

## **FIELD OF HONOR**

November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, Americans, patriots. Welcome to the Field of Honor, where 400 flags fly and tell a story. Actually, they tell many stories, of veterans, those who have served our great nation in times of war and in peace. I encourage you to walk the field while they remain posted here over the next week. See these flags that represent individual veterans, soldiers, sailors, Marines, airmen, coastguardsmen and the merchant marine. Men and women who regardless of origin or faith donned our nations uniforms and gave of themselves to support the Constitution and defend our liberty and freedoms.

I would like to thank all of you who have come today for your presence, interest, and patriotism. I find it heartwarming. I would also like to thank the Kiwanis for this effort and especially Karsten Meier for extending the invitation to me. It is an honor to stand here with this beautiful sight of 400 flags and you wonderful folks.

The 11<sup>th</sup> hour, of the 11<sup>th</sup> Day, of the 11<sup>th</sup> Month. November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1918, a day known as Armistice Day, the date that fighting on the Western Front in World War I ended. The so-called “war to end all wars” was catastrophic and deadly for all involved. Shortly after the conflict ended, it became known in Commonwealth countries, as “REMEMBERANCE DAY,” but was also celebrated in France and the United States. In 1926 a Congressional resolution officially named this date as

Armistice Day and it became a federal holiday in 1938. By 1947 when Raymond Weeks held the first officially organized Veterans Day, it had become clear that, sadly, the hope that the war to end all wars was ephemeral and not to be. In 1954, Congress sent a bill to the White House and President Eisenhower signed that into law, proclaiming the date as Veterans Day.

With that brief introduction of what the day is about, let us turn our attention to the beautiful Field of Honor we see here today. What exactly is a flag? What is the purpose of the flag? Flags are everywhere and represent many different things.

While flags are mainly associated with geographical regions, countries, and nations, they can also represent organizations, groups, universities and even causes.

A flag is a distinctive piece of fabric used as a symbol, a signaling device, or for decoration. We cannot for certain pinpoint the exact origin or date for the appearance of flags, however, there have been flag like symbols dated as far back as the 11th century BC, in China. They also had prominence in ancient Egypt and Rome.

In ancient India, they were carried on chariots and elephants. While representing monarchs, emperors and political entities, the flag soon became a useful military tool. Flags helped identify units on the battlefield, were a means of communication for signaling, and became a symbol that was not to be treated

lightly. The “colors” became the first object of attack in battle, and their fall would frequently result in confusion or chaos, often leading directly to defeat.

In medieval Europe flags began to take on all sorts of shapes and purposes. They morphed into guidons (or unit flags), streamers, banners, standards and pennons. They often represented noble families. But the most common became the standard. The standard was the largest flag and was intended, from its size, to be stationary. It marked the position of an important individual before a battle, during a siege, throughout a ceremony, or at a tournament. It also came to represent the presence of someone of importance, a tradition that carries on today for heads of state and even general officers in our military. In that era the standard could be used to mark the palace, castle, tent, or ship where the monarch was present.

However, flags are not only important on land but at sea as well. Ships began to use flags at sea to signal to each other and to harbors.

National flags often include symbols and or colors. For instance, many European countries or political entities incorporate the Christian cross. This includes all Scandinavian countries like Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Iceland.

Great Britain’s “Union Jack” is the result of combining three crosses: the crosses of St. George (England), St. Andrew (Scotland), and St. Patrick (Ireland). In the

Islamic world, green is prevalent on national flags like that of Saudi Arabia and Algeria.

European royalty adopted coats of arms that soon became the basis of their flags. Although those heraldic devices have largely disappeared from modern national flags, the colors used in the coats of arms remain the colors of Poland, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Hungary, Luxembourg, and Monaco's flags. Austria, San Marino and Liechtenstein, however, still display the heraldic devices on their flags.

While this history of flags may be interesting, or perhaps not, we are here for the 400 American flags you see on this Field of Honor. Our flag, though it has been modified from time to time, has stood as a symbol of freedom and justice for over 246 years. The sight of the American flag has given notice to foes and assurances to friends that democracy lives in peace and during conflict.

On June 14, 1777, the Continental Congress adopted the Stars and Stripes as the official flag for the United States of America. Congress had to act, as the previous year, the Declaration of Independence made a resolution necessary. Each colony already had its own flag. But now, fighting for our independence from Imperial Great Britain, we needed a national flag of our own.

The American flag has flown without interruption since 1777. The Stars and Stripes represent all that is great about America. It embodies the very qualities that

make our nation great: liberty, justice, freedom, love of country and national purpose.

The American flag is also a living piece of history and a source of pride and unity for Americans. The original American flag was designed to represent the new union of the thirteen original states: it would have thirteen stripes, alternate red and white, and thirteen stars, white on a field of blue.

The flag has been modified over time, however, since 1818, at Congressional direction, we have retained the flag's original thirteen stripes that represent the original 13 states to enter the union. We simply add new stars to reflect each new state that enters the union.

Since its inception, Americans have fought for and died to preserve the ideals of representative democracy represented by the flag. Over 41 million Americans and foreign nationals have served in our uniforms, over 16 million in World War II.

Today there are 18 million living veterans:

7.8 million are Gulf War era veterans, or 43% of all living veterans.

5.6 million Vietnam era vets (or 30% of living veterans)

767,000 Korean conflict and 1950s veterans (4%)

Fewer than 120,000 of the 16 million who served in World War II are still with us (1%)

Serving our nation is becoming less and less common. In 1980 18% of all adults were veterans. But by 2022, that figure had dropped to just 6%. In large measure, this reflects the transition to an all-volunteer, professional force in 1973.

In the future, you will see fewer and fewer American military veterans. Between 1980 and 2018, the veteran population declined by a third from 26.4 million to 18 million. It is projected to continue declining. By 2040 we will have just 12.9 million living veterans.

I mention this decline not to lament it, but to note how what was once a common experience for most men and many women, is now someone only a small segment of our society experiences. Consequently, most American do not know what it means to serve in uniform. They do not know the personal and professional sacrifices their fellow Americans make on their behalf: defending the Constitution at home and in challenging locales abroad. They cannot know the trauma and horror of conflict, thank goodness. They will not know the countless personal sacrifices our veterans make and have made.

I say these things to you not to elicit, empathy or sympathy, after all, we are no more special than any other American. The distinction, if one exists, is that just

like first responders, EMTs, firefighters, and law enforcement officers, our military serves our nation, each and every day. We stand or have stood on that wall defending freedom, on all our behalf. When you thank a veteran for his or her service, do not forget your thanks embodies much more than the simple and brief phrase “thank you for your service.” It means a lot and we are grateful, as are the veterans represented by these 400 flags, as well as their families and descendants.

I enlisted in the Army at 18, after a year at university and spent most of my adult life in uniform: 36 ½ years in the US Army (the oldest US military service, BTW), 34 of those years on active duty, 23 years overseas on over a dozen tours, plus combat and peacekeeping tours of duty. But, while that may impress folks, something that happened long ago is among my most cherished responsibilities while in uniform.

As a young soldier in Germany during the Cold War, I was fortunate enough to be selected for the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Color Guard and got the privilege of carrying our nation’s colors in countless ceremonies and during funerals for veterans. It was something I competed for, to be on the color guard and carry our nation’s colors, that is. I still cherish that responsibility to this day, nearly 40 years later.

I thank you all for coming today and listening to an old soldiers' ramblings about flags. I hope you leave with a deeper appreciation for what the flag represents and why it matters. God bless and thank you.

*William M. (Chris) Wyatt*

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