us every day.

Stand up and let your voices be heard when you see things that dishonor those who gave America its freedom. Don’t let lethargy or apathy snuff out the flame of freedom that our deceased veterans fought so hard to keep burning brightly.
We must show the same bravery and determination in preserving our nation’s foundation of freedom, as those we honor today did so while giving their lives while fighting for us overseas.

We can honor them by living each day thanking God for our freedom, and remembering those who defended it to their very deaths. Honor them by how you live. Teach your children and your grandchildren about those who did not come home, but yet their lives made—and continue to make—a difference to a nation and the world.

Those who do not understand the fragile nature of freedom, and what it takes to protect and preserve it, might not be willing to defend it. Those we honor today gave their lives for freedom. Their history has given us a promising future.

Yes, we are free because our nation’s brave sons and daughters made the ultimate sacrifice for that freedom. They could have kept their heads down from enemy fire, and remained crouched in a foxhole to let others do the dangerous work. They could have left the sides of their injured battle buddies to find more secure ground.

They could have stayed down after taking a bullet or after being wounded by shell fragments. But they did not.
Surely many of those killed in action had injuries that could have easily been their ticket to get back home.

But with a flag patch on their sleeves, or folded stars and stripes in their chest pocket, they rose to the challenge of defending our country. Their freedom-loving hearts, their love for their comrades, and their desire to keep loved ones back home as free people, pushed them to the very edge of their existence here on earth.

Please join the Pennsylvania Veterans of Foreign Wars in saluting those who died so we could keep America as the best nation in the world. Please find a patriotic way to honor our heroes tomorrow.

Go forth as grateful Americans living life to the fullest, being responsible citizens and serving others in memory of those we honor on Memorial Day.

As you leave this cemetery, glance up one more time to view the streaming flags. Each flag is a patriotic statement reflecting a hero’s creed that America’s freedom was more important than their own life.

Thank you again for being here. God Bless you. God Bless our veterans and our troops. God Bless America.