

**The
American
Legion**



For God and Country

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VETERANS DAY SPEECH 2016

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Carl Johnson's life matters. A 90-year-old veteran in Virginia, Carl was the last Tuskegee Airman to graduate from the famed school that produced so many heroic African American aviators.

According to a recent article in the Washington Post, the U.S. Army issued Carl a train ticket for a Pullman sleeping car so he could get from Texas to Alabama for his military training in 1946.

Carl recalled being told by the station manager that he and his fellow black soldiers were not allowed to use the Pullman. "You have to go in coach," they were ordered.

Threatened with jail if they resisted, the soldiers rode for 24 hours and were denied the use of the train's dining car as well.

Despite the indignities, Carl would continue to treat his country better than many of his fellow citizens treated him.

Carl would extend his military service for another three decades, serving in the Korean and Vietnam Wars. He would earn a Distinguished Flying Cross and 10 Air Medals and retire as a colonel.

Air Force Staff Sergeant Brian McElroy and Tech Sergeant Jason L. Norton were military police officers. Unfortunately, they are unable to extend their military service. Their lives were tragically taken.

Assigned to the 3rd Security Forces Squadron, Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska, Sergeants McElroy and Norton made the supreme sacrifice when their vehicle struck an IED while on patrol near Taji, Iraq on January 22, 2006.

"Brian always made us laugh and he always knew when to jump into a conversation to make us laugh even more. He was a family man and really enjoyed talking to his wife and kids. His mother gave him a gold cross that he always wore around his neck to remind him to never lose his faith," Staff Sergeant Richard Cleary said during his memorial service.

"He was the best father in the world and I said that before anything happened," Cristina Norton said of her husband, Jason.

The two fallen veterans share the same coffin and headstone because their remains were intermingled from the blast and unidentifiable, according to an Arlington Cemetery spokeswoman.

But their character is easy to identify. Just look up the word "Hero."

When then-Governor Ronald Reagan introduced returning POW John McCain at a speaking engagement in 1974, the future president asked, “Where do we find such men?”

He was speaking of many veterans, when he answered, “We find them in our streets, in the offices, the shops and the working places of our country and on the farms.”

In other words, President Reagan was referring to ordinary people accomplishing extraordinary things.

And it isn't just the men.

Grace Murray of New York was a curious child. At the age of 7, she dismantled an alarm clock just to see how it worked. Later, she became one of the first programmers of the Harvard Mark I Computer and would invent the computer language known as COBOL.

The world was fortunate to benefit from the brilliant mind of the woman known by friends and admirers as “Amazing Grace,” and by the U.S. Navy as Rear Admiral Grace Hopper.

Although she left us in 1992, we can emphatically say that the world is a better and smarter place because of Admiral Grace Hopper.

Veterans come in all shapes and sizes. Young and old - rich and poor - black and white - and nearly every category in between, they are men and women who served or still serve America.

And their families are diverse as well. We need to remember the wives who briefly but anxiously dreaded every doorbell ring or telephone call as their husbands witnessed unspeakable horrors while fighting in hard to pronounce villages that most Americans could never find on a map. We need to remember the modern military families, who deal with frequent address changes, interrupted employment by spouses and a disproportionate sharing of parental responsibilities.

For what they do for us, military families should also be honored on Veterans Day.

While their numbers are decreasing, too many veterans are still homeless. As recently as 2014, an estimated 50,000 homeless veterans were identified in communities around the nation. That is roughly the population of Galveston, Texas.

And, let us remember the estimated 20 veterans-a-day, who commit suicide and that approximately 20 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have experienced Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Veterans still face long wait times to use many VA facilities and the care, while often good, still needs to be worthy of the veterans who served this great nation.

We should frequently remind employers that veterans have been tested under pressure, have completed unique training and have displayed the leadership qualities that would benefit almost any organization.

Hiring veterans is not just a way to show gratitude, it is simply smart business.

Veterans Day is an important but symbolic way of saying thanks. But we should insist that our elected officials produce meaningful laws and public policies that will enhance the quality of life for veterans and their families.

The American Legion is dedicated to remembering the legacy of all veterans because what these men and women have done for us, matters to America. It matters to the people overseas who were liberated from tyranny due to the sacrifices of our military members.

From defeating Communism, Fascism and Imperialism, to liberating slaves, keeping the peace during the Cold War and battling terrorism today, veterans have accomplished remarkable things throughout our nation's history.

Ladies and gentlemen, Veterans have preserved the country that we all love so much.

Thank you again for allowing me to speak on behalf of our nation's veterans. God bless you and God Bless our nation's veterans.

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