

**The
American
Legion**



For God and country

Suggested Speech

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Corporal Rachael L. Hugo was a former high school cheerleader who served as a combat medic with the 303rd Military Police Company based in Jackson, Michigan.

The 24-year-old sent her father, Kermit Hugo, an e-mail from Iraq last year saying “This is what I choose to do, and being a medic is what I live to do.”

The Madison, Wisconsin, native chose a life of danger, saving the life of a sergeant three months into her tour by treating him in the middle of a firefight. Eight months later, Corporal Hugo volunteered to be in the lead vehicle – often times the most dangerous one -- in a convoy riding through Bayji, (BAY GEE) Iraq. She was killed by an IED.

What do you say to someone who has made the ultimate sacrifice? “Thank you” is a start but it seems woefully insufficient.

You could say, “I respect your heroism.”

You could also say, “I will not dishonor your sacrifice by belittling the cause for which you gave your life.”

For whether a war is popular or unpopular, the sacrifice is the same for the more than one million men and women who died in service of this nation in wars and conflicts since 1775.

Before going to Iraq, PFC Jesse A. Givens wrote a letter that he hoped his family would never open. Like many servicemembers, he wrote the letter to be given “just in case...” Well, “just in case” happened in May 2003. To his 6-year-old daughter, Dakota, he wrote, “Never be afraid to be yourself. I will always be there in our park, when you dream so we can play. I love you, and hope someday you will understand why I didn’t come home. Please be proud of me.”

The American Legion is proud of Jesse and his brothers and sisters-in-arms that have paid the ultimate price.

We are also proud of their families, who have sacrificed 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.

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, many Southern 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.

There are many ways to remember our fallen heroes. The traditional way is with flowers and flags for their graves or with observances such as this.

But if you asked our heroes before they died how they would like to be honored, most would probably say, 'take care of my family.'

That's why retired General Hal Moore tells us in "We Were Soldiers," that the last words of many dying soldiers is "Tell my wife I love her."

That is also why in his second inaugural address, Abraham Lincoln included widows and orphans when he asked the government to "care for him who shall have borne the battle."

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.

Korean War veteran Charles W. Johnson summed up his feelings about Memorial Day with a poem.

“We walked among the crosses
Where our fallen soldiers lay.
And listen to the bugle
As taps began to play.

“The chaplain led a prayer
We stood with heads bowed low
And I thought of fallen comrades
I have known so long ago.

“They came from every city
Across this fertile land.
That we might live in freedom.
They lie hear `neath the sand.

“I felt a little guilty
My sacrifice was small
I only lost a little time
But these men lost their all.

“Now the services are over
For this Memorial Day.
To the names upon these crosses
I just want to say,
Thank you.

“Thanks for what you’ve given
No one could ask for more,
May you rest with God in heaven
From now through evermore.”

Fellow Legionnaires, fellow veterans and friends
of veterans, let us remember our fallen comrades –
not just today, but long after we leave here.

Their sacrifice was important, their sacrifice was noble and their sacrifice was permanent.

May God bless them and may God bless you for caring enough to be here today.

Thank you.

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