



THE AMERICAN LEGION
Veterans Strengthening America

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

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Suggested Remarks for Memorial Day 2024

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They were brothers-in-arms but also brothers bonded by sacrifice.

Navy SEALs Nathan Gage Ingram and Christopher J. Chambers attempted to board an unflagged ship in the Arabian Sea that was carrying Iranian-made weapons to Yemen on January 11th.

As they were leaving their boat to climb the contraband ship, waves reportedly widened the gap between the two vessels. Chambers plunged into the water. Ingram jumped in to save him. They were never seen again.

The dangers inherent with military service are especially so with Navy Special Warfare Operators. But they exist in every branch and in every military occupation.

Today, we honor the more than one million men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice for our nation while serving in wars and missions since the American Revolution.

Each story is unique, and each story represents heartbreak to the family and friends left to mourn.

There was Private Furman L. Smith, who served with the Army's 135th Infantry Regiment, 34th Infantry Division. Eighty years ago, his unit came under intense fire from German forces near Lanuvio, Italy. Severely outnumbered by the enemy, Private Smith tended to seriously wounded comrades, even as others withdrew. Smith emptied clip after clip of his M-1 Garand rifle and killed at least 10 enemy soldiers before he was fatally shot. The 19-year-old from Six Mile, South Carolina, was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

There was also Lieutenant Colonel Annie Ruth Graham, who served in the Army Nurse Corps during World War II, the Korean War and finally Vietnam. It was while she was assigned to the 91st Evacuation Hospital in Tuy Hoa (pronounced Too-ey Wah) that Graham succumbed to a stroke in 1968. She is one of eight women

whose names are on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Colonel William “Rich” Higgins was a Marine who served as a chief observer on a United Nations peacekeeping mission. On February 17th, 1988, the Vietnam veteran was driving on a coastal road in southern Lebanon when his car was suddenly blocked by another vehicle, and he was taken hostage by Hezbollah terrorists.

He endured months of torture before his captors released a video of his hanging. He was declared dead by the U.S. government on July 6th, 1990. He was survived by his wife, Robin, and daughter, Christine.

As proud Americans, we should all remember that our freedom is not free. It is only possible because heroes, some from our own families or neighborhoods, have paid a high price. It’s that price which enables us to have ceremonies and observances like this in towns across this great country.

The first Memorial Day was not called Memorial Day. It is believed to have been celebrated with a parade of freed slaves and Union soldiers marching through Charleston, South Carolina in 1865.

Waterloo, New York, is considered the official birthplace of Memorial Day because after the town held observances on May 5th, 1866, General John Murray and General John A. Logan called on all communities to honor the war dead every year.

Logan had been impressed with how the South had honored Confederate soldiers for years. In 1868, Logan, who was head of the prominent veterans group, "Grand Army of the Republic," issued a proclamation that "Decoration Day" be observed nationwide. The date chosen was May 30th, specifically because it was not on the anniversary of a battle. It was a day to honor fallen veterans of all American wars.

Even so, many communities did not want to observe “Decoration Day” because of lingering resentments from the Civil War.

The alternative name, “Memorial Day” wasn’t commonly used until World War II, a two-front fight against tyranny in which more than 400,000 American servicemembers would die.

Among those heroes were men singled out by President Ronald Reagan, as he stood at an outdoor lectern in Normandy, France on June 6th, 1984.

Quote –“Behind me is a memorial that symbolizes the Ranger daggers that were thrust into the top of these cliffs,” President Reagan said. “And before me are the men who put them there. These are the boys of Pointe du Hoc. These are the champions who helped free a continent. These are the heroes who helped end a war.” – Unquote.

Many of the men rest in graves at Normandy American Cemetery. Others found peace at Arlington or in their hometown burial places. And many more survived the war and raised their families under the peace and freedom that they and their brothers and sisters-in-arms fought so hard to achieve.

In The American Legion Preamble, we pledge to preserve the memories and incidents of our associations in all wars. We do this not to pat ourselves on the back or impress people with stories of our own military service. We know what we did. But we are also witnesses. Veterans have seen heroism in its purest form. Veterans served alongside the very men and women that we remember today.

One such witness was Lou Conter. On April 1st, 2024, Lou passed away at age 102. He was the last survivor of the USS Arizona. During Pearl Harbor observances in 2020, Lou said to The American Legion, -quote - “We’re not the heroes. The 1,177 who went down with the ship are the heroes. You have to remember we got to go home, get married, have children and grandchildren, and we’ve lived a good life. Those who didn’t get to do that should be called the heroes.” – unquote.

Lou’s sentiment was undoubtedly influenced by his own humility, for he did serve heroically throughout his 26-year Navy career. But his larger point must also be remembered. We are able to raise families, continue careers and live good lives because of the sacrifices made by young men and women who never came home.

We must always remember them.

May they all rest in peace.

Thank you for being here. God Bless America.

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