

## *Dave Milidonis*

**Director National Veterans Freedom Park  
Featured Speaker at Memorial Day Service  
Hillcrest Cemetery, Cary, NC May 26, 2008**



Thank you. It's hard for me to imagine, but; nineteen years ago, I wore the uniform of a US Army Infantry officer for the last time, and before that, 39 years ago I put on the uniform of a US Army Private for the first time. As long ago as that was, I can still *remember* each day as if it were happening right now. So, I became a veteran 39 years ago, but; much earlier than that I learned how much this special day, this Memorial Day, meant to the veterans in my family; my father, my uncles and my grandfather.

Today, however; I want to take you further back in time. I want you to close your eyes and try to imagine yourselves on a day such as this, 140 years ago.

“Nothing in William Henry Christman's brief life suggested that in death he would become a singular figure in American history...He enlisted in the US Army on March 5, 1864, for a \$60 cash bounty and a \$300 promissory note from his government. The muster rolls of the 67<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Infantry Regiment recorded that he was 5' 7 1/2" tall, with sand hair, gray eyes, and a florid complexion..four weeks later, young Christman was hospital-

ized for measles.

He grew sicker and on May 1<sup>st</sup>

was admitted to Lincoln General Hospital, a mile east of the Capital in Washington, D.C. There, in Ward 19, on Wednesday, May 11<sup>th</sup>, he died of peritonitis. With the Civil War now in its third sanguinary year, Christman's body was among all too many bodies overwhelming the nation's capital. Every steamer up the Potomac River carried dead soldiers from Virginia battlefields, sheeted forms laid across the bows. Hospitals – often converted churches, public halls, or private mansions – ran out of burial space; more than 5,000 graves filled the Soldier's Home cemetery alone. In desperate need of an expedient solution, Army quartermasters on May 13, 1864, trundled William Christman's remains to a new burial ground that had been identified above the south bank of the Potomac on the confiscated estate of the Confederate commander, Robert E. Lee. The place was called Arlington.” Christman was the first. These excerpts came from the book, *Where Valor Rests*, about Arlington National Cemetery, in an essay written by Rick Atkinson.

William Christman was the first Union soldier buried at Arlington, and that week alone he was followed by 14 more of the war's dead. By the end of the war, some 16,000 graves laid at Arlington. Several years later, on May 30, 1868, in the first major event ever scheduled at Arlington, the first Decoration Day – now called Memorial Day – was held. President Andrew Johnson gave all federal workers the day off “for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades.” Today Arlington has tripled in size from the original 200 acres, with more than 300,000 graves.

I mention all of this because Memorial Day and Arlington National Cemetery are forever linked, but; no less important are those gravesides spread around our country, smaller, not famous, and in many cases all but forgotten. Right here, at Hillcrest, is just such a place. Wherever a veteran is buried is not only sacred ground; but; it is a last resting place of a man or woman who helped shape our nation's history. And, just as many of those plots around the world have been forgotten; in all too many cases, so too have the contributions of those veterans buried in those graves. They also have been forgotten, no different than the ones who surround us today. Look around you...the few of us who are here...and pay homage to those who went before us. In this small resting

place, are the remains of close to 60 veterans who served our nation... representing all the military branches. In this cemetery alone are representatives of the US Army, the US Navy, the US Marine Corps, the US Air Force and the US Coast Guard. Yet, as you walk this ground you may not recognize many of their names, nor will many outside their direct families remember the service these brave souls rendered to our nation.

But; they are here, calling us to do just that... to remember.

Here rests Private Ruby Blake, of North Carolina's own 30<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. He died on September 29, 1918, just 1 and ½ months before Armistice Day, November 11, 1918. And somewhere near him lies Sergeant Millard Eatman, who gave his life to the service of our nation just 38 days after the Armistice was declared in that “war to end all wars.” Oh, how I wish I knew their stories. Somewhere in this hallowed wood you will find the marker for Platoon Sergeant Perry Sloan, who died at the ripe old age of 24, on May 19, while serving with his comrades of the 6<sup>th</sup> Marine Division on Okinawa. Here, too lies the story of Master Sergeant Blueford Cates, a WWII US Army veteran and the story of Staff Sergeant Rudolf Baker, a veteran of the US Army Air Corps in WWII. Nelson Crank, a WWI Navy seaman and Hugh Templeton, a

doughboy of WWI, lie just within our reach. Ernest Waldo, a US Army Specialist from Vietnam is also resting here, as is US Army First Lieutenant Phillip Badger, a Korean War veteran. Sadly, I know nothing of these men and their service careers. I have no idea what they did, why they did it and what they thought of the sacrifice they made for us here today. I wish I did. And more is the pity for my lack of knowledge about them and I suspect many of you here today know nothing of their service. Yet, knowing they served, knowing they are here, I suspect I can also hear their voices crying out from their graves to us with just one whisper of a word... remember. Because of them, I am now compelled to do all I can, all within my power, to insure that every veteran I encounter henceforth will have their story remembered. For me, Memorial Day is an annual renewal of my personal quest...to insure that every veteran's story is remembered and that no one, not one soul within shouting distance of my ears, will ever say to me again, as has been said to me in the past, that veteran's stories are not important. There are many on this earth, indeed many in this nation that would sooner the veteran's story be forgotten and buried, just as the stories of the sixty who lie here today are buried.

