



A TRIBUTE TO OUR FATHERS

*Presented by Martha T. Cummings
at a memorial presentation in
Philadelphia, June 6, 2007*

Standing in front of you, the veterans of World War II, members of the 297th Combat Engineers, and participants in the historic events of June 6, 1944, is truly one of the immense honors of my life, and I will do my best to pay proper tribute to those American soldiers—those who are here and those who have already left us—soldiers who helped to rescue our world.

As I gathered my thoughts to present to you today, I wished more than anything that my father, Joseph Francis Cummings, Jr., a proud veteran of World War II, could be here with us. But his passing in September 2005 rendered that wish unfulfilled. Soon after his death, I came to realize an inevitable fact of life—that our childhood wishes are often achievable and intend to lead us into the future—but our adulthood wishes are often impossible, as they seek to return us to the past. But return to the past is what we shall do today as we honor a noble, unflinching, unparalleled generation of Americans who together fought to return sanity to a European continent that in the 1930's and 1940's had witnessed or participated in the exchange of civilized behavior for unspeakable inhumanity.

I remember the precise moment I realized that the memory of D-Day lives just beneath a veteran's flesh: just under those eyelids, just inside those fingers, just below the surface of his mind. The memories, forever too profound to remove completely, come forth when the veteran closes his eyes to remember his wartime service—for it is underneath those eyelids that the veteran relives the cold of the English Channel, the weight of the Bangalore Torpedo, the fit of the helmet, and the deafening sound of battle and of silence.

For me, the awareness of wartime's constant presence came on June 6, 2004, 60 years to the day after the momentous landing. I went to visit my dad, a then 84 year-old veteran, and gently, ever-so-gently, asked if he would be willing to talk about the events of 60 years before. I had already learned that many D-Day veterans speak about that day in a manner that varies from nearly complete silence to cautious sharing, but I had not learned enough to anticipate what happened that afternoon.

In response to my question my father closed his eyes, bent his head back slightly, and paused for more than a moment. And then, in an instant, his whole body shuddered—from the top of his head through his narrowing shoulders through his weakened legs to the tips of his toes. And his eyes stayed closed as his head rocked back and forth in a kind of pained rhythm. I often wonder what my father saw and heard and smelled and touched when he closed his eyes that day. Of course I can wonder, but

I can never know. And that, I now understand, is the ultimate gift that World War II veterans gave to the citizens of the world and to the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren to come. You, as members of the 297th Combat Engineers, helped give us all the freedom to close our eyes and to fill our minds with images of our choosing, not images that were chosen for us. You soldiers, some mere children yourselves, by your very presence and your very willingness to strap on boots, a uniform, guns, grenades and a whole lot of moxie, gave us back home a chance to preserve and foster a most valuable element of human existence: an element we call innocence.

But in giving us the chance to preserve our innocence, veterans put on hold the hope of preserving theirs, and I wonder if that is what veterans see when they shudder underneath the shield of their eyelids. I wonder if they see that disappearance of innocence, both from those who lost their lives on the beaches of Normandy and from those who, through divine intervention or often just sheer good fortune, were allowed to leave with their hearts still pounding.

Time keeps moving forward, as it is wont to do, and since the last time you gathered many of your brothers have passed away, and many of their family members have gathered in places of worship across America to lay to rest yet another humble hero.

As family members of veterans, many of us certainly tried to anticipate the enormity of the tribute and the emotion of the moment when the

flag-draped coffin would enter the church, when the Star-Spangled Banner would ring out in homage, when the three-gun salute would echo in hometown graveyards, and when the spouse, eldest child or other loved one would receive the triangularly-folded flag and hear the surreal words of gratitude from the young soldier.

Like many things in life, however, anticipation falls short of truth, or as one family member put it, the preparation is like a raindrop and the reality is like a hurricane. In fact, the much-anticipated emotion of a veteran's final stand is dramatically outweighed by the reality of such an event, but equally dramatic is the total, nearly crushing pride that is felt when a congregation of mourners places hands over hearts and joins in the National Anthem to honor a soldier—who also happens to be your father, husband, grandfather, or brother—a loved one who helped to save the world.

Over the past several months, and in preparation for today, I have tried to understand and find a way to express the vastness of this pride. Each facet of your service, of course, elicits pride enough for a lifetime: your courage, your loyalty, your intelligence, honor, patience, fortitude, and grace under fire. Those accolades, I trust, you have heard before. But what I have come to realize after saying goodbye to my father for a final time is that my pride is as much about what you did during peacetime as it is about what you did during wartime. For when the guns of World War II quieted, and the evils of Nazism had been obliterated by the righteous stance of America and its allies, those who could, made

their way home. And once there, you waged a new kind of battle—one that required that you put the memories of World War II in a place far enough below the surface of your skin that they could be out of view but not out of reach. And time marched on. And you furthered your education or found spouses or carved out careers or raised children. And most remarkable of all, you found a way to keep moving forward, while never forgetting the past. And in the process, you kept the horrors of war to yourselves, or saved them for those select few who could truly understand, and by doing so, you inspired and molded another generation of innocence.

So, yes, as children of veterans, our collective pride is certainly about your courage, loyalty, honor, fortitude, and grace. But it is also about the fact that even though you saw what you saw on that momentous military morning in 1944, you still managed to tuck us into bed, still taught us how to ride bikes, still marveled at our first steps, still helped us with our math homework, still gave us piggy-back rides, still bounced us on your knees, still melted when we kissed you on your lips, and still managed to let us dance on your toes when the music played slowly.

Maybe that's because that is what you were actually fighting for on the beaches of Normandy. Maybe you were fighting for those moments—those that had already happened, and those that should be allowed to happen. And so I say to all veterans—to those here in this church and to those watching from another place—that is what helps to explain the vastness of our pride. That is what helps to

explain the vastness of our awe: that your humanity was not another victim of war's inhumanity.

I am aware that the veterans here today and those who have already passed know precisely what my father saw beneath his eyelids that day—because all of you have an understanding that transcends language. That is why this gathering is so important, because it gives you a chance to surround yourselves with those who understand; it gives you a chance to remember those who lived the same history; and it gives us, the daughters and sons, the nieces and nephews, the granddaughters and grandsons, a chance to express our unwavering gratitude for who you are and what you were willing to do. We know there will come a day, and we hope it is not for a long time, when this memorial service will be without veterans. But when that day comes, we also know that you will be having a different kind of reunion—a more complete reunion of the 297th Combat Engineers.

And when you're all together again, side-by-side, as you once were on the English Channel and on Omaha and Utah Beaches, please know that we as a nation, and we as children of America, will never, ever allow you to be forgotten. And when that message gets delivered, we hope that you will then close your eyes, and allow the space beneath your eyelids to be filled, in the ultimate act of freedom, with peaceful images of your own choosing—images that overflow with the kind of innocence that, so very long ago, you put on hold for yourselves so that we, your children, could be free.

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