

# **SOUTHCOM SPEECH TRANSCRIPT (as prepared)**

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First, a few statistics to ponder. There are twenty-five million living American veterans. Since General George Washington commanded the Continental Army forty-two million Americans have served the colors. A million have been killed in its defense. Another million and a half wounded. When most of us think about military cemeteries the first thought that comes to mind is “America’s Valhalla,” Arlington National Cemetery in northern Virginia, but there are many, many more across the United states. Most Americans also don’t know there are 24 American cemeteries maintained overseas with 125,000 graves of our fallen—61,000 in France alone—the result of two wars that saved Europe from horrors unimaginable to Americans today; unimaginable, that is, unless you were a veteran of that war who saw it all with their young eyes so those who were safe in America, and those of us yet unborn, would never have to. There are also memorials overseas to an additional 94,000 Americans who were lost at sea, or their remains never recovered from a thousand foreign battlefields. With all this service and loss we as Americans can be proud of the kind of people we are as we have fought not to conquer others but to defend ourselves. We have never enslaved any with whom we have fought... we possess no empire. On the contrary billions across the planet are today—and billions yet unborn—live free because Americans have fought and died, and, once peace achieved, we rebuilt the destroyed cities, economies, and societies of those who only days before were our enemies.

Memorial Day was established by Presidential Decree on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May 1868, and first observed later that month on the 30th when all of the graves at Arlington National Cemetery—Union and Confederate—were decorated with flowers and flags. It was only three years after our terrible Civil War that finally established what kind of nation we would be. A war in which 600,000 young Americans perished for the cause they held dearer than their own lives. For a century the day continued to mean visiting and decorating graves or town-square memorials to those who died serving our great nation, and celebrating with parades and civic events. Americans in the past kept the day quiet pausing to remember, at least for a little while, the kind of men and women that so willingly gave the last full measure. Of the immensity of the sacrifice they made for those who remained safe and protected at home. A hundred years on in the 1960s our Memorial Day remained the same and revolved mostly around the losses of two world wars and Korea. And while the millions of veterans of those terrible wars stood in quiet respect for a quarter of a million and more of their own their buddies killed in those wars and now long gone, they welcomed home the 50,000 dead—some their own sons and grandsons—who were fighting and dying in far off Vietnam.

The reality in the 60s was that we were surrounded by men, real men, who had gladly worn the country's cloth in wars against fascism and communism. The earliest memories we had as kids were of comic books and paper backs that honored the sacrifices of the super heroes of those conflicts. It was a time when the most violent games played by little boys was "army men" with toy guns, and back then they were not considered at risk to develop into murderous psychopaths. Or standing up and removing one's hat when the national anthem was played, or saying the pledge of allegiance and a

prayer to any God a young child worshiped at the beginning of every school day, was not too much trouble or considered offensive to someone else's sensitivities or seen as trampling on the rights of anyone. It was a time when names like Guadalcanal, Sicily, Tarawa, Salerno, Iwo Jima, Normandy, and the Hurtgen Forest were real to our dads. The terrible battles at the Chosen Reservoir and the Yalu River in Korea just as real to their younger brothers, and they all watched in reverence as their own sons battled in a thousand nameless jungle battles and in the skies over Vietnam. It was all so real to us then, Memorial Day was, and we knew without thinking and to our souls that we owed this country and our precious war dead a debt we could never repay.

We live in a very different world today, and as a people have indeed lost something of quality over the years. We don't always see that same selfless devotion to something bigger than self. Memorial Day today is more about a day off to take advantage of the big sales at the malls or car dealerships, or fighting the traffic to get a long weekend at the sea shore or lake side. But we should be ashamed of ourselves if we forget that as we enjoy the coming long weekend that we are today again at war, and a new Greatest Generation continues to fight and win against a merciless enemy on our behalf in Afghanistan and in other locations around the globe.

