



**Keynote Address**  
***Sioux Falls Area Chamber of Commerce Veterans Day Program***

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**Bishop of Sioux Falls**

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***Armistice Day***

**Lincoln High School Auditorium**

We come together this Veterans Day to remember those living and dead who have sacrificed in defense of liberty and in loving concern for others and to remember those who supported them in and out of war zones. It is important we do so for three reasons, to honor them with grateful hearts, to learn from them about how to cope with the uncertainty that come with such service, and as a result to be inspired to look to the future with hope.

We remember individuals by name who have touched our lives, loved ones still with us and those who went before. We also remember the unnamed persons who defended freedom in our country's name and in whose debt we live. Despite war, terrorism, death and separation, by acknowledging God the creator of life we can be people of hope as were those whose legacy from which we benefit.

Military forces are often talked about in numbers: so many sent, so many wounded, so many killed, so many who return home forever changed by their experiences. Those statistics though are created one by one, one life by one life. Military forces are made up of individual people trying to do their duty, each with their personal dreams and loved ones.

I remember my grandfather who served in the Army during in World War I; two uncles who served in the Army in Europe during World War II; my father who served in the Navy in the Pacific and who after the war was a career member of the coast guard, and my two brothers who served one in the Navy and another in the air force during the Cold War.

I have been asked to briefly discuss my own experiences in the military. I am a Vietnam War veteran who served as an intelligence officer in the Air Force. This of course was before I became a priest. As I look back, it is clear to me that this challenging experience helped shape who I am as a person and as a priest. In those days, now nearly 50 years ago, the mandatory draft existed. I chose to sign up for the air force not to avoid the draft but to serve in a way that seemed the best use of my limited abilities.

I entered from graduate school and attended Officer Training at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. My limited abilities were immediately on display having chosen to do this training in the months of June, July and August when the heat was at its most impressive in San Antonio. I then entered into ten months of intelligence training at Lowry Air Force base in Denver, which is now closed.

Upon completion of this training I was immediately sent to Vietnam. I can recall the enthusiasm and idealism; I also recall the fear and the loneliness. I arrived only days

after the Tet Offensive which some of you will recall. I remember the huge plane coming to for a landing at Tan Son Nhut Base in Saigon where I was to be stationed. Divisionary tactics were deemed necessary to avoid potential hostile fire. I was housed in the central city for a while until it was necessary to evacuate under fire during the so-called May offensive.

My area of responsibility was IV Corps or the Mekong River delta area in the south. I remember how beautiful was the countryside and how ominous was the atmosphere. Among my responsibilities was to ride in the two seat air forward control plane and study the terrain. Then there were no powerful satellites as exist today. The mission was to become so familiar with the area that movement on the ground could be noticed simply by disruption of the trees and grass. Photos would be taken which would then be compared with the previous days. It was tedious and often boring. It has always been a bit embarrassing to have received the Bronze Star medal for meritorious service. It is those whose medal contains a "V" for valor or a purple heart who were deserving of such recognition which clearly was not me.

One memory that sticks with me from those days is that the first person I knew who died over there was a fellow intelligence officer who was diagnosed with cancer and quickly passed away distant from home and family. He of course would not be the last.

Our unit shared space with intelligence officers from the South Vietnamese air force, which stretched me in ways I never imagined. I became especially close to one family with two delightful little boys. His parents told me that their hope was that their children would be able to live in freedom to practice their Catholic faith. I was not Catholic at the time but that hope so honestly shared surely had an impact on me when I returned home. I often wonder what has become of them.

Upon my return from Vietnam, I was among those who were told to in order to avoid protesters change out of uniform into civilian clothes before leaving the safety of the airbase.

After Vietnam I was assigned to the Tactical Air Command at Langley air base in Virginia. Our area of focus was on the Middle East, then as now a place of instability and concern. I remember our breakthrough computer. It took up a room almost this size and which required punch cards in order to collate and share information.

I left the military after nearly five years. But the experiences shared, not all of which I can or want to talk about, remain with me to this day.

We ought to take to heart the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John, spoken before he died for us, that there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. The willingness of men and women of America to put their lives on the line, indeed give their lives, to assure respect and freedom for people of different cultures, thousands of miles away, has always been awesome and a profound acts of love. We may differ among ourselves on the policies that led to their service, but we ought never to differ on recognizing the selfless sacrifice they and their families made and that veterans in the making are doing this very day.

The casualties of war are not only the physically dead. They are those who remain anguished by the experience, and those who despite their scars have learned to cope. We remember them as well and must insist that they receive the medical and other assistance they need, earned and are owed.

