

MEMORIAL DAY SPEECH

May 27, 1985

Phlox, WI

Introduction to Speech

In about March or April, 1985, I received a phone call while making rounds with Dr. Ted Fox at Langlade Memorial Hospital in Antigo, WI, requesting that I consider speaking at the Memorial Day service in Phlox, WI, a very small farming community about 10 miles south of Antigo. I immediately thought, "Why me?" I wasn't anyone special. Perhaps all other candidates had declined their invitation. I was a Vietnam vet but also was the chairman for the local county chapter of Wisconsin Right to Life. Did they really want a potentially controversial person on their podium?

I did feel an obligation to accept their offer because of my military background and what I viewed to be a necessary public demonstration of my respect for the deceased veterans of previous wars.

I had a number of questions. What was I to talk about? What does one say at Memorial Day services? What could I say that had not been said before? Do I ask for advice from other more experienced Memorial Day speakers and risk losing some original thinking in my words? I did not want to be controversial on such a solemn occasion, yet this opportunity to speak provided a certain degree of freedom for expression.

I struggled for a number of days and was typing out the words on an old fashion typewriter up until about 2 AM the morning of the speech. I copied several quotes from magazines I had on hand including an old copy of LIFE.

The speech was presented on a cold and windy overcast morning at the Phlox cemetery. Hoping to have a public address system set up, I found none and had to almost yell into the wind toward an audience of about 50 people many of whom were from our prolife chapter.

The words were received well, mostly by the proliferers. I wasn't sure if I would be heckled, criticized for interjecting politics into a memorial event, asked to speak elsewhere – perhaps at Antigo's Memorial Day service next year or written up in the Antigo paper. None of the above happened. As it turned out, this was an event quickly forgotten by all but me.

In retrospect, I am very satisfied and thankful to God that I was able to participate in this manner.

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THANK YOU.

FELLOW VETERANS (look at crosses), FELLOW CITIZENS. I AM TRULY HONORED TO BE HERE TODAY. HONORED, THAT I HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO EXPRESS MY SINCEREST RESPECTS TO OUR VETERANS WHO HAVE MADE THE SUPREME SACRIFICE FOR THEIR FELLOW CITIZENS, KNOWN AND UNKOWN, ON THE BATTLEFIELD AND AT HOME.

IN REALITY, ANYONE OF YOU IS QUALIFIED TO BE UP HERE SPEAKING BECAUSE YOU'VE LOST SONS, HUSBANDS, FATHERS, FIANCES, BUDDYS, BROTHERS, CHILDHOOD FRIENDS, OR CLASSMATES. MANY OF YOU ARE QUALIFIED BECAUSE YOU HAVE BEEN EITHER PHYSICALLY OR EMOTIONALLY SCARED BY WAR, OR HAD SOMEONE CLOSE TO YOU SO AFFECTED. OR AS A CITIZEN ENJOYING THE RIGHTS AND PRICLEDGES OF OUR DEMOCRATIC COUNTRY, YOU FEEL AN OBLIGATION TO, IN SOME WAY; EXPRESS YOUR GRATITUDE TO THOSE WHO HAVE GIVEN UP THEIR LIFE FOR YOURS.

AS I LOOK AT THESE CROSSES, I WANT TO SAY THANK YOU TO THE MEN AND WOMEN FOR WHOM THEY REPRESENT. FOR 120 YEARS, OUR COUNTRY HAS BEEN SAYING THANK YOU EVER SINCE THE FIRST MEMORIAL DAY WAS HELD IN 1866 IN HONOR OF THE CIVIL WAR DECEASED.

MEMORIAL DAY IS FULL OF MEMORIES AND I THINK IT IS HELPFUL TO TALK ABOUT SOME OF THEM AND NOT TRY TO HIDE THEM IN THE BACK OF OUR MINDS. WE ALL HAVE OUR OWN PRIVATE THOUGHTS OF THE PAST, SOME ACCURATE, AND SOME NOT SO ACCURATE.

