

TRANSCRIPT: ADMIRAL STUART B. MUNSCH'S REMARKS AT THE NORTH DAKOTA VETERANS' CEMETERY MEMORIAL DAY CEREMONY ON MONDAY, MAY 27, 2024.

[START]

“Thank you very much. It's really terrific to be back here in North Dakota, the one place where I truly feel at home. To the Gold Star families, Commander-in-Chief Burgum, General Dohrmann, thanks for your generous introduction. Fellow and past members, active duty, reserve and guard members of our Armed Forces, other public servants, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to this remarkable day.

For a North Dakotan, appearing at an official North Dakota event with the governor is quite a privilege. Thank you, Governor Burgum.

Speaking at a Memorial Day service at the State's Veteran Cemetery Ceremony is a deep honor, and I can't imagine anything more humbling for a North Dakotan to do what I'm about to do today.

We have two occasions where we recognize veterans each year, specific days. Veterans Day in November recognizes all who have served in uniform. Memorial Day, today, recognizes all who served in uniform and gave their life for their Nation.

Several years ago, when I was a younger Admiral, I was in the duty rotation to represent the Chief of Naval Operations at events where he was unable to attend, but where the presence of an Admiral was appropriate for the dignity of the occasion. I was asked one day to go to Baltimore-Washington International Airport and represent our Head of Navy to greet the arrival of the remains of a World War II Navy Corpsman who gave his life while serving with Marines in the island-hopping campaign. There were a large number of extended family members there, but there was only one that had a direct recollection of the Corpsman's death. She, as a young girl, had been the first grandchild for her grandparents. She remembered the raw emotion when she learned of her uncle's death and how thereafter everything changed for her grandparents.

But what that little girl didn't know, when this news arrived after Christmas, is that the news actually had arrived before Christmas. Her grandfather had taken the news when he happened to be alone at home. He chose to bear the burden by himself for several more days so that his family could have one last joyous Christmas, celebrating the season and with pride of their son and their sibling who was doing so well in the US Navy.

Ever since, I've been troubled by how fragile can be the memory of a young service member after their immediate family themselves have passed on and there are no direct descendants to carry on their memory. For many of the 2,956 North Dakotans who gave their lives while serving in our Armed Forces, our recollections are incomplete and imperfect. For some, we have gallantry citations to call upon. More often, we do not. For those without gallantry awards, their contribution is no less important.

Perhaps no one witnessed their actions. Perhaps no witness survived to tell their story. Or no one due to the war-fighting urgencies at the time documented the actions they witnessed. Or in a time when uncommon valor was a common virtue, their actions seemed commonplace. Or finally, for those who gave their lives in uniform and circumstances not in direct action with enemy forces, they may not have been recognized for having done something equally important in our nation's effort.

Yet despite all these imperfections, we must remember, as best we can, all who gave their lives while serving in uniform.

The prairie, the wind, the birds.

As I've traveled the world, these features are the three, that to me, make North Dakota different, special and home.

The prairie is subtle; it does not have the instant grandeur of mountains or the obvious splendor of ocean coastlines or the noises and lights of big cities. What the prairie does have is easily overlooked by those in a hurry.

Quiet strength, that's what the prairie has: a self-confidence and having adapted over thousands of years to be the source of hardy life, a humility of not trying to be more than what it is, a beauty when you study on your hands and knees reveals within just a few square feet tremendous diversity of plants and creatures.

Our forebears recognized the prairie as a core feature of North Dakota. Our state crest carries the motto "Strength from the Soil." Our Governor's flag, based on our state crest, repeats the motto "Strength from the Soil." The crest of our Navy submarine USS North Dakota displays the ship's motto "Strength from the Soil: Reapers of the Deep." The quiet strength of the prairie is reflected in our people: self-confidence, humility, more than meets the eye.

During the Second World War, Lowell Nelson of Grand Forks, graduated from high school in 1943 and enlisted in the United States Navy. He must have had a sense for what he was in for. For well publicized had been the toll on the United States Navy at Pearl Harbor, the toll on the United States Navy at Midway, though it was a great victory for America, and the toll on the United States Navy at the Battle of Coral Sea, though that too was a victory for America.