The tradition of Memorial Day has withered in these last few decades.

Even with so many of our young men and women, our Nation's best and brightest, our nation's "next Greatest Generation," serving our needs, many of our fellow citizens have not only chosen *not* to remember, they have chosen to ignore the selfless service performed by these veterans. I have always believed that if we do not learn the lessons of history we will be doomed to repeat history's mistakes. As a veteran, I know this as well. When we repeat those mistakes, it is always our veterans who pay the highest price for the ignorance of their generation. Stone cutters, bronze sculptors, and headstone carvers in every village, town and city of this nation have made a decent living on our veteran's sacrifices. Everywhere you travel, everywhere you look, another monument, another memorial is raised to our veteran's service and sacrifice. There are plenty to go around. Travel 25 miles in any direction from this spot and you will find one. Unfortunately, when you stop to visit one and a passerby comes by to look, they usually ask, "What is this one for?" Two minutes later they depart with the words, "That was nice." Then they continue their trek to the beach or the mountains, not knowing the story behind what they saw and, in many cases, not caring to know.

And from the graves of our fallen comrades, you can hear the word..."Remember!"

I can think of no more fitting monument, no more lasting memorial, anywhere in this world, than the one that contains the individual, unedited, non-politicized stories of the 42 million men and women who have served this nation, in uniform, for over 230 years. Twenty million of us are alive today. We have successfully collected only 60,000 of those stories and we have a long way to go and very little time. Of the more than 10 million veterans who served in WWII, only 2.5 million are alive today and their stories are going to these graves with countless others around this great country, unless we continue to build this monument of stories that we have just begun...this memorial of live history that will cause every citizen of

this nation, all 300 million, to do the one thing we ask...to remember.

My grandfather was a veteran of WWI, my father is a veteran of WWII and I am a veteran. I can no more forget nor can I ignore what this day truly means to us. It is in my blood. I ask you to remember as well and do all you can you help others remember. I ask you to re-dedicate yourself to that noble cause.

This day is the 140<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of that first Decoration Day held at Arlington and I would like to conclude my remarks by renewing the General Order Issued that day, 140 years ago.

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**ATTENTION TO ORDERS:  
General Orders No.11, WASHINGTON, D.C., May 5, 1868**

The 30th day of May, 1868, is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village, and hamlet churchyard in the land. In this observance no form of ceremony is prescribed, but posts and comrades will in their own way arrange such fitting services and testimonials of respect as circumstances may permit. We are organized, comrades, as our regulations tell us, for the purpose among other things, "of preserving and strengthening those kind and fraternal feelings which have bound together the soldiers, sailors, and marines who united to suppress the late rebellion." What can aid more to assure this result than cherishing tenderly the memory of our heroic dead, who made their breasts a barricade between our country and its foes? Their soldier lives were the reveille of freedom to a race in chains, and their deaths the tattoo of rebellious tyranny in arms. We should guard their graves with sacred vigilance. All that the consecrated wealth and taste of the nation can add to their adornment

and security is but a fitting tribute to the memory of her slain defenders. Let no wanton foot tread rudely on such hallowed grounds. Let pleasant paths invite the coming and going of reverent visitors and fond mourners. Let no vandalism of avarice or neglect, no ravages of time testify to the present or to the coming generations that we have forgotten as a people the cost of a free and undivided republic.

If other eyes grow dull, other hands slack, and other hearts cold in the solemn trust, ours shall keep it well as long as the light and warmth of life remain to us. Let us, then, at the time appointed gather around their sacred remains and garland the passionless mounds above them with the choicest flowers of spring-time; let us raise above them the dear old flag they saved from dishonor; let us in this solemn presence renew our pledges to aid and assist those whom they have left among us a sacred charge upon a nation's gratitude, the soldier's and sailor's widow and orphan.

It is the purpose of the Commander-in-Chief to inaugurate this observance with the hope that it will be kept up from year to year, while a survivor of the war remains to honor the memory of his departed comrades. He earnestly desires the public press to lend its friendly aid in bringing to the notice of comrades in all parts of the country in time for simultaneous compliance therewith.

Department commanders will use efforts to make this order effective.

By order of  
JOHN A. LOGAN,  
Commander-in-Chief  
N.P. CHIPMAN,  
Adjutant General

Thank you!