MY MEMORIES ARE MOST VIVID OF THE YEAR I SPENT AS A NAVY CORPSMAN ATTACHED TO THE MARINES IN VIET NAM BETWEEN 1966 AND 1967. I REMEMBER RIDING THROUGH THE LOS ANGELES SUBURBS ON MY WAY TO A TROOP SHIP, AND WONDERING IF THIS WAS THE LAST TIME I WOULD SEE AMERICA. I BELIEVED THAT OUR PRESENCE IN VIETNAM WAS NECESSARY TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF COMMUNISM, AND I IMAGINED EXPLAINING THIS TO THE CHILDREN I WAS YET TO HAVE.

I REMEMBER MAKING A MEDIVAC – RESUPPLY HELICOPTER FLIGHT TO A SQUAD OF MARINES, LANDING IN A SMALL CLEARING AFTER SKIMMING OVER THE TREE TOPS NEAR DA NANG, AND LOOKING OUT THE DOOR AT THE JUNGLE ONLY 75 FEET AWAY, NOT KNOWING IF THE VIET CONG WERE LOOKING BACK, AND WONDERING, “HOW BRAVE THESE MARINES WERE TO LIVE LIKE THIS DAY AND NIGHT!”

I REMEMBER AN ORTHOPEDIC SURGEON, CRYING AS HE TRIED TO SAVE AS MUCH MUSCLE AND BONE AS POSSIBLE FROM A MARINES FOOT IMPALED ON A PUNJI STAKE, KNOWING THAT MORE TISSUE WOULD HAVE TO BE CUT AWAY LATER AT ANOTHER HOSPITAL IN JAPAN BECAUSE INFECTION WOULD NECESSITATE FURTHER SURGERY.

I REMEMBER LAUGHING, CRYING, FEELING PROUD, FEELING HUMBLE, BEING SCARED, BEING THANKFUL THAT I WAS ALIVE.

THE VIETNAM WAR, AS ANY WAR, SEEMED UNREAL, SURREALISTIC. I TALKED TO A CORPSMAN ONE DAY ABOUT HIS WIFE AND KIDS. THE NEXT DAY I SAW HIM IN A BODY BAG. IT TOOK ME 33 DAYS TO GET TO VIETNAM BY BOAT, IT TOOK 13 HOURS TO RETURN TO HOLLYWOOD BY JET. ONE VIETNAM VET SAID, "AFTER 12 MONTHS THEY WERE PUT ON AN AIR-CONDITIONED PLANE WITH PRETTY STEWARDESSES AND SUDDENLY THE WAR WAS OVER. 'WASH UP,' ONE RETURNING VETERAN'S MOTHER SAID, 'YOUR WELCOME HOME DINNER IS READY.' HE LOOKED AT HIS HANDS. MUD FROM VIETNAM WAS STILL UNDER HIS FINGERNAILS."

I KNOW YOU HAVE YOUR MEMORIES TOO. ANOTHER VETERAN HAS DESCRIBED EVENTS THAT PROBABLY OCCURRED IN SOME OF YOUR HOMES DURING THIS OR PREVIOUS WARS. "WHEN YOU LOST A SON IN VIETNAM, YOU DID EVERYTHING YOU COULD TO NEVER FORGET ANYTHING ABOUT HIM. YOU MADE YOURSELF REMEMBER CONVERSATIONS AND SCENES OVER AND OVER AGAIN. YOU STUDIED FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS. YOU CLIMBED TO THE ATTIC AND OPENED THE CEDAR CHEST IN WHICH YOU STORED HIS THINGS. YOU TOUCHED THE AMERICAN FLAG THAT HAD COME HOME WITH HIM. SO MUCH HAD BEEN TAKEN FROM YOU, SO YOU CLUNG TO THE ONE THING THEY COULD NEVER TAKE AWAY, SOMETHING THAT HAD BEEN WITH YOU SINCE THE JOY OF HIS BIRTH: HIS NAME."

