

American Legion Evanston Post 42 100th Year Celebration

Sunday, September 22, 2019

By Stephen Howard Hagerty, Mayor City of Evanston

Good evening. It's my honor to be with you tonight as we celebrate the 100th anniversary of American Legion Evanston Post 42.

As mayor, I have the pleasure of celebrating milestones of many great organizations in our City, but tonight stands out. Not just for the length of time Post 42 has served our community, but for the people they serve -- our veterans.

I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge all of the veterans here with us this evening. If you've served our country as a member of the military, please stand or raise your hand. Let's give them a round of applause.

Thank you for your service.

I also want to acknowledge everyone else under the tent this evening for coming out to support Post 42 as they kick off their next century in Evanston.

As you all know, Post 42 is much more than a place to listen to some of the finest bluegrass music in the country, or to enjoy a beer or three on the patio—although it's a great place to do either of those things. I've done them both.

Post 42 is a place where service to the community and country comes before self. It's a place where the principles of democracy, freedom and justice are safeguarded and transmitted to future generations. It's a place where bonds are formed, memories are preserved, and stories are shared.

If you'll indulge me, tonight I'd like to share a few stories of my own. As I do, I'd like you to reflect on your family and those who served this country in the military.

The idea of framing this speech with stories came to me last Wednesday when I was walking to my gate at Reagan National Airport in Washington, DC. It was like any other travel day, until it wasn't. As I approached the gate, off in the distance I heard patriotic music playing [Queue 'God Bless American' on the piano]. Wondering what was going I accelerated my pace. Before I knew it I was among a parade line of hundreds of travelers waiting to see who was deplaning at Gate 42.

Then the doors opened. One-by-one off walked veterans of World War II, the Korean War, and Vietnam many in wheelchairs as hundreds of people lined the airport smiling at them, waving to them, saluting them, and shaking their hands. It was a chill inducing moment.

I soon learned that this was an honor flight. An organization supported by the airlines, other businesses, and citizens to fly veterans to Washington, DC to visit their respective memorial.

Standing there, watching these veterans walk and wheel by was a powerful reminder that what we have in this country – as messy as it may seem at times – is due to the extraordinary sacrifice and service of millions of men and women who put the country before themselves. It was a touching and spontaneous tribute to witness and one that I hope you all will have the opportunity to see during your lifetime.

Tonight is an equally fitting tribute to this American Legion Post and those who have served this country in this room. So onto the stories.

The first story is about Service.

My paternal grandfather, Jack, was 28 years old, married with a young daughter, when he was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1943, two years before WWII ended.

Jack was sent to Fort Blanding in Starke, Florida. At 28, he was older than most of the young recruits there, and he stood out for his seriousness and maturity. He quickly rose to the rank of Sergeant.

I can only imagine how scared he must have been knowing that he would soon be sent to Europe. Then something unusual happened. My grandfather's unit was sent to Europe, but his orders were to stay at Fort Blanding to train other soldiers. You see, my grandfather, a young man from Boston who had never fired a gun before being drafted, was, unbeknownst to him, a highly skilled marksman. Combined with his serious and mature demeanor, the Army opted to keep him stateside to train other soldiers on marksmanship. I'm sure my grandfather was relieved, but his marksmanship training of other soldiers came to an end when the war in Europe ended.

Like many soldiers he was given a transfer and a bus ticket to California to train for the impending invasion of Japan, an invasion that was estimated to result in the loss of hundreds of thousands of US soldiers and millions of lives.

Now a father of two, he sold his bus ticket, sent the money home to his family, and instead hitchhiked from Florida to California.

Not long after my grandfather arrived in California though, Harry Truman made the monumental and undoubtedly excruciating decision to drop the atomic bombs, bluff that we had more bombs, and obtained a full and complete Japanese surrender, arguably saving countless American and Japanese lives.

I'm sure my grandfather never envisioned leaving his young family, getting assigned to train soldiers instead of seeing combat, and ultimately avoiding the invasion of Japan due to the invention and use of the atomic bomb. But, like so many others under this tent – including the relatives I've asked each of you to think about - he answered the call of service and had faith that his country would make every effort to prevail.

The second story is about Sacrifice.

We all need to sacrifice to have the life we cherish. I mean that both personally and as a nation. There are millions of names on memorials around this country from the revolutionary war to the civil war to the World Wars to Vietnam to the Iraq and Afghanistan conflict who have made the ultimate sacrifice so that we can govern ourselves and live in peace.

Each name on a monument has a story of sacrifice. And it's not just their sacrifice but the sacrifice of entire families.

