

## **Remarks for Memorial Day Service, Hillsdale Fire House**

**by Peter Cipkowski**

I'm not typically someone who is lost for words but when Jim asked me to prepare a few words to say on Memorial Day, I was a bit, I don't know, stuck and wondered what I could possibly contribute.

I thought, what do I really know about Memorial Day? I don't have the distinction of being able to say that I served my country the way these good men and women have. And how does the privilege of serving on the Town Board as Supervisor give me the right to address something so important, so sacred, as Memorial Day?

I know that it's part of my job as Supervisor to be Hillsdale's biggest cheerleader. And I'm happy to do whatever I can to help our town grow and succeed.

But if there's one thing I believe about what success look likes – it's always better when a Town remembers its past, and respects the symbols of its unique local history.

For me this means lots of things - the beautiful land we live in, working farms, the historic barns, the old toll house, the grange hall, the old Masonic Temple, our churches, the old library – now our beautiful Town Hall.

And it also means respecting and understanding the price our community – like every town in America – has paid to protect our freedom.

That's why I also believe that the monuments we have in our town – the ones that single out our veterans – are among our greatest landmarks.

At the intersection of 23 and 22, as you know, we have a simple stone that commemorates the memory of the local men who fought in the Revolutionary War. There were at least 37 known men who lived here and fought for our independence. I'm sure there were some women, too, but we don't know their names. And we have records to prove that 16 of these men are buried in our cemeteries – unfortunately in two or three countryside cemeteries are almost forgotten to us. That's something for us to worry about.

In the Town Center, as you know, we have the magnificent Flag Bearer monument dedicated to the 150 men from Hillsdale who fought for the Union. It's astonishing that Hillsdale is the only town in Columbia County with a memorial to the Union – especially given the enormous contribution the County made – nearly 3000 men – but there it is. And it's thanks to one of ours – a Civil War veteran who left \$10,000 in his will in 1916 to create “a fitting monument to our brothers who served.” The Civil War monument includes a bronze tablet with the names of the local men.

Now I was also interested to read in some records from 1946 that a group of Hillsdale citizens met after World War Two to decide how to honor the men who had served their country in the two world wars. In the recorded minutes, all organizations in the town were asked to send representatives to discuss the matter and present proposals. Every major committee in the community was represented – Cadby-Shutts, V.F.W, Hillsdale Fire Company, the Copake-Hillsdale Garden Club, the Eastern Star, and the Masonic Lodge.

All in all, it was a pretty representative group from the community and on July 2, 1946, the committee recommended that the War Memorial of the Town of Hillsdale be something called “Memorial Field.” They said it should include a boulder with a suitable plaque, with the names of all the Hillsdale residents who have served in World War I and World War II but that it should also be a field and playground of suitable size for baseball and other games.

That's how the little park behind the old town hall emerged – from private land, much of which was originally a working pasture.

Though we have forgotten the name “Memorial Field” (and perhaps that's something we should restore), the original war memorial there – the large boulder – was finally enhanced in 2009 to include the names of veterans from both world wars, as originally intended. It also includes the names of those who served in Korea and Vietnam. Names of some of the men gather here today.

Many of us feel great pride to see the names of our fathers and grandfathers and uncles and brothers and sisters inscribed on these monuments. I know I do when I see my father's name on the World War Two memorial wall inside St. Mary's Church in Hudson, where my father grew up and left for the Navy in 1942.

As I mentioned this morning at the Civil War memorial, the great-grand-daughter of Charles Lacey, a Civil War soldier whose name is inscribed on the tablet on the Flag Bearer monument, came through Hillsdale the other day. Her name is Arleen Wood and she lives in Yonkers. She gave me a call yesterday to say how sorry she was that she couldn't join us today but was grateful that her ancestor was being remembered. But passed through Hillsdale on Thursday to accomplish two goals – something she does every Memorial Day weekend as part of a family tradition. One was to touch the inscription of her great-grandfather's name on the monument and the other was to lay flowers on his grave – just over there. A man she never knew, who died long before she came along.