THE VIET NAM WAR SEEMED UNIQUE IN A NUMBER OF WAYS. ONE IN PARTICULAR WAS THE WAY RETURNING VETS WERE ACCEPTED BACK INTO SOCIETY. MANY FELT THEY HAD TO HIDE IN THEIR OWN COUNTRY, AND BE CAREFUL TO WHOM THEY REVEALED THEIR HISTORY OF FIGHTING IN NAM. THESE WERE THE SAME INDIVIDUALS WHO, A SHORT TIME EARLIER, HAD DISPLAYED BRAVERY AND VALOR THAT ONLY THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN IN COMBAT CAN APPRECIATE. ONE VETERAN SAID, "I DID NOT EXPECT A TICKER TAPE PARADE, BUT I SERVED MY COUNTRY FAITHFULLY."

IN NOVEMBER, 1982, THE VIETNAM VETERAN'S MEMORIAL IN WASHINGTON, DC, WAS DEDICATED. ONE OF THE ORGANIZERS EXPLAINED, "ALL WE WANT IS FOR THE PEOPLE TO RECOGNIZE THE SACRIFICE AND CONTRIBUTIONS THEY MADE BECAUSE THE COUNTRY THEY LOVE TOLD THEM IT WAS RIGHT."

"THERE'S NO MORE SACRED PART OF A PERSON THAN HIS OR HER NAME. WE HAVE TO START REMEMBERING REAL INDIVIDUAL NAMES. THE WAR WAS ABOUT NAMES, EACH NAME A SPECIAL HUMAN BEING WHO NEVER CAME HOME."

THOMAS E. DOBRINSKA, 2nd LT., US ARMY, DIED FEB 10, 1968. ALL OF YOU PROBABLY REMEMBER HIS NAME. LT. DOBRINSKA WAS FROM PHLOX AND WAS THE FIRST VIETNAM CASUALTY FROM LANDGLADE COUNTY.

THERE WERE 10 OTHER MEN FROM LANDGLADE COUNTY:

PFC WILLIAM L. CUNNINGHAM, USMC, DIED MAR 1, 1968, ANTIGO,

SGT DAVID SCHUH, USA, DIED MAR 6, 1968, ELCHO,

LARRY LEINDECKER, USN, DIED APR 30, 1968, ANTIGO,

SGT BEN J. GREEN, USMC, DIED MAY 7, 1968, ANTIGO,

CORP JOSEPH PETTERLICH, USMC, DIED MAY 19, 1968, ANTIGO,

PFC JOHN A PETERSON, USMC, DIED FEB 23, 1969, DEERBROOK,

PFC MICHAEL P. MALNES, USMC, DIED MAR 6, 1969, ANTIGO,

CORP FREDERICK BENISHEK, USMC, DIED MAY 7, 1969, ANTIGO,

SGT LARRY C. MOSHER, USA, DIED NOV 12, 1969, GLEASON,

AND AT LAST –

SGT WILLIAM A. THEISEN, USA, DIED DEC 24, 1969, DEERBROOK.

DURING THE VIETNAM VETERAN'S MEMORIAL DEDICATION WEEKEND,
ALL THE 57,000 NAMES WERE READ OVER THE RADIO DURING A 56-HOUR
VIGIL. "THE NAMES WERE READ IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER, FROM
GERALD L. AADLAND OF SISSETON, SD TO DAVID L. ZYWICKE OF
MANITOWAC, WI. EACH NAME WAS LIKE A BELL TOLLING. AS IT WAS
READ ALOUD IN THE NATIONAL CATHEDRAL IN WASHINGTON, EACH
RIPPED INTO THE HEART, INTO OLD WOUNDS THAT COULD HEAL ONLY
AFTER THEY HAD BEEN REOPENED." A CONGRESSIONAL MEDAL OF
HONOR WINNER WHO HAD VOLUNTEERED TO READ NAMES LASTED FIVE

MINUTES BEFORE HE BROKE DOWN. HE READ THE REST OF THE NAMES ON HIS KNEES.”

