

MAYOR'S MEMORIAL DAY SPEECH

28 May 2007, National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific

Good morning and aloha.

Thank you for joining us here for the 58th annual Mayor's Memorial Day Ceremony.

We welcome Senator Akaka, Representatives Abercrombie and Hirono, General Leaf and Lieutenant Governor Aiona. And welcome to all the friends and families of the fallen warriors who surround us this morning.

We are also honored to have with us this morning seven Filipino veterans of World War II, residents of Oahu who just last month received Philippine Liberation Medals from the government of the Philippines. If you are able, please stand and be recognized.

We are pleased to note that the U.S. Senate just the other day approved adding Senator Akaka's Filipino Veterans Family Reunification Act to the immigration bill, one more step in repaying the debt America owes to those who fought for freedom at our side.

We thank the Boy Scouts who placed lei at each grave here at Punchbowl yesterday and the Girl Scouts who did the same with Gail and me at the Hawaii State Veterans Cemetery. Mahalo to the thousands of people, especially the schoolchildren and kupuna, who picked the flowers and strung the lei. We also salute the hundreds of schoolchildren statewide who participated in the annual Memorial Day lei poster contest. I was able to honor the winners recently at Honolulu Hale, where their winning posters were displayed.

We also thank the Department of Education and Aloha Airlines for getting the flowers here, for the hundreds of City workers and volunteers, led by the Department of Parks and Recreation, whose efforts made this ceremony possible.

Let me single out our Civil Defense volunteers. They came last week to unload the lei and flowers, helped the scouts place the lei on the graves, stayed overnight to keep watch and are here this morning handling traffic and parking control. They're here every year, and that's in addition to providing invaluable help for our City Department of Emergency Management during floods, high surf and myriad other problems, plus community parades and other

events, all on a voluntary basis. There are about 30 of them here today. Let's show them our appreciation. (Applause).

And thank you to Colonel Gene Castagnetti and his staff here at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific for maintaining this hallowed place in a manner befitting the more than 47,000 souls who repose here. Let us never forget their service and sacrifice for this great nation, for all of us.

It was the poignant desire to remember and to honor those Americans who had fallen in battle, that led to the establishment of Memorial Day almost a century and half ago, out of the sorrow and chaos of the Civil War.

Today many people confuse Memorial Day with Veterans Day, the anniversary of the armistice that ended World War I. In 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower proclaimed November 11 to be Veterans Day, an occasion to honor all of America's war veterans.

It is indeed right and proper to recognize and thank all of the people who serve America in uniform every day. Our gratitude should be limitless, especially in these tumultuous times, when they are waging two wars and protecting us in so many other less-familiar ways, around the world.

Many of us civilians go about our daily lives unhindered by that distant turmoil. But we must never forget the men and women who are even now braving the fire and venom of America's enemies.

Here in Hawaii, May is Military Appreciation Month, a time to show the members of our military community our gratitude.

Today, debate rages across the nation over the war in Iraq. Wherever you stand on that, let us not forget that the very fact we can have such a debate is one of the freedoms that cost the future for the sons and daughters of Hawaii, of all America, lying here and in cemeteries across the nation.

Last November, Sergeant William Sigua, a squad leader with the 82nd Airborne Division in Iraq, sent an e-mail to his mother in California. He wrote:

“I am honored to have the opportunity to give back to the country that has given me so much, and anyone who thinks differently should be ashamed of themselves. If I do not come back from this deployment, you can tell people that you are proud of me, and I of myself.”

Sergeant Sigua was killed by small arms fire while on patrol in northern Iraq, on Jan. 31, 2007. He was 21 years old.

This day – Memorial Day – is the occasion for America to focus its attention on Sergeant Sigua and the hundreds of thousands of other American soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen who gave their lives in countless battles over the years.

As the Bible says, in John 15:13, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

We cannot hope to find full measure to repay them and their loved ones. But the very least we can do is honor their memory and treasure the liberty they bought for us with their lives.

For them, a generation ago, Army helicopter Michael Davis O’Donnell wrote a poem. He was in Dak To, Vietnam. It was January 1, 1970, two months before he was killed in action.

On this Memorial Day, let me close with his words:

(REMEMBER THEM)

If you are able, save for them a place inside of you

And one backward glance when you are leaving,

For the places they can no longer go.

Be not ashamed to say you loved them,

Though you may or may not always have.

Take what they have left

And what they have taught you with their dying

And keep it with your own.

And in that time when men decide and feel safe

To call the war insane,

Take one moment to embrace

Those gentle heroes you left behind.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. Aloha.

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