

## Memorial Day Speech

**May 29, 2011 Indiantown Gap National Cemetery and Minersville, Pennsylvania**

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Good morning. I bring you greetings from both of my bosses, MG Wesley E. Craig, the Adjutant General of Pennsylvania and BG Michael Gould, the Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans Affairs. I have the privilege of enjoying your company because my life changed on September 11, 2001. As a direct result of events from that unique and unparalleled day of days, I can now number myself among those who have stood up and placed themselves between the soft tender flesh of our fellow Americans and those who have vowed to destroy us. As a direct result of the suffering I witnessed my brothers and sisters-at-arms endure during my first tour to Iraq, I quit my former life's work, moved hundreds of miles and dedicated myself to doing all that I can for veterans, those who belong to a small and select fellowship.

I will confess to you, however, I wasn't always passionate about veterans, even after my first twenty years in the Army. You see, I grew up in a family where military service was as natural as going to school, playing sports or belonging to a civic organization. My younger brother beat me into combat by deploying to Bosnia. Our father is a veteran. His brother, a pilot, is a veteran of Korea and Vietnam. Their dad was a combat veteran of World War II and the attic of his home was filled with war trophies were a young boy and his cousins could allow their imaginations to entertain them for hours. Stories of my great grandfather's study and interactions with Civil War veterans were common, as were tales of how my great-great grandfather on my mother's side, of how his wounds and imprisonment at Andersonville Prison, the deadliest and most dangerous of the South's prisons, changed him. He returned to his Butler County farm a different man than the boy who had left. Our great-great-great grandfather was a part of the historic battle of Lake Erie during the War of 1812 before becoming the Clerk of Courts in Allegheny County and his father, a man who public records state stood "6'7" tall in his stockings" was a major in the Pennsylvania militia when the nation was born.

So I didn't give a lot of thought to veterans. I thought every family served. But then the world shifted. A cataclysmic event occurred on sunny Tuesday morning in September and my life would never be the same after I went to Iraq for the first time. And although, I am was glad to come home, I confess to you that returning is bittersweet. I often feel like a stranger among so many civilians now. There are bright smiles that are missing, which I once saw here or places like this. Those smiles belonged to men like LTC Michael McLaughlin, SFC Daniel Brozovich, SPC Mark Kasescki, SPC Clifford Moxley, SPC Carl Curran, SPC Mark Melcher, SPC Chad Edmundson, SGT Carl Morgain, SSG Ryan Ostrum, SSG Daniel Lightner, SFC Randy McCaulley, SFC Brent Adams, MSG Shawn Thomas and a host of others. As of today, Pennsylvania has lost 263 sons and daughters in the Global War on Terror. My hands and my uniforms have been stained by the blood of our enemies and my brothers-at-arms, as well as, civilians on the battlefield. And I suspect, it has stained my soul in some way too, in ways I do not understand nor can I define but I suspect some of you know. Some of you understand what I am saying.

Living near the Mennonites and Amish as we do, I am mindful of a line from the movie, "Witness" starring Harrison Ford and Kelly McGillis. Perhaps you are familiar with it. Ford plays a Philadelphia detective who goes into hiding among the Amish in Lancaster County following the murder of another police officer. At one point in the movie, a young Amish boy named Samuel finds, Harrison Ford's police revolver and begins playing with it. The boy's grandfather Eli, tenderly takes the gun away and then sits down in the soft golden glow of a kerosene lamp in their simple kitchen and with the boy sitting on his lap, he says, "Samuel, what you take into your hand, you bring into your heart." I've thought about that line so many times as I have watched young men and women take up arms to protect one another and the country they love. And I've thought about it all the times I have washed the blood off my hands into white porcelain sinks, stainless steel pans and the dust of the middle east. Please don't think I am suggesting this is a bad thing. No, quite to the contrary, I am utterly convinced that it gives those of us who have worn the uniform, as well as, those who love us, a much deeper appreciation for our nation and the freedom we enjoy. As I often hear other combat veterans say, "For those who have fought for it, freedom has a taste the protected will never know."

I still remember the first time, I said the Pledge of Allegiance after returning from Iraq. It was at the Mercer Elementary School. Sitting at an event to which families and friends were invited, we were also invited to stand and recite the Pledge with those innocent children with sweet but naïve voices. I can still hear them now, those little cherubs, "I pledge allegiance to the flag, of the United States of America..." Tears flowed down my cheeks. A lump in my throat prevented me from completing the entire Pledge as I remembered specific occasions in Iraq which I associated with the Flag:

- the way it would flutter and snap in the strong desert wind even at half staff following a memorial,
- the way the soldiers at Mortuary Affairs would iron the Flag, I didn't even know anyone ever ironed a flag. But yes, that's what they did. They would put it on an ironing board and make sure there was not a wrinkle on it before a senior NCO would inspect it for lint or a loose string with his white gloves, and only then, after it had cleared his personal inspection, would it be placed with dignity and reverence on the boxes which held the remains of our fallen,
- or the time when SGT Brock Beery was killed by a powerful IED. His men then began to receive small arms fire, a gun fight ensued as they waited for the Quick Reaction Force to come to their aid. They took Brock's body from the cab of his truck but because no one on the patrol had a body bag or poncho to put his body into, they wrapped him, in the only thing they had...an American flag, SGT Beery proudly displayed in the back window of his truck. I've never forgotten that blood stained flag we later burned that night.