Gunnery Third Class Nelson, after graduating from boot camp, was assigned to the new light cruiser USS Birmingham. He and his ship soon went to the Pacific. In October of 1944, the Imperial Japanese Navy and the United States Navy engaged in the longest-running sea battle of the Second World War, known as Leyte Gulf. USS Birmingham, with Gunnery Nelson on board, saw extraordinarily intense action, as did another ship in company with Birmingham, the light aircraft carrier USS Princeton, a ship as long as two football fields.

On October 24th, the carrier Princeton received a direct hit by a bomb dropped from a Japanese aircraft, and the ship quickly became consumed by fire and explosions. Birmingham pulled alongside the burning carrier and with all available hoses progressively extinguished the fire,

moving from the front end of Princeton toward the rear, while in parallel rescuing surviving crew members off Princeton. To assist in putting out the most difficult fire burning at the stern of the ship, Birmingham sent 38 volunteer sailors to embark the burning hulk of Princeton. Lowell Nelson, with just one year in the Navy, was among them.

Aboard Princeton, the fires were causing small arms ammunition to explode everywhere like popcorn in a kettle. Individual bombs stored in the carrier's magazines were exploding regularly. Princeton was a ticking time bomb.

In the face of this danger, the strength and courage of Gunnersmate Nelson and his fellow volunteers would have been enormous. The fire must have continued to spread downward in the ship toward the main magazines, because suddenly a massive explosion blew off the stern end of the ship, the size of half a football field. Debris from the size of slivers to the size of houses flew into the air. Lowell Nelson's body was lost in the explosion and his remains known only to God.

The brave firefighting actions of Birmingham and its sailors, including Lowell Nelson, contributed to saving the lives of over 1,300 sailors from the burning ship Princeton.

The Prairie, Gunnersmate Lowell Nelson, quiet strength.

The wind.

The wind is ever-present in North Dakota. Our state has the highest average wind speed of all 50 states. The wind over the prairie is the great communicator; it connects all things and all places in North Dakota. The wind delivers and takes away our weather. It spreads the seeds of our plant life. Never in North Dakota is there a town with just one yard with dandelions.

The wind carries scents and hints of presence. The wind shares the history of where it came from and gives warning of what is to come. The wind speaks to us as the spirit of the prairie. The wind too is reflected in our people: communicators, connectedness, ever-present.

During the First World War, Richard Blue Earth became the first Native American from North Dakota to enlist in the US Armed Forces. In 1917, coming from Cannonball and the Standing Rock Sioux reservation, he volunteered to fight for the United States even though at the time Native Americans were not permitted to become United States citizens.

As World War I raged in Europe, communication secrecy became vital. With enemy forces intercepting messages, the US military turned to a unique advantage: Native Americans and their languages. Thirty-three tribes, including Standing Rock Sioux, participated in this effort. Corporal Blue Earth joined these code talkers. Together, they used their languages to protect United States and Allied soldiers on the battlefield.

Blue Earth also became a noted sniper. He fought bravely throughout the brutal Argonne Forest campaign. Tragically, on October 9th, 1918, one month from the end of the war, Blue Earth gave his life for the United States that would not yet accept him as a citizen.

Corporal Blue Earth's contributions to the US Military and to the freedom of our allies were recognized. The US Army awarded him the Silver Star, and the French government awarded him the Fourragère, both honoring exceptional valor. Blue Earth and many other Native Americans helped defeat the Central Powers of World War I. They paved the way for the fame of the Navajo Code Talkers in World War II.

But most impactful for generations to come, the exceptional contributions of Corporal Blue Earth and his fellow Native Americans to the United States in World War I resulted in all Native Americans being granted United States citizenship on June 2nd, 1924, the 100th anniversary of which is next week. Blue Earth's voice for respect and recognition, to his last breath, became the wind that now connects all North Dakotans as fellow citizens of the United States.

