

**World War II Veterans 71<sup>st</sup> Division Dinner**  
**Keynote Address**  
**Sea-Tac**  
**September 6, 2014**

First and foremost, welcome to the state of Washington. I know most of you have traveled great distances to be a part of this week's convention and reunion of the 71<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, and for many your travel has not been easy.

The 13 combat veterans in this room have the satisfaction of being able to look back through many decades and see how your efforts in battle, and all of the sacrifices that you and your fellow soldiers made on behalf of your country, were critical in keeping the United States of America the prosperous and free nation that it remains today.

I understand these Red Circle gatherings have been going on for better than 20 years now. I am told that one of your most stalwart of convention-goers, Vernon Renner from Springfield, Missouri, was not able to make the trip for the first time this year.

You see Vernon, who retired as professor emeritus in agriculture from Southwest Missouri State University in 1981, had intended to come, but he's better than 100 years young now and his daughter sent word just late last week that he would not be able to join this year. I am also told that for a few of you who live here in Washington state this is the first convention that you've been able to attend.

I understand that when these conventions first began in Colorado Springs there was quite a showing, with the early reunions posting turnouts of more than 500 veterans and their families. I'm sure that during these conventions, many long-lasting military friendships between soldiers have been rekindled, and new ones fostered. While it has been many years since the fury of our second world war, it must seem like yesterday as you recount your memories.

Some of your stories no doubt date to when the 71st first formed in 1943 as a mule-riding mountain light infantry division in Camp Carson, Colorado. Wait, riding on mule back instead of on the Strikers or Humvees of today's military? What an incredible experience that must have been!

You all have perhaps in some ways similar, but individually very unique stories from the 62 days that the 71st fought in the European theater, starting in France then penetrating further east than any other combat unit in the U.S. Army. Along the way you liberated thousands from horrific Nazi concentration camps across southern Germany and Austria like Straubing, Gunskirchen and more than 80 lesser known camps.

The Washington State Holocaust and Education Resource Center in Seattle has been interviewing some of you this week for their records so that they can share your first-hand accounts with later generations. Your experiences are extremely important and will no doubt aid the resource center in its mission to develop and share curricula about the holocaust with schools and students across the Pacific Northwest. This is so important to insure that what happened in the holocaust, the cruelty, the inhumanity, is never lost from the memory banks and minds of every generation. Your real life and death experiences your horrendous stories are critical to make people understand why we cannot, we must not tolerate the atrocities that we still hear about in every decade.

I was excited to learn that we have with us tonight three survivors from Gunskirchen Lager concentration camp in Austria: Aaron Zoldan from Livonia, Missouri; Simon Braitman from Rochester, New York and Dr. Robert Fisch from Minneapolis, Minnesota. Thank you so much for making the trip. We are honored that you are here and thank you for your willingness to share the horror you lived through even though I know it must be difficult to relive it with each retelling.

In the material given to me to prepare tonight's remarks I read some of the accounts about you, the soldier's, bravery and what many of you endured.

There is no need for me to remind you of any of the horrific scenes you certainly encountered, however I must tell you I came away with a sense of humble admiration for all that you did over there, those of you that endured through the agony of mental and physical torture and those of you who liberated them.

I also read about some very challenging conditions as you made your way through muddy villages, slept in the dugouts abandoned by retreating Germans, cleared road blocks and even climbed mountains while advancing into enemy territory.

It's hard to imagine all that you went through, but the proof that you did so is by the fact that you are sitting in this room in a free and democratic nation and it is a testament to your service to your country and your great courage and determination to prevail.

Here in the state of Washington we are home to eight military bases, so the military is a part of our state's DNA. Our strategic location along the Pacific Coast means we have more bases than most states.

Our largest of course is Joint Base Lewis-McChord, a huge combination Army and Air Force base just to the south of us. We have one other Air Force base, Fairchild over in Spokane, an Army base/training center in Yakima and four Navy bases here in Western Washington.

So that's a lot of military might right in our backyard, and the thousands of service personnel stationed there are major contributors to our region's economy. We've found over the years that a lot of the soldiers, sailors and airmen who were stationed here stay after their service to make Washington their home or eventually return to retire in our state, attracted by the high livability and ready access to a host of services. Because of the prevalence of active duty and retired personnel I have a special empathy for issues that we have seen in the news lately, such as the ultra-long waiting lists that some of you may have encountered at VA hospitals and the scandals surrounding that; the difficulty in obtaining medical and other benefits to which you are entitled and continuing problems among veterans with substance abuse, high rates of suicide, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, housing, family issues and many, many more.

As a state and a nation we must step up to help our veterans with these issues, if for no other reason than as a gesture of appreciation for service and sacrifice well above self.

In doing so we must always remind ourselves of all that you gave and ever so willingly came at a price. When you went into the service you were prepared to do whatever was necessary to preserve our nation's freedom, and, as I'd mentioned earlier, in the twilight of your lives you can look back with a great sense of fulfillment to see that America is still strong and free.

Think about what kind of world it would be had the Nazis succeeded and taken control of Europe and possibly beyond, or had the Japanese Empire succeeded in its request to become the dominant world power of the Pacific. Fortunately, and in no small part a thanks to you and your fellow veterans, we can now count Germany and Japan among our greatest of allies.

And think about the threats in the world today, such as with North Korea which enslaves political dissidents in labor camps by the thousands and, similar to the Nazi Germany in World War II, is spending the majority of its resources on its military.

We see replications of genocide and ethnic cleansing not unlike that of the Nazis toward the Jewish people. With great sadness we shake our heads wondering why history has to repeat itself so often. The most current example is with ISIS militants in Iraq and Syria.