Catholic News Service had an article on coping with the loss of loved ones in war, not all of whom died physically but their loss is still real. Interviewed was a father whose son was killed in Iraq. This anguishing father discussed his journey of grief. He said he has now moved from grieving over the immediate loss of his son to grieving the loss of any future with his son. That father is also a veteran in a way as are family members who serve by separation.

This anguish of separation is one reason we in the Diocese of Sioux Falls established the St. Raphael Fund. It offers financial assistance for those in the military and their families. St. Raphael is the patron saint of travelers which is necessary to serve and of healing which is necessary to move on. Support offered can be as simple as supplying airfare to attend a family funeral or for spouses to get together when one is on leave but still far from home, or a little cash to buy Christmas presents or replace a broken appliance. There is little bureaucracy; we err on the side of helping, and it is available quickly. If you know of any one, Catholic or not, who need quick help for special needs or to support family life, please let us know.

Several years ago I had the privilege of celebrating the funeral Mass of George Gaffney, Jr. whose plane had apparently crashed into a mountain in New Guinea during World War II. When he died in the service of his country, he had been married only three months. When he died his wife carried their daughter in her womb.

This is what the daughter, Patricia, posted on the Internet for the American World War II Orphans network: "Twenty three year old Second Lieutenant George Philip Gaffney, Jr, was a fighter pilot who went missing in his P47 on March 11, 1944 in the jungles of the Finisteere Mountains of New Guinea, leaving a young widow and me, his unborn, fatherless child. . . As he was expected to be shipped out any day, my mother returned to her family in Wisconsin early in November. She was already experiencing morning sickness. She remembers her last glimpse of my father as the train pulled away and he waved goodbye as he turned to leave. She says he looked so handsome in his brand new raincoat. . . My father's family and childhood friends describe him as a warm, thoughtful young man with a legendary wit. Mom tells me he was pensive, affectionate, and had a powerful sense of justice. He adored his mother, loved to dance, and had a close group of friends known as the gang of twelve. He loved Ravel's Bolero, Dostoevsky and potato pancakes. (He was a typical soldier.) On June 26, 1998 my father's remains were found with his wrecked P47 . . . The discovery was made near where I had flown in 1995 calling out with all my heart, 'Daddy, where are you? Daddy, where are you.' "

Someone noted that for many every day is Veterans Day and for too many every day is Memorial Day. I was privileged to celebrate a funeral Mass for him in the church where he was baptized and where his daughter was baptized in his absence. He was buried in Arlington National Cemetery. After 55 years he was home, and he, his widow and his daughter, veterans all in their own ways, were finally at peace.

On this Veterans Day, we pray for the George Gaffneys in all wars and military conflicts who gave their lives doing their duty because their country asked, hoping it would lead to peace for their daughters and sons. And, we pray for the wives and husbands, mothers and fathers, the war orphans whose lives were changed forever.

The world today is dealing with the same issues: how can people live in peace and mutual respect with one another. Like generations before us, we have yet to learn the way and so we stumble. More young men and woman are called for duty at home and abroad and other men and women worry about them. We remember too those who are serving today in harm's way, and pray for their safe return, and we pray for those who worry about them.

Let me conclude with this with this:

One of my personal treasures is a little book called "My Soldier's Record". It is a collection of memorabilia my great grandmother kept while her son, my grandfather, served in World War I. In it is a newspaper clipping. The experiences of war never fully leave us and some remain etched forever in minds and hearts. And so the writer recalled when that war ended. He wrote:

“For weeks we have been in bloody combat. When the end came, we were too exhausted for exuberance. One by one, we slunk away to be by ourselves in sleep or in silent thought. I wandered into a peasant’s hut: shell ridden and empty, lit a comforting fire in the cavernous, old fashioned hearth; lay down on tile floor, thawing out physically, mentally and morally. My mind was dull. I had neither imagination nor memory; tired in body and soul, neither happy nor hopeful – just blinking, blinking away at the great mass of flames. They lit up every corner of the empty room where once humans had lived and loved, had worked and prayed and played. I lifted up my eyes. There above the mantel was the inevitable French crucifix. There was the hope and the joy, the imagination and the passion of all the human race symbolized in the solitary and lonely little gem of the Church of God. So ended the war. And so will end all wars when humanity looks above for its peace and not below for its prosperity.”

And so will end all wars and all violence, when humanity looks above for its peace. Sadly that time has not yet come. Until it does, let us continue to pray in thanksgiving for those men and women who have sacrificed their dreams and sometimes their lives in defense of freedom which as is so often noted is not free. You have paid the price for the rest of us. They, you, have given us another chance, a little more time to discover and accept the truth that our only hope is in the Lord.

Thank you for listening. Thank you for your service. May God bless all of you, your families and those we specially remember this day. And, may God bless the United States of America.