

VETERANS DAY IN BEDFORD, 2016

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Thank you for being here this Veteran's Day. It's a humbling honor to represent Veterans as part of the American Legion Family here in Bedford.

In full disclosure, this speech has been adapted from material in The American Legion - Media & Communications Division.....

Carl Johnson's life matters.

Carl, a 90-year-old veteran in Virginia, was the last Tuskegee Airman to graduate from the famous school which produced so many heroic African American aviators.

According to a recent article in the Washington Post, back in 1946, the U.S. Army issued Carl a ticket for a Pullman sleeping car to get him from Texas to Alabama for military training.

Carl recalled how the station manager ordered that he and his fellow black soldiers were not allowed to use the Pullman. Threatened with jail if they resisted, the soldiers rode for 24 hours – even without the use of the train's dining car.

Despite these humiliations, Carl would continue to treat his country better than many of his fellow citizens treated him. Even President Wilson's policies, which directed a segregated military, did not stop heroes like Carl Johnson serving his country.

Carl would extend his military service for another three decades, serving in the Korean and Vietnam Wars. He would earn a Distinguished Flying Cross and 10 Air Medals and retire as a colonel.

In 1974, when Governor Reagan introduced returning POWs at a speaking engagement, the future president asked, "Where do we find such men?" Reagan answered his own question: "We find them in our streets, in the offices, the shops and the working places of our country and on the farms."

In other words, President Reagan was referring to ordinary people accomplishing extraordinary things.

And it isn't just the men.

Grace Murray of New York was a curious child. At the age of 7, she dismantled an alarm clock just to see how it worked (they don't tell us if she put it back together). Later, she would invent the computer language known as COBOL.

The world was fortunate to benefit from the brilliant mind of the woman known by friends and admirers as "Amazing Grace," later, she was known by the U.S. Navy as Rear Admiral Grace Hopper.

Veterans come in all shapes and sizes. Young and old - rich and poor - black and white - and nearly every category in between, they are our men and women who served or still serve America.

Military families should also be honored on Veterans Day. I reflect on the military families who touch our lives in our town. Through the Scouting programs, at BHS, or in our churches and synagogues..... The children of men and women stationed at Hanscom AFB are not "base kids". These children typically face hardships that non-military dependents would ever experience. We are fortunate to have these families from around our country in our lives. I am thankful how our School District has addressed and embraced their unique experiences – adding a dedicated School Guidance Counselor for military dependents was brilliant !

While numbers are decreasing, still too many veterans are homeless. As recently as 2014, an estimated 50,000 homeless veterans were identified in communities around the nation. The Bedford Green Project at the VA has taken a very pro-active response –all involved deserve tremendous kudos for that !

Remember well, the estimated 20-22 veterans-a-day, who commit suicide and 20% of combat veterans have experienced PTSD. We have a wonderful example of what a VA should be right in our own back yard. Our VA is not infamously criticized in the headlines – but rather, totally involved with the needs of our Veterans – we are blessed.

We should remind employers how veterans have been tested under pressure, have completed unique training and have displayed the leadership qualities that would benefit almost any organization. They are the 100% volunteer force – the Red, White & Blue -- the true 1%.

Veterans Day is an important but symbolic way of saying thanks. We need to urge lawmakers to pass meaningful laws and public policies that will enhance the quality of life for veterans and their families. Just two nights ago, at Town Meeting, Bedford approved covering compensation during extended deployments for Town workers who are Reservists, or in the Air or National Guard – these are our Citizen Soldiers of the 21st Century.

The American Legion Family is dedicated to honoring the legacy of all veterans because what these men and women have done for us, it matters to America.

It matters to the people overseas who were liberated from tyranny due to the sacrifices of our military members.

From defeating Communism, Fascism and Imperialism, to liberating slaves..... In fact, this Sunday @ 2:00PM, the Bedford Historical Society in conjunction with the American Legion will host the 54th Mass. Infantry Regiment re-enactors – - reenacting the determination and bravery of those soldiers during the Civil War -- later manifesting into the highly acclaimed movie “Glory.

Yes, from keeping the peace during the Cold War and battling terrorism today, veterans have accomplished remarkable things throughout our nation’s history.

Ladies and gentlemen, Veterans have preserved this country that we all love so much. I suspect that each man and woman Veteran would staunchly defend the First Amendment for Free Speech of all individuals. They would also be less likely to exhibit mannerisms deemed anti Patriotic. Personally, I would prefer to see less kneeling on Sunday afternoons – and rejoice in seeing more kneeling Sunday Mornings.

Thank you again for allowing me to speak on behalf of our nation’s veterans.

God bless you and God Bless our nation’s veterans.