

Editor's Note: This is the address Marine Master Sgt. (ret.) Jim Peterson of Fly Creek delivered on Memorial Day 2014 at the Cooperstown remembrance at the Soldiers & Sailors' Monument in front of the county courthouse.

Every year, on the final Monday in May, we observe Memorial Day. On this day we remember the members of our nation's military who have died while in the military service. We honor the soldiers, sailors, Marines and airmen who gave their lives to protect the rights and freedoms of people, not just in the United States, but all over the world.

The men and women we remember today fought, and died, to gain us freedom,

They fought, and died, to preserve the Union,

They fought, and died, to rid the world of tyranny,

They fought, and died, to protect democracy

and most recently,

They fought, and died, to keep terrorism away from our shores.

The idea of a memorial day was originally conceived following the Civil War when almost every town, village and hamlet had some of their young men buried in their cemeteries as a result of the conflict between the states.

600,000 Americans died in the Civil War

The large wars of the 20th century further reinforced the call for a day of remembrance.

116,000 Americans died in WWI

405,000 Americans died in WWII

Many of our dead from WWI and WWII lie in graves outside the US, in Europe, Africa and Asia. Large American Cemeteries are located near battlefields in France, Belgium, Tunisia and the Philippines. Never to return to this country, but not forgotten, their graves are tended to by the American Battle Monuments Commission.

36,000 Americans died in Korea

And 58,000 Americans died in the Vietnam War

Starting the latter half of the 20th century dramatic advances in technology, medicine & evacuation techniques made the battlefield more survivable. The helicopter in particular enabled the saving of many lives with a speedy medevac.

Injuries that would have been fatal in past conflicts are survivable on today's battlefield.

Many of our wounded warriors returned to us.

Still, 4,486 Americans died in Iraq and 2,322 Americans died in Afghanistan during the war on terror.

As the war in Afghanistan winds down, the focus of our military will shift. Deployments and training will pick up pace.

Just because we are not at war does not mean that our military men and women are out of harm's way. Not all of the deaths are a direct result of enemy action.

Disease, illness and accidents have accounted for many of the deaths.

Our forward deployed troops are often the first responders to disasters throughout the world. They are often exposed to danger and disease when they enter these areas to save lives.

The rigors of training to defend our country also take their toll.

Every year heart attacks, heat stroke, aircraft crashes and live fire accidents claim the lives of some of our service members.

No one forces today's military men and women to endure these hardships.

The most recent draft ended in 1973. We have had an all-volunteer force for more than 40 years.

Some of our fighting men and women aren't even U.S. citizens. They join our military as way to become citizens of our great country.

Currently, less than one half of one percent of the US population serves on Active Duty.

As a result many Americans don't know someone who has died while in service to the country.

The burden of sacrifice for our freedom falls on an ever smaller percentage of our society.

The largest share of this burden is borne by the families of the fallen. Those who have opened their front doors to find a uniformed service member bearing the horrible news of the death of their loved one. For these Gold Star families EVERY DAY is a day of remembrance.

In closing, I want to remind you that a National Moment of Remembrance takes place at 3 PM on each Memorial Day. Please pause whatever you are doing at 3 o'clock today and observe a moment of silence to remember and honor those that have died in service to our country.

Thank you.