In 1942, three years before the end of WW II, a young man enlisted in the Army.

He was 25 years old. He was the oldest child and had two siblings. He was recently married.

This soldier was assigned to the Fourth Armored Division, under the command of Major General John Shirley Wood. His Division trained in the mountains of Tennessee and then the Mojave Desert before heading to Massachusetts for winter training in the fall and early winter of 1943. On December 29, 1943, four days after Christmas, this young soldier and his Division set off for England to commence training for the invasion of Normandy. Ten days after his Division departed his daughter, my mom, was born.

After training in England for six months, the 4th Armored Division landed at Utah Beach on July 11th, a month after the initial Normandy landings. A week later his Division entered combat.

My grandfather's job: To stand on the shoulders of another soldier and stick his head out of the tank to obtain situational awareness. Talk about drawing the short straw.

Two months later, on September 27th, Howard Edgecombe, a 28-year old enlisted soldier, was shot and killed doing his job and serving our country.

My grandfather never held his daughter. My mom never had a father. My grandmother never remarried despite being proposed to by three different men. The pain of that loss was generational. Yet, they weren't alone. Approximately 417,000 other U.S. soldiers died in WWII and, like my grandfather, never realized their life's plans. Let that sink in.

Today, my maternal grandfather's photo sits prominently on my desk. I brought it with me today because it seemed the right thing to do. I've asked Commander James Brusek to hold it up.

This photo, which sat in Howard's parents living room, was passed on to me in its original leather bound frame after the passing of his sister my beloved Great Aunt Charlotte. It is one of my most prized possessions. I can't

help look at it and wonder what his life would have been had he not been killed in WW II. I wonder what my life would have been had we had a major war during my time on this earth. It's worth contemplation by all of us younger people under this tent this evening.

The final story is about Honor.

Over the last year, I had the opportunity to work with Post 42 to update the criteria governing the names listed on our Veterans Memorial in Fountain Square.

The conversation began nearly a decade ago when the family of Captain Matthew Hays-Freeman approached the City and asked that his name be added to our previous Fountain Square Veterans Memorial.

Matthew, a graduate of the US Naval Academy, died at the age of 29 serving our country in Afghanistan in 2009. Although Matthew spent summers with his father in his own bedroom, swimming at Evanston beaches, and marching down Central Street in our 4th of July parade, he didn't meet the criteria to be listed, as his home of record was Richmond Hill, Georgia, not Evanston, Illinois. You see, Matthew's parents divorced when he was young with his mom remarrying and

settling in Richmond Hill and his father remarrying and remaining in Evanston.

Matthew's family asked that his name be added to Evanston's memorial, to provide them with a place to honor their son without having to board a plane.

The recent renovation of Fountain Square gave us an opportunity to do that. After speaking with veterans in Evanston and beyond and talking with the former Secretary of the Navy, Sean O'Keefe, the City and Post 42 worked together to update the criteria governing our memorial wall, paving the way for more Evanstonians like Matthew to be honored, and giving more families a nearby place to honor them.

Now, fallen heroes like Matthew who lived in Evanston for at least five years, or who spent time in Evanston and have parents or guardians who've lived here for 10 years or more, can be honored on our wall.

One of the most personally satisfying Monday meetings I've had as Mayor is when the Council unanimously approved those changes, which were also supported by Congresswoman Schakowsky and Commissioner Larry Suffredin. These changes would not have gone through had it not been for the willingness of American Legion Post 42 to work with the City to update these procedures

and the persistent advocacy of Mike Roche and Kenny Suchar.

[Queue 'God Bless America' on the piano] I share these stories of service, sacrifice and honor because these are the same stories shared at Post 42 and at American Legion posts across the country. Stories of people serving their nation. Stories of selflessness and sacrifice. Stories honoring others who've served. Woven together, these stories make up the fabric of our great nation.

For the last 100 years, American Legion Evanston Post 42 has strengthened that fabric by being the place to share these stories. By holding ceremonies every Memorial Day and Veterans Day at Fountain Square. By working with boy scouts to plant flags on the graves of fallen soldiers. By serving hot meals to veterans from Lovell Hospital on Thanksgiving. By giving veterans, like my late grandfather, Jack, a place to gather, converse and remember. And by honoring those who've fallen, like my grandfather, Howard, and Captain Hays-Freeman.

Tonight, on behalf of the City of Evanston, it is my distinct honor to congratulate and thank you for a century of service, companionship, and camaraderie.

Together, your stories tell the story of our great nation. And what an amazing story that is.