I UNDERSTAND THAT WHEN PEOPLE SEE THIS MEMORIAL, THEY TOUCH THE STONE. YOUNG CHILDREN REACH UP TO FATHERS AND UNCLES, THEY HAVE NEVER KNOWN. THEIR TOUCHES ARE GENTLE, FILLED WITH FEELING, AS IF THE STONE WERE ALIVE.

THESE SAME CHILDREN WILL SOMEDAY ASK TOUGH QUESTIONS:
WHO ARE THESE NAMES?
WHAT DID THEY DO?
WHY DID THEY DIE?
DID YOU KNOW THEM?
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO ME?

I’M SURE YOU UNDERSTAND THAT THESE THOUGHTS AND EMOTIONS ARE NOT UNIQUE ONLY TO THE VIETAM WAR, BUT ARE ACTUALLY A COMMON PATTERN OF MEMORIES OF ALL OF OUR LOVED ONES FROM ALL OF OUR WARS.

ALSO COMMON IN ALL MEMORIES IS THE HAUNTING QUESTION, “DID THEY DIE IN VAIN?”

THIS QUESTION MUST BE ANSWERED ALMOST DAILY BY EACH OF US. THERE IS NO BLACK OR WHITE, YES OR NO, ANSWER. THE ANSWER, IN

A WAY, DEPENDS ON OUR STATE OF MIND. IF WE FORGET WHAT THEY DIED FOR, THEN THEIR DEATHS ARE IN VAIN. BUT, IF WE CONTINUE TO REMEMBER, THEN THEY DID NOT DIE IN VAIN. WE CANNOT REPAY OUR DEBT TO THEM BY RESTORING LIFE, BUT WE CAN REPAY THEM BY NOT FORGETTING.

WHAT DO YOU THINK THEY WOULD WANT US TO REMEMBER?

WHAT WOULD YOU WANT TO BE REMEMBERED FOR?

IF YOU HAD SACRIFICED YOUR LIFE FOR YOUR COUNTRY, WHAT WOULD YOU EXPECT IN RETURN FROM YOUR COUNTRY?

I THINK THEY WOULD WANT US TO REMEMBER WHY THEY DIED.

WELL, WHY DID THEY DIE? I HAVE TO BELIEVE THAT MOST OF OUR VETERANS DIED BELIEVING IN OUR COUNTRY AND THE PRINCIPLES IT STANDS FOR. NO ONE WANTED TO DIE AND MOST PROBABLY DIED UNEXPECTEDLY. WHILE THEY MAY NOT ALL HAVE BEEN ABLE TO ARTICULATE THEIR BELIEFS IN THEIR COUNTRY, I'M CONFIDENT THAT THEY FELT IT WAS RIGHT TO DEFEND THE WORDS OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE WHICH STATE, "THAT ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL, THAT THEY ARE ENDOWED BY THEIR CREATOR WITH CERTAIN

UNALIENABLE RIGHTS THAT AMONG THESE ARE LIFE, LIBERTY AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS.”

IF I HAD DIED, I WOULD EXPECT PEOPLE TO VALUE ALL LIFE, TO BE WILLING TO STAND UP AND DEFEND THEIR LIBERTIES, AND TO ENJOY THE FREEDOMS PROVIDED BY OUR DEMOCRACY, AS LONG AS THESE UNALIENABLE RIGHTS DID NOT INFRINGE ON THE RIGHTS OF OTHERS.

ARE YOU AWARE THAT WORLD WAR III HAS BROKEN OUT?

