

Good morning and thank you to the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 6791, its Ladies Auxiliary, members of the American Legion Post 300, its Ladies Auxiliary, and Sons of the American Legion, for coordinating this year's Memorial Day Observance which pays tribute to our fallen servicemen and women.

The American heroes we honor today have selflessly given their lives for this country and for our freedom. It is our duty and obligation to remember their sacrifice and to teach our children and future generations of the importance of this day by bringing them to Observances like these and explaining their significance.

I'd like to start with a story about eight-year old Myles Eckert, a youngster who learned the meaning of sacrifice at a tender age, and who sets an example for all of us about paying it forward.

Myles was excited when he recently found a \$20 bill one morning in the parking lot of a Cracker Barrel. He planned to buy a Lego video game with his unexpected windfall. But fate took him in a different direction.

While dining in the restaurant with his family, he noticed a uniformed member of the Air National Guard at a different table. Myles wrote a message on a post-it note and presented the \$20 to the man, who was dining with his own family.

“Dear Soldier,” the note started.

“My dad was a soldier. He’s in heaven now.

I found this \$20 bill in the parking lot when we got here. We like to pay it forward in my family. Today is your lucky day! Thank you for your service.

Myles Eckert, is a Gold Star kid.”

The recipient of the note, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Dailey was moved. "It's incredible being recognized in such a manner. I look at it every day," Dailey later said.

Myles was only four-weeks-old when a roadside bomb in Iraq took the life of his father, Army Sergeant Andy Eckert in 2005. While Andy was denied the opportunity to raise this outstanding young man, we can all imagine how proud he would be of his son's commitment to 'pay it forward.'

It is a commitment that we too must share by advocating for veterans and supporting military families through the programs of the American Legion, the VFW, the DuPage Veterans Foundation and veterans' groups throughout the country.

Throughout our nation's history, the sacrifices have been great. President Ronald Reagan recalled one such sacrifice when he stood at an outdoor lectern in

Normandy, France, on June 6, 1984. "Behind me is a memorial that symbolizes the Ranger daggers that were thrust into the top of these cliffs. And before me are the men who put them there," Reagan said.

"These are the boys of Pointe du Hoc. These are the champions who helped free a continent. These are the heroes who helped end a war."

Many of the men lay beneath the thousands of crosses at Normandy American Cemetery. Others found peace at Arlington or in their hometown burial places. And many, many more survived the war and raised their families under the peace and freedom that they and their fallen comrades fought so hard to achieve.

In the days that followed the D-Day landing of 70 years ago, thousands more Americans and our brave allies would make the supreme sacrifice. Pvt. Joe Gandara of Santa Monica, Calif., voluntarily advanced

alone and destroyed three hostile machine guns before he was fatally wounded on June 9, 1944 in Amreville, France.

Just 20 years old, the soldier from the 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment was denied the opportunity to raise a family of his own. Instead, his 69-year-old niece received the Medal of Honor from President Obama on his behalf during a ceremony on March 18th.

Gandara and 23 other U.S. Army veterans of World War II, Korea and Vietnam were at long last recognized for heroic actions that cost many of them their lives, but will forever earn their place in history as recipients of the nation's highest military award. Most Medal of Honor recipients are very humble about their actions and would prefer to talk about the heroes that they served with instead of themselves.

We continue to lose American heroes everyday in Afghanistan and in military training accidents and missions around the world. The loss to their families, friends, fellow service members and country is permanent.

Some were only teenagers and most of those killed in action were under age 25. In the eyes of their loved ones, they are forever young.

This is why Memorial Day is so important. We don't just honor those with the highest medals or even those who participated in the most hellacious firefights. We honor the more than one million men and women who lost their lives defending America in wars from the Revolution to the Global War on Terrorism.

It is fitting to have days like this to remember heroes like Private First Class Jesse A. Givens. Before going to Iraq, PFC Givens wrote a letter that he hoped his family would never open. Like many service members, 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.”

Today we honor Private First Class Givens and his brothers and sisters-in-arms who loved America enough to die for it.

We are also proud of the families, who have sacrificed so much. Long after the battlefield guns have been silenced, 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. Nobody can replace them – 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.

Earlier this month I had the honor of welcoming over 1,000 people, many of them veterans of World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and current, active military, to the DuPage Airport in West Chicago for a celebration of their service to our country. The event, sponsored by the DuPage Veterans Foundation, was a fundraiser for Honor Flight Chicago, an organization that flies WWII veterans to Washington, D.C. for a day of honor and reflection at the various war memorials.

After spending several hours again among these great men and women, you still notice the sense of pride and patriotism that has remained deeply ingrained in them, even though for some, five and six decades have passed since they returned stateside from their tours of duty. Hearing some of their stories and witnessing the camaraderie of these former warriors left me with a deep sense of awe and gratitude for their strength, bravery, and sacrifice. Current members of our military proudly carry on that tradition of **“service to country”** all around the world today.

I speak of my nephew every year, Sergeant Edward Thomas Pineda, West Chicago Graduate, class of 2003 and will continue to mention him every year until he has completed his service to his Country.

He has served six tours so far.
-One in Iraq
-Five Tours in Afghanistan
And will again be leaving shortly for another deployment somewhere abroad.

The proud soldier that he is, he has made the decision and sacrifice to defend this Country and to continue to give us the right to live freely.

Let's continue to pray that my Nephew and that this Generation make it home safely.

As the unofficial start of summer, let us never lose focus of what Memorial Day really means. It is not about beaches, picnics or auto races. It is a day to remember.

And that's why we're here today, gathered at the Soldiers and Sailors Monument in Oakwood Cemetery.

Let us remember. And let us pay it forward.

God bless our fallen heroes and their families; and may He watch over the men and women currently serving our great country. God bless the City of West Chicago and God bless the United States of America.

Thank you.