Like it or not America is engaged in a war today against an enemy that is savage, offers no quarter, whose only objectives are to either kill every one of us here in our homeland, or enslave us with a sick form of extremism that serves no God or purpose that decent and rational men and women could ever understand. Given the opportunity to do another 9/11, our vicious enemy would do it today, tomorrow and everyday thereafter. I don't know why they hate us, and I frankly don't care, but they do hate us and are driven

irrationally to our destruction. The best way to fight them is somewhere else, and for whatever reason they want to destroy our way of life we should all thank God we still have just enough young people in America today willing to take up the fight as our bravest and most committed have done from the earliest days of our nation. And I would be remiss if I failed to mention another kind of hero—our law enforcement professionals of every kind particularly the uniformed police, FBI, CIA and first responders of every sort who protect the nation and its citizens in this fight against those who would do us harm regardless of whether the attack is as destructive as 9/11, or as pointless as Boston.

If you know a member of your Armed Forces, and most Americans tragically do not, then you know what I am talking about. They have a look in their eye and a way of walking that marks them as warriors as good as any that have ever marched to the guns, but they are not born killers. They are, on the contrary, good and decent youngsters mostly from the neighborhoods of our cities, and small towns across America. Almost all are from “salt of the earth” working class homes and more often than not are the sons and daughters of cops and firemen, factory and service workers, farmers and the like. Kids who once delivered your papers, stocked shelves in the grocery store, played Little League baseball and pickup hockey in the local rink, and served Mass on Sunday morning. They are ordinary young people performing remarkable acts of bravery and selfless acts of devotion to a cause bigger than themselves. They could have all stayed in school, but chose to serve knowing full well a brutal war was in their future. They did not avoid the most basic and cherished responsibility of a citizen—to defend the nation and its people—on the contrary, they welcomed it. They are the best our country produces and have consciously put every American above their own self interest. They

are all heroes, and know and understand fear in a way that thankfully few Americans do. Like veterans throughout our history they are right now enduring things in our defense that will haunt them for the rest of their lives, but they are comforted that the vast majority their countrymen and women they have sworn to protect will never have to deal with memories so terrible.

Those in America's Armed forces today know the price of being the finest men and women this nation has to offer, and pay it they do every day. Five thousand two hundred and twenty two from all services have been killed in action since 9/11. Nearly 52,000 wounded—many terribly. Some will try to make them out to be victims, but they are not victims as they knew what they were about and were doing what they wanted to do. We who are serving, and have served, demand not to be categorized as victims. Those with less of a sense of service to the nation never understand it when strong and committed men and women stand tall and firm against evil, just as they can't begin to understand the price paid so they and their families can sleep safe and free at night. The protected never do. What the experts and commentators are missing, what they will also never understand, is the sense of commitment, joy, and honor, of serving the nation in its uniform. Every veteran and the loving families who supported them, and feared for them every day, however, do understand.

Memorial Day is not as much for the Gold Star families, but more for the nation and its citizens to remember. The families of the fallen need no reminder...they remember every day, all day....it never goes away. They remember every second of every day in the lives of their loved one until the instant they were informed of their deaths, and then run those memories through their minds and their hearts every second of

every day thereafter. The story of a Gold Star family starts in nearly the exact same way and most often with a knock on the door, in the early morning hours by a casualty officer who'd been sitting outside the house waiting anxiously for hours for the first lights to come on. He dreaded the mission he'd been assigned that day. He was not glad to be there, but he was privileged to be there as the duty is a sacred one. It is an honor to be called to do it. The minute the door opened and a family member sees him framed in the doorway they knew...they knew without being told...before he uttered his first words...they knew.

After that it varies a bit. Some collapse in grief and cover their faces screaming and striking out in panic and disbelief as images of a happy little boy or girl race thorough their minds. Others slam the door trying to somehow turn back the clock and make it go away. Most, however, simply invite the casualty officer in, offer a cup of coffee and sit quietly as the story of the death of someone so loved is related in words that don't seem to make any sense...are nearly impossible to comprehend. Every casualty call is a little different but in the end the result is the same: a family is brought to its knees in a grief that is unexpectedly physical in its impact on the body, unbearable to the mind, and agonizing to the heart...a grief that never goes away. Not even with the passage of time.

