

**Speech delivered at Loudoun County Courthouse to
Town of Leesburg and Loudoun County Citizens on
Memorial Day, May 31, 2021, by Col (Ret) Phil
Rusciolelli, Past Commander VFW Post 1177**

It is an honor to be with you all and to represent the many Veterans here with us, both in body and in spirit. This morning, I would like to take a few moments to reflect on three things that are symbolic of our great nation, one: our beautiful, patriotic, and generous community, two: the meaning and history of Memorial Day, and three: the resilience of our young men and women who stand guard today, at the gates of freedom.

Some years ago, I asked my loving wife, Barbara where she would like to live following our 32 years of nomadic military life. Without hesitation she said Leesburg, Virginia. My question was, in fact, rhetorical, since our two married daughters lived here in town, and our first grandchild was on the way. Twenty-one years and seven grandchildren later we cannot imagine a better decision, or a more beautiful place to call home.

Family, Church, Friends, Veterans, Rotarians, Knights of Columbus, and recently Leesburg Fire and Rescue, although Barbara says I cannot get on a

ladder. We have integrated as part of a community of people who give, sacrifice, serve and keep giving. Loudoun County and this Town have, a culture of service. It has never been more obvious than this past year during a pandemic when so many needed and so many people and organizations in Leesburg and Loudoun County were here with hands outspread to support; thousands of volunteers (many who this past month were recognized as outstanding Loudoun County volunteers). Organizations and people like, Loudoun Hunger Relief and Peter Burnett and Ampersand, and the many churches, civic, and veteran organizations that came to the rescue of citizens unable to cope with the financial stress imposed by the pandemic.

How great is it that here in our community, not steps from this very spot is the General George C Marshall Center, where lived a man responsible not only for successfully leading our country through a World War, but also in the peace that followed the war, dedicated his efforts to rebuilding a devastated world. Maybe, just maybe it is such a local magnificent example of service that helps lead so many of our citizens to answer basic volunteer challenges to serve their fellow citizens and support such diverse needs as hunger relief, social and

medical, and even, fire and rescue and police services.

Today, like many occasions in our community we take time to remember and reflect. I think back to twelve years ago when Doctor Pete Hilgartner and Pat Hugee before me helped resurrect with town leadership this Memorial Day ceremony. I wish also to recognize Joe May, Tom Horne, Dean Worschester, and Pete Coppolino, friends who have researched names at these monuments, in archives, and on gravestones in our community to perpetuate the history of heroes who have gone before us.

This is what Memorial Day is, remembering those who have given their all for the freedoms we in this United States cherish. We have this one day in 365 that has been dedicated to honor our fallen heroes: Today, Memorial Day, The Last Monday in May, a U.S. national holiday.

Originally known as Decoration Day, Memorial Day only became an official federal holiday in 1971. Many observe the day by visiting cemeteries or memorials, as we are doing this morning, placing flowers, wreaths, or flags, holding family gatherings, and participating in parades. Unofficially, Memorial Day marks the beginning of our summer.

The history of Memorial Day dates to the end of the Civil War, in the spring of 1865. That War claimed more lives than any conflict in United States history and necessitated establishment of our country's first national cemeteries.

By the late 1860s, Americans in various towns and cities had begun holding springtime tributes to the countless fallen soldiers of that war, decorating graves with flowers and reciting prayers.

Subsequently, the federal government declared Waterloo, New York, the official Birthplace of Memorial Day. But records tell us that one of the earliest Memorial Day commemorations was organized by a group of freed slaves in Charleston, South Carolina less than a month after the Confederacy surrendered at Appomattox.

Many of you can probably remember Memorial Day ceremonies of your youth. For me, it was in Bethel, Pennsylvania at the local Presbyterian church yard surrounded by gravestones and listening to the mayor or community leaders eulogize our local fallen war heroes. Such moments remain with us for a lifetime. Today, here, on these patriotic grounds, we continue, with our friends and family, the legacy of remembrance.

Today we lay wreaths of honor at Revolutionary, World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Afghan/Iraq War memorials and at placards containing the names of civil war dead. Not so long ago those whose names are on these stone monuments were living among us.

We also have memories that walk amongst us. You might say I am one such living memorial of a family hero, a Marine, my mother's youngest brother Philip who was killed in battle in the later days of World War Two, just two years before my birth. It will forever be an honor to be my Uncle Philip's namesake. Even so, it had its challenges growing up in an Italian family where my four aunts refused, out of a respect for their brother, to call me by my given name. Until my last aunt passed away at 96 years of age, and I was 60 years old, I was lovingly known as "sonny" to those dear ladies. This, I imagine, was their unique way of honoring their brother who they lost.

In many respects we are all memorials to the brave man and women who have gone before us, and who guaranteed the freedoms and opportunities offered in this great nation.

But there is work to be done. A few months ago, our nation dedicated a memorial to those who served in World War One, the “Forgotten War”, the War supposedly to “End all Wars”. Ninety-nine years ago, Loudoun County citizens also gathered on these hallowed grounds to dedicate a memorial to the Loudoun County “Dough boys” who had sacrificed their lives in that war. Yet in a strange state of mind some of those who served and died were recognized differently on that memorial plaque, merely because of the color of their skin. It therefore rests upon us to recognize the injustice and rectify the wrong. We applaud and thank our county leaders for initiating the restitution of the War World One memorial plaque by unifying the names of all heroes long gone but remembered this day. We look forward to the rededication of that plaque and memorial in the not-too-distant future.

Like many who served in Vietnam, I joined the military under the draft. Today however, our military is a volunteer force. A highly trained and technologically astute force.

During my career, I served with many great young military volunteers, who never ceased to impress me. An example of one of those soldiers was a young

sergeant I met late in my career. His name alludes me, but the incident never will.

I was the Defense Attaché in Skopje, Macedonia, and was escorting a visiting Congressional Delegation to a US security base on the Macedonian-Serbian border. As our helicopters landed near that base situated on a lonely mountain top, a young sergeant ran out to greet us. He led us through his base, briefing us all the while on his unit's security mission. At the end of the tour, the sergeant asked if there were any questions. A young freshman congressman who was with the delegation, raised his hand and asked, "Soldier, if you were in charge here, what is the one thing you would want to see changed?" Standing in the back of the group, I could see some distress on the faces of several general officers in the delegation, who were probably concerned for how the young sergeant might respond. The Young sergeant's reply was simple but impressed all those there that day. "Sir, I am in charge here" he said.

See, what that congressman, as well as others may not understand is the amount of responsibility placed in that young sergeant and many young military men and women like him: the responsibility to lead and safeguard our sons and daughters placed in their

command. The responsibility for millions of dollars of sophisticated equipment used to perform their missions. The responsibility to protect freedom and all it stands for. See, that sergeant and many other highly trained young men and women are out there every day serving our nation, in so many ways we cannot imagine.

Today, we thank God for the military men and women who served and are serving to protect our great nation, the men and women who safeguard our community, and the community volunteers who give from their heart to serve fellow citizens. Let us lift our prayers for fallen friends, family, and neighbors and those who continue to be affected by the pandemic. And finally, let us take time to reflect on the names of the many heroes on these monuments around us, who have made the ultimate sacrifice in securing our freedoms. Thank you,