We remember in 1994 in Rwanda where up to one million Tutsi and moderate Hutu were slaughtered by members of the Hutu majority. We think about the so-called Killing Fields in Cambodia when an estimated 1.3 million were murdered by the communist Khmer Rouge regime during its rule of the country in the mid-to-late 1970s following the civil war there. In fact many Cambodians fled and settled in this area – we have a large Cambodia population here in King and Pierce counties and I have heard firsthand some of the atrocities that they faced.

We could talk about Bosnia, Croatia, Guatemala, Sudan, Kosovo, and many more; my point being that much of the world remains a dangerous, dangerous place and, that as Americans, we

have a continued responsibility to stand up to these atrocities and, whenever possible, try to stop them in their tracks.

If the United Nations cannot do it, we must be leaders in the effort to move in well before these hostilities reach the level of genocide. And, in every case, human interest should be dominant over economic interest. In other words we should not move into an area just because our oil supply is threatened to fall into the hands of a hostile regime. The challenge is to develop a method for early intervention, a challenge which we must continue to push for as it's clear that whatever we are doing now is not working very well.

Oh, and one more thought along those lines. When people who are living under persecution in their homeland seek political asylum, or are forced to flee as political refugees, where are they most likely to go? To the United States of America, of course. And why is that? Because the freedoms that you and other combat veterans fought for and helped to preserve make this nation like that of no other.

People can say what they would like about America, but it is still a place where, for instance, a young man like myself who grew up in a housing development in Tacoma can grow up to be a lieutenant governor. Or where a child of mixed heritage like Barack Obama can rise to become the President of the United States. Or where a young Russian immigrant named Sergey Brin, whose family emigrated from the United States to escape Jewish persecution in 1979, can go on to co-found an Internet search company called Google, making billions of dollars in the process.

We celebrate and honor you and all veterans for what you have accomplished. We must continue to support great organizations like the Wounded Warriors Project, which challenges those who are suffering from the loss of limbs and wear other scars of battle to continue to climb, conquer and compete.

As an organization the Wounded Warriors focuses on mind, economic empowerment and body, serving 43,000 members across our nation. They are truly doing wonderful things for our veterans.

We have based at Joint Base Lewis McChord a special unit that is dedicated to challenging those who have been wounded in action to either return to service or to help disabled veterans overcome any obstacles that may prevent them from going on to live meaningful lives.

Through the work this detachment, and through the support of many private donors including the Seattle Seahawks, they have established a non-profit organization called Camp Patriot. Each year for the past several Camp Patriot has put three or four disabled combat veterans on the summit of Mt. Rainier, our tallest peak. Mt. Rainier is a very challenging climb even if you are not disabled!

Besides climbing mountains, they go on fishing and hunting trips, go kayaking, whitewater rafting, horseback riding, hiking and embark on many other outdoor adventures. Camp Patriot recently purchased a 150-acre tract of land in northwest Montana so it can develop a new ranch retreat to serve as many as 400 veterans a year.

Camp Patriot is emblematic of the kinds of things we can do to ensure that our wounded combat veterans can lead whole and healthy active lives after service.

We must support our Veterans of Foreign Wars, both recent and distant, and remember and honor all of you who have served both in life and in death.

The United States of America may be a great nation, but it is only great because of those who have protected our interests around the world. We may be struggling and hurting at times. We may be at odds with each other politically and divided economically. But through it all we stand together as we strive to do what is right and just.

We have carried that mantle for generations and we have you and your fellow veterans to thank for keeping the flames of freedom lit and our shores free from invasion. I wish I had the time to sit down with each one of you to hear about your service to our country and how you lived your lives after that. You are among our nation's most distinguished of citizens and stand as a brilliant example of lives well-lived.

There is a story I would like to close with, one I've told a few times before and one that you may have heard, but one that bears repeating for its inspirational message that applies to young and old. It's a story that I normally tell at commencement exercises but, now that I think about it, may also apply to you.

It's the story of a lamplighter. I knew it when I was a kid in the fifties as another beautiful song that went, "He made the night a little brighter wherever he would go, the old lamplighter of long, long ago." In actuality it came from a bit of history and literature that goes something like this—some people come into our lives and quickly go: some stay for a while and leave footprints on our hearts and we're never the same. Sir Harry Lauder, the Scottish humorist and singer, loved to tell the story of the old lamplighter in the village where he lived as a boy:

Each evening as dusk came, the old man would make his rounds with his ladder and his light. He would put the ladder against the light post, climb up and light the lamp, step back down, pick up the ladder, and proceed to the next lamp. 'After a while,' said Sir Harry, 'he would be down the street and out of sight. But I could always tell which way he had gone from the lamps he had lighted and the glow he left behind.'

Distinguished veterans of the 71<sup>st</sup>, you are lamplighters all. We can pay tribute to the glow you have left behind because it is a glow that has endured for generations already and will continue to shine against the face of hostilities for generations to come.

You as members of the Greatest Generation have our greatest respect. All we can do now is to give you our sincere thanks and gratitude for a job well done. Red Circle, be proud.

I have been asked to do just one more thing, that is to call out the names of the 13 members of the 71<sup>st</sup> who are with us today. As I call your name please stand.

Robert Deschamps  
Douglas Fargo  
Earl Flanagan  
Joseph Hanning  
Tony Leptich  
Stephen Mahoney  
Ernest Nordquist  
Gene Ochs (pronounced like Oakes)  
Gerald Rettela  
Lowell Smith  
Robert Rogots  
James Sorley  
Carl Sundberg

I would also like to formally acknowledge the three Holocaust survivors who are with us. When I call your name would you please stand:

Dr. Robert Fisch  
Simon Braitman  
Aron Zoldan

Let's give them all a big hand. Thank you.