Then begins the waiting and the heartache seems to turn minutes to hours, and hours to days. The family waits because there is little left to do as the military with precision, and reverence, brings the remains of their cherished loved one home to the country they served...to rest in the good earth of the America they loved. They are now part of a legend that God willing will never end—our America. In past wars since the

birth of our Republic the burden of stopping such evil fell on the shoulders of an entire generation. Today the task is taken up by only 1% of America. They are men and women of character who believed in this country enough to put life and limb on the line without qualification, and without thought of personal gain.

Aside from everything else their families have endured over the loss of their loved one they can be proud of the decision to serve...of the commitment to defend their nation when they did not have to. Proud of their loved one who stepped forward when the vast majority never even consider it. Proud that by this one very personal decision—to serve a cause higher than themselves regardless of the outcome to them personally—their fallen loved one gave answer to two questions that have over the centuries defined the dedication of free and righteous men and women in the fight against wickedness: “If not me, who? If not now, when”?

If we did not have citizens willing to not only ask, but also to act on these questions, we would have lost in our struggle for independence in 1776. Slavery might never have been eradicated from our shores, and the rights of all Americans under the law might still be just a dream. The Nazis would have triumphed. The death camps never liberated and eliminated. Untold millions never saved from the gas chambers and furnaces. The cancer of communism responsible for the deaths of 100 million would never have been thrown onto the dust bin of history. And today the high tide of Islamic intolerance and extremism—an empire of hate that Osama bin Laden himself proclaimed would last forever—was counted in only days after 9/11 once our country woke up and took the fight to them on their home turf. That is the kind of men and women we remember on this Memorial Day...on every Memorial Day.

The comforting news to our countrymen who have decided to sit it out and watch in amazement from the sidelines at what these young heroes do every day for them in this war against our land and our values, is that they are as good as any who came before them in our history. As good as what their fathers and uncles were in Vietnam, and their grandfathers were in Korea and World War II.

I have been privileged to walk among some of these heroes in combat. I have seen them literally turn the intangibles of commitment, bravery, and selfless devotion, into real and meaningful action. In my three tours in this war as an infantry officer and commander I never saw one hesitate, or do anything other than lean into the fire and with no apparent fear of death or injury take the fight to our merciless enemies. Like the million who fell before them in America's past wars, the fallen we have come here to memorialize today unhesitatingly climbed into trucks or helicopters, or departed the wire on patrol, and did it as if they were born to it...were indestructible...were without fear. They also learned early as anyone who has truly experienced combat does, however, that fear is always with you. They also knew how random combat is, and how you have little control over whether you live or die.

They also knew what can happen to you—or just as importantly to your best friend or one of your men—in an instant. They'd seen it...its frightening ...horrible...but still they went out knowing full well it could happen to them. The fear is at times an all-consuming constant but that is what courage is, isn't it, pushing through the terror and completing the mission assigned regardless of how dangerous. They learn early, these kids we send out to fight the nation's battles, that fear is an instinct but courage is a decision and one they make day-after-day throughout their tours. It is unlikely their

loved ones had ever seen that in them when they were growing up, or when their dreamy eyed spouse said “I do” holding their hands and gazing into their eyes...but I saw it every day. Their families and friends likely did not know them as one of the bravest and most courageous and committed young people our society produces...but I can attest to it.

As terrifying as combat is when it starts, when the explosions and tracers are everywhere and there is no rational reason on this earth for a man or a woman to do anything but run away in horror or find a hole to hide in pray to God for it to stop—the fallen we remember here today did not. When no one would call them coward for cowering behind a wall or shivering in panic in a bunker slave to the most basic of all instincts—survival—none of them did. When the calls for the Corpsman or medic were shouted from the mouths of young kids who know they will soon be with their God—when seconds seem like hours and it all becomes slow motion and fast forward at the same time—and the only sensible act is stop, get down, save yourself—they never did.

