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Memorial Day 2019, 27 May 2019
Garnett Cemetery, Anderson County, Garnett, KS
Sgt. Jeffrey S. Mersman Memorial VFW Post 6397

Welcome ladies and gentlemen to what is our Nation's most sacred day, Memorial Day, a day in which we gather to pause, reflect, and honor those who made the ultimate sacrifice. Since 1868, Americans have gathered at cemeteries to pay their respects. This is not just a day for fellow members of the armed forces, the Navy, Marines, Army, Air Force, Coast Guard, and Merchant Marines, to remember their own fallen brothers and sisters in arms, but for all Americans to fully appreciate the human sacrifices made to secure freedom and peace, these heroes that raised their right hand and swore to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. I want to tell you a story of three such heroes I knew.

It was a sunny Tuesday morning when I arrived to my high school, James W. Robinson, Jr. (named in honor after a Vietnam War Medal of Honor recipient from Virginia who was fatally wounded under heroic circumstances), when during second hour at the start of band class at 935, my conductor, who usually tells a joke at the start of class, took the podium with a stone-cold face and said, "there is no punch line to this, there have been airplanes that hit the world trade center.... would you like me to turn on the TV?" The class said yes and the glow of the large CRT TV began to grow until we saw what did not look like the New York City skyline. Confused, we stared intently at an in descript skyline with a lot of smoke and haze in the air. Eventually the camera panned down at a heavily damaged side of the Pentagon. The room filled with shock and panic, for our school is located in the center of Fairfax County, Virginia, a county that claims home to many Pentagon military and civilians. For one of my friends, Cassie Johnson, her father would not return home that night. LTC Dennis M. Johnson, described as a person of quiet demeanor, who earned the honor, respect and dignity of all those he encountered, left behind a wife of 21 years of marriage and two daughters. Our world changed that day.

That coming summer I entered the United States Military Academy Preparatory School in Fort Monmouth, NJ. It was a year of dedication and hard work with the memory of LTC Johnson as a foundation. I would then enter West Point with the Class of 2007 on Reception Day: June 30th 2003. On this day I picked up my duffle bag and scurried around the hallowed areas inside West Point to the sounds of yelling upperclassman. As I turned a corner, I came upon the scene of a short, fiery female African American cadet sergeant quickly spouting off the four responses to a line of new cadets, "Your four responses are 'Yes, Sir/Ma'am,' 'No, Sir/Ma'am,' 'No excuse,

Sir/Ma'am,' 'Sir/Ma'am, I do not understand.'" I felt bad for whoever would have her as their squad leader. Well fate would have it that Cadet Sergeant Emily T. Perez, Class of 2005, would be my phase one squad leader. She would go on to grow and mentor her squad into an amazing and cohesive team. Eventually Cadet Perez became the Corps of Cadets Brigade Command Sergeant Major, the first female minority to hold the position and she did so with grace and honor. She commissioned into the Medical Service Corps as a 2LT and served in Iraq where she was mortally wounded in an IED attack on her convoy in Al Kifl on 12 September, 2006; making her the first female African-American officer in US history to die in combat. I found out about her death two days later after just receiving laser eye surgery. I am not sure which hurt worst, the pain in my eyes from the surgery or mourning Emily's death that made my eyes continue to hurt. Between her death and the many others that year we recognized within the Corps of Cadets during breakfast in the mess hall standing at attention listening to the announcer quietly say, "It is with great regret that I announce the death of....," followed by panicked shrieks from fellow cadets as those announced were former upperclassmen that went to class with us, that played sports with us, that mentored us.

In May 2011 I deployed with the rest of 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division to Iraq. It was an Iraq I knew Emily Perez would be proud to see. One that saw the most stability and security since our 2003 invasion. It was a much different place than the Afghanistan I experienced from 2009 to 2010. Our mission within the 2nd Battalion 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment was to advise and assist the 7th and 9th Iraqi Armies in what are termed as security cooperation operations. With only three weeks left in the deployment, our battalion experienced our only loss, SPC David Hickman, who would become the last casualty of the Iraq War on 14 November, 2011 due to an IED that struck his convoy. It was hard for us to take and even harder for those combat medics that could not save his life. He, like 2LT Perez, LTC Johnson, and 7500 other Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, Airmen, and Coast Guardsmen in the post 9/11 era died in the selfless service to their country. A service in which they volunteered fully aware of the dangers.

Here in the Garnett Cemetery we are in the presence of more than 300 heroes represented by more than 300 American flags. I encourage all gathered here to view each of their graves and reflect on their great sacrifice. They died here in America during the Civil War, and they died in far-away lands. Understand that freedom is not free. There is a cost. The worse thing we can do is to forget this fact and forget their stories and memories that live in us. May God continue to Bless this country and those that selflessly sacrificed their lives for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and also for freedom and equality for all.