

REMARKS BY COL. DAVID DUNKLEE

DELIVERED AT BEDFORD, MASSACHUSETTS

MEMORIAL DAY ~ MAY, 30 2016

I am proud to be here today with our friends and neighbors of the Bedford community to honor our servicemen and women who have served to protect our nation and gave the ultimate sacrifice to guarantee our freedoms and way of life.

This peaceful and serene town has a long history. One that predates the founding of this nation. It has borne witness to the devastation of war chronicled in the gravestones of our loved ones at the Shawsheen Cemetery and the Old Burial Ground and in several monuments and parks. There, we have memorialized our fallen veterans of the Revolutionary war, Civil War, Spanish-American War, WWI, WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan.

When I heard the town had challenged students to write essays on how the town's history helped them gain an understanding of the importance of Memorial Day; I, too, took up the challenge.

I visited many of the sites and was immediately drawn to Bedford High School's Veteran's Memorial, and heard recount of Bedford's recent fallen heroes, Private First Class John Hart and Lance Corporal Travis Desiato, both killed in Operation Iraqi Freedom... the newest fallen veterans joining First Lieutenant Terry Reed and First Lieutenant Robson Wills who both died in the Vietnam war. All of these men were graduates of Bedford High school.

I read many website postings from family, friends who told stories of their amazing spirit, faithful service, and lasting bonds of love and kinship.

I remembered my own experience in 2008. I commanded a unit in Utah. We would hire local high school students during the summer to do odd jobs. That is where I met Jordan Byrd. Jordan was a High School Junior, team captain of the softball team, leader in the student council... he had a perpetual smile and an endearing spirit who was loved by everyone. He, among a foursome of other students would work the most mundane of jobs cleaning up trash and weeds. When the others would complain or cower away from the dirtiest of jobs... Jordan would eagerly jump in... he had a job to do... and he'd do it better than anyone else. He had this energy about him; he was loyal, trustworthy, and always protective of those that would otherwise be ridiculed.

I was impressed by this young man and tried hard to persuade him to join the Air Force. But Jordan's passion and dreams were steadfast. He intended to go into medicine and become a doctor. I knew he would attain those dreams and had expected to hear about his practice in the very near future.

Flash forward two years later and I'm completing pre-deployment training before departing for Afghanistan. On our last night before deploying I got a call from my wife. She simply said, Jordan was killed in Afghanistan. I was shocked. How could this have happened? As I gathered my bearings my wife talked me through an amazing story. To earn cash for his degree, Jordan joined the Army, following in his father's footsteps. He got married to the love of his life and left for Afghanistan just a few short weeks after welcoming his newborn son. Jordan had become a Field Medic. He was killed in action on a mountain side in Paktika Province... in true Jordan fashion... while attempting to save the life of a fellow soldier.

Jordan had joined an exclusive, all-volunteer force... the one percent of Americans that are sworn to protect our freedoms and our way of life. We are the most powerful, best trained, and best equipped fighting force. In part, because of the technological innovations developed at Hanscom Air Force Base and the defense sector here in Massachusetts. But mostly, because of the incredible spirit, determination, and selflessness of our young men and women whose resolute dedication, courage, and drive protect and defend our way of life.

Jordan's life and his Gold Star Family are forever intertwined with my own life. I will always remember his spirit, his kindness, and his compassion for others. And whenever I get a chance, I share that story with others.

I never knew PFC John Hart and LCpl Travis Desiato who are memorialized at the Bedford High School... until I came to the school's memorial. I never had the opportunity to really know our own Hanscom Air Force Base Defenders Senior Airman Kcey Ruiz and Senior Airman Nathan Sartain who were killed in action last October until I had the honor of meeting with their family and friends. Nor did I know the hundreds of other Bedford citizens memorialized throughout the town until I walked past their grave markers adorned in flags and flowers. I know we must be forever indebted to the sacrifices these brave men and women, who, with spines of steel rose to service in defense of our country.

They believed in our nation, our inalienable rights to life, liberty, and happiness. And they had sworn an oath to lay their lives down against those that attempt to deny us those freedoms. They leave behind a nation grateful to have guaranteed our prosperity; ensured we are free to express our own beliefs and practice our own religion. We sleep soundly tonight because there are those that continue to protect us.

The Bedford High School Fallen Veteran's memorial. Four young servicemen memorialized in stone and bronze. They were our neighbors, our friends, and they gave all... for us.

Freedom is not free.

Freedom is a gift. A precious gift that is paid by the blood of those that defend our freedoms.

Today, I challenge you to visit Bedford's cemeteries and its monuments all adorned with flags and flowers... don't worry, a little rain won't hurt you! Pay respect to our heroes. Listen to our Gold Star families' stories of the lives of those who protected our freedoms.

Our Bedford students amassed over 60 essays about how the town's history has helped them understand the importance of Memorial Day. I am proud of their efforts and look forward to reading them along with you.

We owe a huge debt to our fallen. We must remember them lest we take for granted the liberties we have today and risk losing them. We must also remember that each of our fallen leave behind family and friends who will share with you the everlasting laughter, love, and life of the ones they have lost.

Pray for our fallen tonight. Pray for their families. Share in their stories. Remember their sacrifice.

God bless our fallen heroes, God bless those families who have lost a loved one, God bless those that serve today to protect our nation, and God bless the United States of America.