So what I want to say to you today, is really quite simple. First I want to thank you for your attendance here. Your presence here is a tangible testimony to your own character as you recognize and remember the fallen of this nation. Memorial Day and Veterans Day are very different holidays. Veterans Day is the time we set aside to honor everyone who has worn the uniform, but Memorial Day is the day, a sacred day really, when we remember those who have willingly laid down their lives for the love of Country and

buddies with whom they fought. There is nothing you and I can do consecrate this day or the fallen. It is by the spilling of their own blood that this time is made Sacred. As President Lincoln said in his Gettysburg Address, “we can not dedicate...we can not consecrate...we can not hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract.” But your presence here honors them.

Secondly, I want to thank all of you who are veterans. Many in the World War II, Desert Storm and current war generations have heard these words. But most from the Korea and Vietnam generations did not hear them genuinely expressed until recently. So, thank you. If you are a veteran, you are truly a part of an elite and select fellowship. And that’s not just my opinion, that’s a mathematical fact. Do you know that only 1%, that’s right, one percent of Americans serve in uniform at any one time? That means that 99% of our population relied on you for their safety and protection. On behalf of my children, thank you.

Finally, I want to thank the families of our service members and our veterans. In many ways I think it is more difficult to stay home than to go and engage the enemy. The uncertainty, anxiety and stress with which you must live can be unrelenting and paralyzing if you were to allow it, but you carry it, like your loved ones do their packs, with determination and nobility without complaint. You, like your loved ones, know far better than most, the true cost of protecting Liberty and her children.

There’s so much I want to say to you, so much I want to tell others about you my brothers and sisters-at-arms but time is also an enemy, so let me conclude by sharing a quick story and then making two promises and I’ll be finished.

Our nation’s wounded warriors receive the best medical care in the world. I am a witness to this. When you visit them, you often will find yourself inspired. Last year, I was inspired by the words which hung outside the room of a Navy SEAL at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. This particular warrior was struck by eight bullets but his spirit never bowed or broke. His words give voice to the spirit so many of us know. This is what he wrote in black marker on that orange poster board:

*Attention to all who enter here. If you are coming into this room with sorrow or to feel sorry for my wounds, go elsewhere. The wounds I received I got doing a job I love, doing it for people I love, supporting the freedom of a country I deeply love. I am incredibly tough and will make a full recovery. What is full? That is the utmost physically my body has the ability to recover. Then I will push that about 20% further through sheer mental tenacity. This room you are about to enter is a room of fun, optimism, and intense rapid re-growth. If you are not prepared for that, go elsewhere.*

*The Management*

And knowing you too, sisters and brothers, some of you could have written those words too. Written by one, they still speak for many. And that is why, we the members of America’s armed forces, will never forget. That is my first promise. We will always

remember. Even if we alone remain, and all others fade away, the memory and sacrifice of our fallen, will not be lost. Through the fog and haze of the years, their faces and names, their smile and laughter will remain crisp and clear to us, such was our camaraderie, so pure and true, remains our love.

And secondly, I promise you this, we will continue to carry the guidon forward. We, the recipients of heroic examples of a select and elite line of American patriots and the sacred trust of this Commonwealth and Nation will not falter or fail. Whether the service tape above our left breast pocket reads United States Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps or Coast Guard, the heart beneath that pocket surges the blood of patriotism through our bodies and souls.

Duty, honor and country will always be our Creed.

Our loyalty and integrity will not waver. We will place ourselves before all enemies foreign and domestic; we will not only be at the tip of the spear but we will also be Liberty's shield. So whether it's guarding the nation's borders, responding to natural disasters or engaging a determined enemy in close quarters combat, we will be there, just as you were.

And with our hearts and minds as one, we will declare with a single united voice,

“I will always place the mission first.  
I will never accept defeat.  
I will never quit.”

So help me God.

May God bless you. May he bless the United States and this Commonwealth.  
And may he bless the men and women of America's armed forces and their loved ones, especially our Fallen and their families, now and always. Thank you.

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Pulaski Memorial Day Address 5/29/2010  
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