DID YOU REALIZE THAT WE ARE LOSING THOUSANDS OF OUR OWN NAMELESS PEOPLE EVERYDAY BY ABORTION? AROUND THE WORLD, TENS OF THOUSANDS ARE BEING ABORTED DAILY! IN VIETNAM WE LOST ABOUT 57,000 PEOPLE OVER AN 8 YEAR PERIOD. TODAY, IT TAKES ONLY 2 WEEKS TO LOSE THE SAME NUMBER BY ABORTION! WITHOUT A DOUBT, WAR HAS BEEN DECLARED ON THE DEFENSELESS UNBORN TO DEPRIVE THEM OF THEIR UNALIENABLE RIGHTS TO LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS.

DOES ANYONE REALLY BELIEVE THAT OUR VETERANS DIED OVERSEAS SO THAT WE COULD KILL OUR OWN HERE AT HOME? OUR VETERANS DIED SO THAT WE COULD LIVE IN PEACE AND BE FREE OF THE KILLING THAT WAR CAUSES. YET IN THIS COUNTRY, SINCE ABORTION BECAME LEGAL JANUARY 22, 1973, 18,500,000 INNOCENT, DEFENSELESS BABIES HAVE BEEN EXTERMINATED. THEY HAVE NO ONE TO PLACE A FLOWER OR FLAG BY THEIR NONEXISTANT HEADSTONE. AT LEAST THE

VETERANS HAVE SOMEONE TO MOURN THEIR SACRIFICE. WHO WILL MOURN FOR THE 4,100 BABIES WHO DIE DAILY? OUR FALLEN COMRADES MUST CERTAINLY BE DISMAYED BECAUSE THE PEACE THEY FOUGHT FOR, IS NOT AT HAND. THE WAR CONTINUES, THE KILLING GOES UNABATED.

AFTER THE VIETNAM VETERAN'S MEMORIAL DEDICATION, AS THOUSANDS OF HANDS STRAINED TO TOUCH NAMES, A LONE GI CLIMBED TO THE TOP OF THE WALL, PUT A BUGLE TO HIS LIPS, AND PLAYED TAPS, SLOWLY. BETWEEN EACH NOTE PEOPLE SEEMED FROZEN, STUNNED BY EMOTION. NEARBY, ANOTHER VET THRUST A SIGN INTO THE GROUND WHICH SAID, "HONOR THE DEAD, FIGHT LIKE HELL FOR THE LIVING." FIGHTING DOESN'T ALWAYS HAVE TO BE PHYSICAL, IT CAN ALSO BE STANDING UP FOR WHAT YOU BELIEVE IN. WE CANNOT ALL GO TO THE BATTLEFIELD OVERSEAS, BUT WHEN THE CONFLICT COMES HOME TO OUR OWN SHORES, WE THEN HAVE TO PROTECT THE LIVES OF OUR OWN PEOPLE.

I AM AMAZED, AND EXTREMELY THANKFUL TO THE PEOPLE OF PHLOX FOR YOUR SUPPORT OF PROLIFE ACTIVITIES. EACH OF YOU CAN CONTINUE TO HELP BY DOING YOUR PART, HOWEVER LARGE OR SMALL. BE SURE TO EXERCISE YOUR AMERICAN RIGHT TO VOICE YOUR CONVICTIONS BY VOTING AND TALKING TO OTHERS. IF YOU ARE SO MOVED, WRITE OR CALL YOUR GOVERNMENTAL REPRESENTATIVES TO VOICE YOUR SUPPORT FOR PRO-LIFE LEGISLATION.

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SPEAK OUT FOR THOSE WHO HAVE DIED ON THE FIELDS OF BATTLE
BY DEFENDING THOSE WHO ARE DIEING DAILY BY ABORTION.

WE MUST NEVER GIVE UP THE QUEST FOR PEACE, THE PEACE FROM
ARMED CONFLICT, AND THE PEACE TO BE BORN.

TO OUR DECEASED VETERANS – AGAIN THANK YOU FOR MAKING
THE SUPREME SACRIFICE SO THAT WE MAY CONTINUE TO ENJOY LIFE.

YOUR DEATHS WILL NOT BE IN VAIN!

WE WILL NOT FORGET!

THANK YOU.