

*Speech delivered by American Legion member Ron Hessil
At Twin Lakes American Legion Post 544 Memorial Day
Ceremony, May 31, 2010*

Good morning fellow residents of Kenosha County.

Thursday March 18, 2010. Army Spc. Robert Rieckhoff, 26, died at 9:30 a.m. in Baghdad Iraq.

Robert had served two tours of duty in Iraq and one tour in Kuwait. He had been in the Army Reserves and the Army since he was 18 years old and enlisted just after graduating from Tremper High School.

I will not profess glory of battle or any other such hype. I will profess duty and sacrifice. [Our Fallen] show us all true duty and ultimate sacrifice.

I have no doubt that the instant Robert die, he was whisked to heaven on the wings of Angels and placed before the unapproachable light of Jesus, who himself said: "greater love hath no man, than a man lay down his life for his friends." John 15:13

The American Legion is proud of Robert 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 never 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.

In 1971 with the passage of the National Holiday Act; Memorial Day was designated as the last Monday of May. Creating a three day weekend. I believe this has caused many of the American public to forget why they are off work today. What I have seen is people see it and be advertised as a kick off to summer. I look at all the sale ad's that were in newspapers across the country Friday and

Sunday. Come in, Memorial Day sale, 3 days only, Kick off to the summer; get your party supplies now.

Get together to celebrate and have fun. But there is a real reason for today. We are not to celebrate the killing of Americans who gave up their lives so we can live here with the freedoms that we so richly enjoy today. But we are to pay memorial to them and remember them for the sacrifices and ultimate price they paid. It's not just the service member that did not come home that paid the price of freedom, it's the Spouse left behind, the child who will never have that parent to raise them and teach the life lessons. The Mother and Father who lost their child. Memorial Day is about the Military personnel who have embodied the words of oath they took when they first enlisted. The men and women of our Military are deserving of our thanks and respect for protecting our freedoms of this great country we live in. Every service member voluntarily signs a contract to this Country asking nothing in return knowing that the sacrifice could be their life.

I don't have to ask what Memorial Day is to you, because you would not be here if you didn't. In today's society I am afraid that many people don't know why they are off work today, or who they are supposed to pay memorial to.

I had the opportunity to take part in Memorial Day services at a United States Military Cemetery outside Luxembourg City, Luxembourg while stationed in Germany. During the World Wars the land that was captured was always turned back over the local Government, except land that was used

to bury our falling comrades. Many foreign dignitaries attended the services, in part to pay respect and thank us for what had been done for helping them achieve the freedoms once again that were taking away by others. Its always made me stop and think, thousands of Services members lay here, fighting for someone they don't even know, and knowing there family never got to lay there loved one to rest.

As we all know today, freedom is not free. So next time you see a flag draped coffin, remember that is some ones son, daughter, brother, sister, mother, father, husband, wife or friend. Stop Salute and say Thank you. **May your soul rest in peace.**

Sadly, none of the more than 1 million men and women who have died in service to this nation in wars and conflicts since 1775 can be replaced. Most were young – in the prime of their lives. All left a nation that is in their debt.

If you asked these heroes before they died how they would like to be honored, most would probably say “Take care of my family.”

The empty seat at the dinner table, the smaller gathering on Thanksgiving and the daughter who has no father to walk her down the wedding aisle are painful reminders that they are gone. We must continue to live up to President Lincoln's promise to not just care for him who shall have borne the battle, but for his widow and his orphan.

In the American Legion we do just that. Though our Legacy Scholarship fund, any Orphan from a Parent killed in action will have their College Education paid for. Remembering our fallen once a year is not enough. We must continue the legacy for which they died: the causes of democracy, decency and patriotism. The American Legion serves as a catalyst for these principles.

We breathe life into the Preamble of The American Legion Constitution which calls on us “to preserve the memories and incidents of our associations in the Great Wars.” While Memorial Day is intended to honor our fallen, we should not forget those who have pledged to make the same sacrifice if called upon – the young men and women still serving in Iraq, Afghanistan, the United States and in more than 130 foreign lands. We must continue to bear witness for those who never returned from the deserts of the Middle East, the jungles of Vietnam, the “Forgotten War” in Korea, the islands in the Pacific, and the European continent.

Just as these heroes were confident in their wartime leaders – we must remain confident and committed to ensure that our national leaders know that the sacrifice made by these young men and women was in pursuit of something they, too, knew to be important

America must remain the world’s beacon of freedom.

We must represent the aspiration and hope of millions of people, that through hard work and perseverance, anyone can succeed in this fair and just society.

So today, on this most sacred day, we pause to reflect on what has been given and sacrificed. Let us never forget. But let us also remember what resulted from these sacrifices. Let us remember the terrorist plots that were foiled and the killers that have been brought to justice because Americans were willing to pay the price. Let us remember the tyrannical regimes that have been toppled and the genocides that were stopped because Americans sacrificed life and limb.

Let us remember that without a U.S. military, the world would be a far more oppressive and darker place.

Freedom is not a gift. It is an earned benefit that was paid for by the blood of our heroes. From the Revolutionary War to the War on Terrorism, the sacrifices and caliber of America's fighting men and women have been nothing short of inspirational.

Robert is what we call a True Hero.

"...believe what you want. That is your right as Americans. But I am telling you, there are no heroes on any football fields, basketball courts or halls of government. There are honorable and decent people all over America. However, the heroes are on the battlefields of Iraq. Suffering and Dying that others might live, and live in Freedom. So

Americans can be free from terror and Iraqis free from oppression and tyranny.

Let us always remember them, Comrad, May your soul Rest in Peace.

Thank you for joining us today and may God bless America, rest us never forget.