The Wind, Corporal Blue Earth, speak to us.

The birds.

The birds of North Dakota are everywhere. The birds and their songs are omnipresent. The birds seem to always be watching over us. Their calls convey renewal at the beginning of daylight every morning. They arrive at important times of the year. Robins mark the spring, geese and ducks the harvest. Year-round, sparrows and blackbirds, always so numerous, survive the coldest, windiest, darkest days and keep calling, sending the message that if they can do it, we can too.

The birds are the angels of the prairie.

The birds are also reflected in our people: watching out for one another, being there when it matters, delivering comfort, being angels.

During the Vietnam War, Lyle Maynard Johannes graduated from high school in Kulm and enlisted in the United States Army. Despite the controversy of the war, he felt it was his duty to serve. He was proud to be in the Army.

Lyle had a sunny, fun-filled outlook on life and regarded everyone with interest and sincerity, qualities he clearly inherited from his mother, Joyce. I knew Joyce and her husband, Maynard. She worked at the school with my father, and both families attended the same church in Kulm, then a town of only 625 people.

I never met Lyle. He had graduated just before my family moved to Kulm, but I knew Lyle's younger sisters. As a young boy captivated by high school sports and music, I greatly admired the Johannes sisters and their classmates. I wanted to be like them, but they all wanted to be like Lyle.

Lyle was a fun-loving, gregarious guy, a bit of a prankster. He was everyone's friend. All the girls in school loved him. He played sports, fixed cars, played pool with the old men at the pool hall, and even carried groceries home for the elderly.

One Halloween, he collected pigeons, another common bird on the prairie, in a gunny sack from barns around town and then let them loose in the high school gym. You can imagine the chaos!

The three things that mattered most to Lyle were his family, his friends, and his faith. He volunteered to serve in the Army, following the path of his uncles and older brother. In Vietnam, his true North Dakota personality shone through. He made friends with the Vietnamese people, finding time in the middle of the war to show compassion and care for the very people he was defending.

On January 29th, 1970, a month after Christmas, an accidental shooting on his base tragically took Lyle Johannes' life. While I was only seven years old at the time, I remember the raw emotion, the change in mood that swept over the entire town. There was confusion about what exactly happened to Lyle, making the news of his passing and the outpouring of emotion even more difficult.

Lyle's death brought the whole community of Kulm together. The funeral, to accommodate everyone who wanted to attend, was held in the very same high school gym where Lyle had unleashed the pigeons years before. Before the service, the men in Kulm carried the church organ out to the gym so there would be proper music for the hymns.

Some three decades later, Lyle's sister, Joanne (who was here with us today), obtained his records. She discovered it was a forgotten chambered round and an accidentally handled weapon that had struck her brother. Sadly, the bullet caused an unrecoverable wound, and though doctors fought valiantly to save him, Lyle succumbed to his injuries. Upon informing her mother of the circumstances surrounding Lyle's passing, her mother's first words were "That poor man," referring to the other soldier who would have to live with the weight of what he accidentally did.

Just like his mother, who always thought of others first, Lyle put the needs of others before his own. He made a tremendous impact on the lives of people in Vietnam and back home in North Dakota, where stories about him are still shared in Kulm. He made friends wherever he went, and with a longer life, he undoubtedly would have made an even greater difference in the Army, North Dakota, and the wider world.

The Birds, even the pigeons, Specialist Four Lyle Johannes, our angels.

For all of us, we have been given life. To whom, then, will we give our life?

For 2,956 North Dakotans, they wore the uniform of the armed forces, and they gave their life to our nation.

May the Prairie remind us of their quiet strength: Gunner's Mate Third Class Lowell Nelson of Grand Forks, we remember.

May the Wind speak to us with their Spirit: Corporal Richard Blue Earth of Cannonball, we remember.

May the Birds with their Angelic calls remind us of all who served and gave their lives in service to our nation: Specialist Four Lyle Maynard Johannes, we remember.

For these three and all their fellow North Dakotans who gave their lives and service to our nation, we remember.

We always will remember.

Rest in peace.

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