And their families should know and hopefully take comfort in the fact that when they fell they were not alone. When they went, they were surrounded by the finest men and women on this earth—their buddies—who desperately tried to save their lives. They held their hands, and tried to comfort them, prayed with them, listened to all the little stories about their families and their homes...until they were gone. They were not alone and when the spirit left them and God in his infinite wisdom took them to his bosom, their military family lovingly sent them home. In this their last journey, they were never alone. At every stop along the way they were treated with the greatest reverence and deepest respect due a fallen hero until members of the service they proudly joined brought them to you.

In my hundreds of trips to military hospitals around the country since 2003 and the start of the war I've visited with thousands of grievously wounded American kids and their families. No matter how battered they were, no matter how many arms or legs they'd lost, their families thanked God they'd come home to them alive...but they also always very quietly asked me if it was worth it. I never tried to answer that question—I couldn't—it wasn't one of my boys lying in the hospital bed. I could never fathom the inner most thoughts of a parent who stood watch through the night at the bedside of someone they loved so much, who was so terribly wounded. Who was I to offer an opinion?

And in my dozens of conversations with families of the fallen at Dover, or at gravesides at Arlington, or at gathering's like this, I have been similarly asked if it was worth the life of someone they brought into the world, raised and nurtured so lovingly, and so much looked forward to seeing grow and find wonderful husbands and wives, and give them grandchildren to spoil. Again, I had no right to reply because as hard as I tried to understand what the immensity of their loss might be, and the depth of the sorrow in their heart, I knew it was impossible. My sense then was it is inconceivable for anyone to understand that has not had his own heart pierced with such sadness. I learned I was right.

Since the instant I received the news in the foyer of my own home from a casualty officer executing his sacred duty, until the day he was buried two weeks later, I asked myself the same question a million times over. I did not have to wait until I unexpectedly caught a glimpse of him in a picture at the house, or when a thought of an earlier time came to mind, or in a quiet and unguarded moment when his loss washed over me in emotions I still can't control. From the moment I had my turn standing in the door

looking into the glistening eyes of a casualty officer, and after that when I woke my wonderful wife and crushed her heart with the news, or while picking my wonderful daughter up off the floor where she worked, I desperately tried to convince myself that it was all for something...I worked so hard at believing his life was worth the sacrifice on the altar of America's freedom. But it all came to me the day we buried him in the sacred ground that is Arlington, at Section 60, Gravesite #9480, sitting next to his beautiful young wife, that it simply does not matter at all what we the living think. The only thing that matters is what he thought. That he had decided it was more important to be where he was that morning in the Sangin River Valley, Afghanistan, to be doing what he was doing with the Marines and Navy Doc he loved so much and led so well in what was at that time the most dangerous place on earth. In his mind—and in his heart—he had decided somewhere between the day he was born at 2130, 5 September 1985 and 0719, 9 November 2010, that it was worth it to him to risk everything—even his life—in the service of his country. So in spite of the terrible emptiness that is in a corner of my heart and I now know will be there until I see him again, and the corners of the hearts of everyone who ever knew him, we are proud...so very proud. Was it worth his life? It's not for me to say. He answered the question for me.

It has been my distinct honor to have had the opportunity to be with you here this weekend. In spite of our loss I am confident that our America, this experiment in democracy started just over two centuries ago, will forever remain the "land of the free and home of the brave" so long as we never run out of tough young Americans like ours who are willing to look beyond their own self interest and comfortable lives, and go into

the darkest and most dangerous places on earth to hunt down, and kill, those who would do us harm.

God Bless America, Ladies and Gentlemen, may all of our revered war dead rest, may we who loved them find peace and understanding in their sacrifice, and that the America that they so loved and protected, and gave their lives for, is forever worthy of their sacrifice. Of this I pray. *Semper*