



**REMARKS ON THE OCCASION OF
MEMORIAL DAY 2018**

FISHKILL RURAL CEMETERY

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11:00 am ~ MAY 28, 2018

Ladies and gentlemen, families, distinguished visitors, thank you for assembling here today.

And thank you for allowing me to honor the men and women who gave their lives for our freedom, on this sacred day and in this sacred place.

Among the reasons I am humbled today...is that I am not a veteran, I am a historian. But it is for this historian's perspective that I have been asked to speak. It is how I offer my gratitude, with you, to the men and women we recognize on Memorial Day.

We might think about all the ceremonies or individual moments of reflection across our country today, indeed across the world. But I ask you to think also about all the ceremonies or individual moments of reflection across time...in the past, and in the future.

It may seem odd for a historian to ask you to consider the future, but we take a long view! And what we do and say today is the lynchpin between the past generations and the future generations. There can be no weak link in the chain, or gap in translation if want certain principles and institutions to endure.

What is obvious when you take the long view is this: **what we remember is a choice.** What we choose to remember, what we memorialize is very much a choice.

Think of how easy it is to forget the most basic and simple things! How do we remember those things we deem most fundamental, and essential? Across not just generations but centuries? Memorial Day is one of the most important ways.

What could be a more profound lesson, or valuable lesson, that the lesson taught by men and women, of successive generations, who are each so principled, so motivated, so driven, so self-less as to defend the freedoms, we enjoy today, with their lives.

The most obvious lesson, and mark of respect, may be to remember that these freedoms are costly and hard-won. The costs born are not just today, but are costs born in days and battles past, and surely in days and battles to come.

What we choose to remember, and by association what we allow to recede into the mist of time, forgotten through neglect, or through conscience avoidance ~ reveals our very profound values as a society, and as individuals.

Given the 100th anniversary of the end of fighting in World War One this year, which prompted our declaring 2018 “The Year of the Veteran,” I’d like to focus on that moment.

100 years ago this year, in 1918, the fighting of what was then called the World War ceased, November 11, 1918. War was declared by the US on Germany only the prior year in April 1917. For what by today’s standards might seem like a relatively short war, the brutality of the war was unprecedented. In addition to technical developments that enlarged the scale and destructive power of bombs, introduced tanks, and airplanes, the introduction of poison gas warfare was also introduced.

In this cemetery lies a man who died not on the battlefield, but died two years after coming home struggling, in the end unsuccessfully, against the scars of being gassed, as it was called. Raymond Van Voohris died and was buried here January 1921.

120,000 Americans died in that war, approximately 120 of those who died were from Dutchess County.

We often find it hard to see World War One, given the scale and more recent World War Two. And the Great Depression which preceded it.

But there are no doubt people in this audience today, I am one, who remembers veterans of the so-called “World War” (it had no number then as it was described as *the war to end all war*). WWI veterans like my grandfather, Harry, and his brother, Bill Jeffway, who perhaps left us with words, or mementoes so that we would not forget, like the dog tags Uncle Bill gave me and I carry in my pocket today.

I would like to especially remember their stories today, but in the context of, and out of respect for, all veterans of all time.

The fallen of WWI rest in many places. And all have earned our remembrance. I would like to mention a few.

General Pershing, like former President Theodore Roosevelt who lost a son in France during the war, believed those lost should be buried where they fell. Over two dozen Dutchess County *boys*, as they were called, rest in American cemeteries in France.

One of them is Edward Wolff.

The “Wolff” of the Vail-Wolf VFW on Violet Street in Poughkeepsie refers to Lieutenant Edward J Wolf, Jr.

Born in Poughkeepsie of a family of moderate means, Lieutenant Wolff won a coveted and highly contested place at West Point. His graduation was accelerated so he could go quickly and directly to combat role in France in May 1918. He was killed August 16, 1918. His parents received a letter from their son's friend and comrade who saw him lose his life just feet away and shared his condolences. But the parents had not been notified of their son's death by the government, or any other way. There were two weeks of confusion, including speculation he was not killed. Having died in 1918, it would not be until 1931 that his mother, on a government-sponsored "Gold Star Mother" trip would visit his grave.

He was, like so many in the area, a descendant of German heritage, he lies buried 300 miles west of his paternal grandfather's birthplace in Germany. The paternal grandfather rests here in Dutchess County.

