

Memorial Day 2001

Speech for the Glen Rock Middle School Assembly

Ever hear of Indian “wampum”? It was not, as old movies have suggested, simply the money of Native Americans. It was a sacred symbol... a method of passing the history of families and entire tribes from one generation to another. The wampum itself was intended to be a symbol that would remind the young of the story that was told every time the wampum was shown to the family and passed on... It was because of the power of these memories that wampum was perceived to have value. Today we have photos, movies and videos to serve as more direct reminders of the past.

Two weeks ago my Uncle died... my mother's only brother. He had grown up across the street from my father, and so they had been lifelong friends. One night, between all the tears, my family sat around looking at old photos. In the old shoeboxes and envelopes were discolored pieces of paper with curled edges. Some of the images were partially cracked away. But those pictures were sacred symbols of days gone by and people who are no longer with us, including my father.

One of those pictures was bent and brown, and poor in quality. The year was 1944... World War II... The people in the picture were 18 years old. My father, Phil Cole; my uncle, Ray Firestone; and my father's best friend, Ellis Hudes had gone out to celebrate. Standing in Times Square in their Navy uniforms and leather jackets they decided to have a silly souvenir photo taken. The next day they were being shipped out, putting their lives on the line... not necessarily because they were brave, but because it was the right thing to do. Little did they know that the picture they were having taken would one day become a most treasured possession of an entire family sitting in a room, wiping away the tears.

So here we sit on stage as part of an assembly that for most of you is just an excuse to get out of class. I understand that... I grew up in Glen Rock and once sat in this assembly feeling the same way.

In America we have many special days to commemorate important events in history: Christmas, Easter, July 4th, Hanukkah, Thanksgiving, Passover, Memorial Day, and many others for other cultures... These days are not, as commercials would have you think, about gifts, parties, and spending money. They're symbols to remind us of extreme, unthinkable sacrifices and suffering that others have endured so that you and I can be here today.

The fact that you may be bored is in one way a good thing. It means that war and suffering are so far removed from your experience that you can't directly relate. Thank goodness that is so.

But it's important for us to remember that these sacrifices that we commemorate today are not just events from the other side of the world. In December of 1969 I was a senior at Glen Rock High. The Vietnam War was raging and the military held the first draft lottery. A reality of war came home to Glen Rock. I sat in my best friend Tom McNaney's living room with Jon Moore, Steve Pratt and about a dozen other guys and we listened, just as 850,000 other young men around the country listened, as birthdays were called one at a time, dictating the order in which

we would be called to service. Steve drew number 7; I got 239. That following year they called all eligible males with numbers up to 197. But for the luck of the draw of a piece of paper, I would have been called. The stories of those of my friends who served in Southeast Asia are too horrific to tell you. Hollywood does a good enough job, anyway.

But we stand here today to remember that people all around us have been called upon and served. And all too many gave their lives. One of my personal local heroes is Irv Bienstock... Doesn't sound like the name of a hero, does it?. If you see him sitting at the counter of Erl's Grill, you may not take notice.

But there was a day, June 6th, 1944, when Irv, all of 19 years old, was dumped in water over his head with a 70 lb. pack on his back. He'd have drowned right there and then, but for another soldier who pulled him up. When he got to shore, he was on Omaha Beach, D-Day... the Invasion of Normandy, France. The horrors that he endured as a medic trying desperately to save lives and limbs are that which we are here today to remember. And every time I see him at the counter, I thank him for what he did.

And the next time you are called upon to place your hand over your heart and recite the pledge of allegiance, remember that it is a form of wampum, a sacred means of remembering the incredible deeds of those who have come before you, and be thankful that you have a heart to place a hand over.

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Ellis Hudes, Phil Cole, and Ray Firestone 1944