

**The
American
Legion**



For God and country

Suggested Speech

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They each have stories to tell. The crosses at Normandy. The markers at Punchbowl. The tombs at Arlington. The fallen heroes who rest in places unknown.

From our founding Revolution to today's Global War on Terrorism, nearly one million men and women in the Armed Forces have sacrificed their lives while defending America in time of war.

Seventy years ago, Americans were still celebrating their great victory in the European theater – a triumph that came at an enormous price. But that celebration was tempered with the determination and sacrifice that still lay ahead – as Americans and their allies were engaging the Japanese in ferocious fighting on the Pacific Island of Okinawa.

Once such American was Dale M. Hansen, a 19-year-old from Wisner, Nebraska. At five-foot-nine and 141 pounds, Private Hansen was far from the biggest Marine in his Reserve unit.

But he fought like a GIANT.

He landed on Okinawa with his unit on Easter, 1945. At a critical stage of action on May 7th, Private Hansen crawled to an exposed position, where he used a rocket launcher to destroy a strategically located enemy pillbox. After his weapon was destroyed by enemy fire, he seized a rifle and continued a one-man assault and opened fire on six Japanese soldiers, killing four before his rifle jammed.

He fought off the two remaining Japanese soldiers with the butt of his rifle, returned for cover, then advanced again with another weapon and some grenades. Private Hansen proceeded to destroy a strong mortar position and annihilate eight more enemy soldiers.

For his actions of May 7th, his parents would later receive his Medal of Honor. For while Private Hansen survived the heroic actions that earned him the Medal and the enduring respect and gratitude of the American people, he was killed by a Japanese sniper just four days after his amazing display of combat valor.

Private Hansen, like so many other defenders of freedom, is forever young.

Brittany Gordon lived a life of service. In the Tampa Bay Times, her mother Brenda recalled a letter that her little girl wrote to the tooth fairy:

“Dear Tooth Fairy, Will you please leave the tooth under the bed, and I will return it the next night? P.S. I want to take it to my school and share it with my friends.”

“That just speaks volumes to who she was,” her mother said.

As a 24-year-old Army Specialist, Brittany was among a group that was delivering furniture to an intelligence office in eastern Afghanistan on October 13, 2012.

She lost her life when a terrorist detonated a suicide vest.

“Brittany was a shining light,” her cousin remembered.

Like Pvt. Hansen, Specialist Brittany Gordon is forever young.

The numbers of our fallen heroes are not just statistics. They are real people, with real families, who lived in real communities.

We can best honor their sacrifice by remembering their families, who have lost so much. Long after the battlefield guns have been silenced and the bombs stop exploding, the children of our fallen warriors will still be missing a parent. Spouses will be without their life partners. Parents will continue to grieve for their heroic sons and daughters that died way too early.

We need to be there for them – not just as members of The American Legion family – but as American citizens. Nobody can replace these fallen heroes – especially in the eyes of their families – but we can offer shoulders to cry on, assistance with educational expenses and assurance that their loved one's sacrifice will not be forgotten.

Americans must remember that freedom isn't free. In fact, it's only possible because our fallen heroes have paid its high price. A price paid, which enables us to have ceremonies and observances like this in towns across this great country.

While exceptional valor and sacrifice has occurred in all of America's wars, we did not always honor our fallen with a day dedicated in their honor. In fact, 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 it was observed there on May 5, 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 the fallen Confederate soldiers for years. In 1868, Logan, the head of the prominent veterans group, the Grand Army of the Republic, issued a proclamation that “Decoration Day” be observed nationwide. The date chosen was May 30 – specifically because it was not on the anniversary of a battle.

Still, some communities did not want to honor “Decoration Day,” because of lingering resentments from the Civil War.

The alternative name, “Memorial Day” wasn’t commonly used until World War II. Federal law recognized the holiday as “Memorial Day” in 1967.

As the unofficial beginning of summer, let us never lose focus of what Memorial Day means. It is not about beaches, picnics or auto races. It is a day to remember.

It is a day for us to remember the promise President Lincoln made to “care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan.”

Remembering our fallen once a year is not enough. The widows, widowers, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters and children remember EVERYDAY.

The empty seat at the dinner table, the smaller gathering on Thanksgiving, and the voice of a loved one heard only as a distant memory in one's mind are constant reminders that they are gone.

The American Legion has always shown great pride in our nation's fallen heroes and unwavering support for those that America sends in harm's way.

On the back of every American Legion membership card is the preamble to our organization's constitution. It pledges, in part, "to preserve the memories and incidents of our associations in the Great Wars."

Today is another opportunity for us to give thanks.

We owe it to the heroes that died and the loved ones left behind to make sure that their sacrifices are remembered and that their service to this nation always be honored.

Real people. Real stories.

May God bless them all.

Thank you.

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