

Memorial Day Speech by Patrick Simpson, LTC, USA, Retired, at Cottage Grove, OR, 26 May 08

Recognition of dignitaries

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Memorial Day sprang up from the Civil War and a human need to honor the war dead. It was officially proclaimed on 5 May 1868 by General John A. Logan, the National Commander of the Grand Army of the Republic; designating, that on 30 May 1868, flowers would be placed on the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers buried at Arlington National Cemetery. 30 May remained the day to honor all war dead, until it was changed to the last Monday in May, in 1971.

As a little kid in Ashland, Oregon, my twin brother and I would accompany our grandparents on Memorial Day, to two of the local cemeteries where family members were buried; and, to decorate the graves with flowers and greenery from our grandparents' shrubs and flower beds. They still called it Decoration Day.

Two of the graves were occupied by Veterans of World War I; my grandmother's brother, Horatio Sanford, Jr., who died in 1918 from the Spanish Flu; and, my grandfather's brother, Alden Whitney who died in a car accident in 1927. He had served in the Philippines and in Siberia. His unit went into Vladivostok in September 1918 as part of the American Expeditionary Force, Siberia. A total of 7000 troops including the 27th and 31st Infantry Regiments had the mission of securing American interests and allied supplies. They remained until early 1920. This was during the Russian Civil War after the Bolshevik Revolution. It is a "little known" footnote to World War I history.

This year marks the 90th Anniversary of the ending of the “World War”. I remember as a high school Freshman attending a Veterans Day Assembly, the first Veterans Day; having been changed from Armistice Day with the purpose of honoring all Veterans rather than celebrating the end of World War I. The speaker was a professor from Southern Oregon College. He began his “talk” by saying “I fought in the ‘war to end all wars’”. It was an ironic comment, because we had since had World War II and the Korean War. It is even more ironic 54 years later.

We, now, have one remaining World War I veteran, Mr. Frank Buckles who resides in Charlestown, West Virginia. He is 107 years of age, having enlisted at 16 - under age. He served in France and during the occupation of Germany. An interesting “side note” is that 20 plus years later he was working for a shipping company in Manila, Philippine Islands, when the Japanese attacked in December 1941 and invaded shortly afterward. He was interned for over three years at the Los Banos Internment Camp, and was rescued, along with 2146 other internees by the US Army 11th Airborne Division in February 1945. Intelligence reports had indicated that the Japanese were going to kill all of the internees. The 11th planned the operation on “short notice” and a Company parachuted into the camp, supported by the rest of the division. It was a, fabulously, successful operation and all of the internees were rescued.

World War I was a brutal “meat grinder”, where military tactics and the thinking of high level commanders had not kept up with advances in weaponry, primarily the machine gun and heavy artillery. Casualties on both sides were horrendous in numbers. Out of all of this came a poem with a great message that is worth noting as we meet here, today to honor our war dead. The poem, “In Flanders Fields” was written by Major John McCrae who was a surgeon attached to the 1st Artillery Brigade of the 1st Canadian Division and was participating in the 2nd Battle of Ypres, Belgium

in April/May of 1915. He was assigned to a Dressing Station located a few hundred yards north of Ypres. In our Army and in my experience, a “dressing station” would compare to a Brigade Clearing Station where immediate, life saving surgery is conducted. By 2 May, Major McCrae had been involved in 17 days of “Hell” taking care of wounded and experiencing the death resulting from that battle. Of note is that the first use of chlorine gas, by the Germans, occurred at Ypres (the Brits called it “wipers”) on 22 April, ten days earlier.

On the 2nd of May 1915, a good friend of Major McCrae was killed by an artillery burst and was buried later that afternoon at a small cemetery outside the Dressing Station. He conducted the funeral in the absence of a Chaplain. The next morning during a break from treating wounded soldiers, while sitting on the back of an ambulance he vented his anguish by writing this poem. It is in the form of a French Rondeau, and was scribbled into a small notebook. He composed it in 20 minutes as he was looking at the cemetery and his friend’s grave. What he wrote was what he saw and felt. The first two stanzas, nine lines, are of a pastoral, sacrificial form. The 3rd stanza is more “hardnosed” It is a plea and a challenge from the “dead” that passes the “torch” and responsibility to the living. This, I think is where we come in.

We formally honor our service men and women twice a year. On Veterans Day, 11 November, we honor those who have served and are now serving; and, on Memorial Day we honor those who have died in that service – those who have made the supreme sacrifice. But, I think that our responsibility goes beyond that. On a continuous basis we must honor and respect those who have been placed, by us, in “harm’s way” to ensure our safety and freedom, including police officers and firemen. How do we pay the ultimate respect? We need to be informed citizens and informed voters. We need to be responsible in performing our civic duty. We need to be

aware of what our country stands for, and maintain that focus; and faithfully exercise our rights as citizens of this great country.

I would like to read the poem and have you join me.

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders Fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you with failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

It has been my pleasure and honor to participate in this Memorial Day Service.

Patrick Simpson, LTC, USA, Retired, 26 May 2008