Another who is buried at an American Cemetery in France is David Clark. An African American, born in Virginia, who like so many came north for work. He was sometimes a chauffeur, often an itinerant farm hand, at the time of enlistment in the town of Milan, at a farm down the street from my home.

John Young of Poughkeepsie was 20 years old when he was killed in action in France. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery. Although Young Street in Poughkeepsie, near Vassar Medical Center is named for him, many people may not realize that is why. The original idea called for streets so named for war dead would have a gold star, I still think that is a good idea.

In Millbrook, a Tribute Garden was started, and trees are there to remind us of lives lost.

In Rhinebeck, a stunning statue of a doughboy in uniform, in battle, calls us to remember the Rhinebeck lost.

And of course here, these veterans rest nearby.

The profoundly sad reminder that the World War of a century ago was not the end of war as hoped, is reflected in the side by side grave of father and son, **PFC Samuel H Phillis who served in the Army in WWI and his son Machinist Mate 3rd Class Samuel B Philips** who served in the Navy in WWII.

National Guard Lieutenant Colonel Robert W Maloney served in both WWI and WWII, having won the Silver Star for valor, and is buried beside his son, **CPT Robert W Maloney, Jr** who served in the Army in WWII.

Jesse E Slater was killed in action in France in 1918. He served in Co. H, 305th Infantry in the 77th Division. His name still resonates in the Slater Chemical Fire Company that serves Glenham.

Another very special group are the nurses. There are two army nurses from WWI interred here. **Maude E Martin and Graced Lord.**

In summary I would like to repeat the words spoken exactly 100 years ago, spoken here in Dutchess County on Memorial Day, 1918. They are the words of Arthur S. Tomkins, a New York State Supreme Court Justice and US Congressman.

You will hear Tomkins speak of gratitude expressed from his century (the early 1900's or 20th century) to those of the prior century (the mid 1800's or 19th century ~ as veterans of the Civil War are in his audience that day). He speaks just as the world war is about to ramp up to its deadliest scale and its outcome is uncertain. These are Justice Tompkins words from Memorial Day exactly a century ago:

This day with its sacred associations and blessed memories will inspire our hearts with gratitude for the service and the sacrifice of the men and women for whom memorial day is set apart. It should strengthen our patriotism. It should lead to a re-consecration and to a rededication of ourselves for the preservation of our institutions. These men saved the life of this nation in its most critical hour. They made America the ark of Freedom, and now the nation they continued has become the hope and promise of the world.

We emerged from that conflict with a national life more robust, a national union more secure, and a national piece more enduring.

In the name of the country you have saved. In the name of the Constitution which you defended. In the name of the government and civilization you placed upon a firm foundation, we of the 20th Century who are enjoying the fruits of your victory warmly and affectionately thank you.

Again we are engaged in a great war to see whether a nation dedicated to the principles of freedom and equality of opportunity can endure. We are fighting now to save our liberty for which the Revolutionary

patriots pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor, and for which you men gave the last full measure of devotion.

This is the high and noble purpose for which we contend, a purpose in harmony with all our history. We are the beneficiaries of the past and the trustees of the future, bound to hand down to our children untarnished, the rich heritage bequeathed to us by our forefathers.

[end tomkins quote - pause]

I'd like to close with these thoughts. *What we remember and memorialize **is a choice** for each generation.*

The voices and actions of those in the past can be heard here today. If we listen. History speaks. If we listen.

We can most honor these men and women by remembering, not just today, but every day, and having that remembrance inform our actions. This surely is the best way to speak to future generations. The combination of our words and our actions speak to the future.

Allow me to say, in the words spoken a century ago,

To those engaged in World War One: In the name of the country you have saved. In the name of the Constitution which you defended. In the name of the government and civilization you placed upon a firm foundation, we of the 21st Century who are enjoying the fruits of your victory warmly and affectionately thank you.

And to all those who are willing to give, or have given their lives, may we remember the words of a century ago:

We are the beneficiaries of the past and the trustees of the future, bound to hand down to our children untarnished, the rich heritage bequeathed to us by our forefathers.

Front cover photo: Eva Wolff, Gold Star Mother
Pilgrimage to France, 1931, at the grave of her son,
Lt. Edward Wolff, Jr., killed in action 1918.