This kind of reverence and respect is, for me, what makes Memorial Day enduring and actually sacred.

Now I told you when I started speaking a few minutes ago that I wasn't sure what I could offer today. I have to tell you that I realized that in fact I had something to say but really only after "taking in" Arlene Wood's example of reverence and gratitude. And in a way, I guess, I've understood Memorial Day for a long time, through a very personal example, inside my own family. An example of the power of remembrance – and gratitude.

I grew up in a family of four boys and two girls. But I also grew up with a bunch of first cousins and we all pretty much lived in a way where there were no boundaries, and pretty much side by side. My father and one of my uncles were veterans of the Second World War. The three sisters who led this extended family, including my mother Ruth, also had a big brother. And that big brother was gone. But he was never really gone for any of us – and still isn't.

His name was Bernard Whitney O'Neil and he enlisted in the army after graduating from high school in 1939. Before the war heated up, he was a member of the 211th Band as a trumpeter and taught bugle and trumpet in the army. Most of the time stationed in Texas and Iceland.

But by 1943, he was in England with hundreds of thousands of other American soldiers - waiting for something BIG to happen – D-Day. I want read you a letter he sent home to his mother, my grandmother, on November 27, 1943.

“Dear Mom, I’m somewhere in England. I can’t tell you where exactly. But I finally found time to drop my best girl another letter to let her know that I’m still alive. I received a letter and a Christmas card from you last night and it really felt funny as Christmas is about the farthest thing from my mind. Forgive me for that – I will celebrate Christmas by going to mass and we can be together that way on Christmas, as you like to say. Now you ask if there’s anything I need: the only thing that I can think of is a cigarette lighter and I doubt if you can find one that will do as I hear that they’re not making them anymore back there.

I have something to tell you. I’ve been going with an English girl ever since I got here and I’m afraid we’re both getting a little serious. I don’t quite know just what I’m going to do about it as yet but I will say that I’m getting clearer. How would you like an English gal for a daughter-in-law? Love, Bernard.

PS: She’s Church of England.”

My uncle was part of the first wave onto the beaches of Normandy in June 1944. It’s pretty amazing that he survived that invasion but six months later, unfortunately, he was captured by the Germans – some time before Christmas 1944. He was imprisoned in one of the largest and most notorious POW camps in Germany. This was Stalag 4B - designed for about 10,000 soldiers. Actually it had more than 30,000 prisoners.

Prisoners were allowed to write a few words home. Here’s another letter – my uncle’s first letter home from the camp.

“December 24, 1944. Dear Dad. Don’t fall over when you get this but I decided it’s about time I write to that old man of mine and thanked him for his letters – one card – that he’s written. Dad, you know how sorry I am to be in Germany – not what we bargained for and I sure as hell can’t believe I’m rotting in a stinking camp and I’m not sure I can write that here. Will anyway. I just got through fixing the damn heater so I decided to take time out and write. I sure hope this reaches you so you can give yourself a pat on the back and my mother and sisters a good kiss for me. Hell, dad, I miss you so much – and I’m kissing you right now, too.”

My uncle was in that camp for about four months, the very last months of the war in Europe. The Soviets liberated his camp that spring in 1945 and he was able to

make his way with some buddies across the heart of Germany to the American lines where the final, ugly, brutal push was on to Berlin.

We don't know how he was reunited but we know that he was killed when a grenade was thrown into his tank.

I have to share a remarkable coincidence – a kind of lesson, I think. A couple of years ago, I was having dinner with a neighbor – someone I was just getting to know for the first time – Ron Bixby, of Little Apple Orchard on Orchard Lane. Somehow we got to talking about history and World War Two and I mentioned visiting my uncle's grave in Magraten, Holland, near the German border.

It turns out that Ron's dad, Philip Bixby, is also buried in Magraten. He was killed in action near the Elbe River, on April 14, 1945, the same day and the same place as my Uncle. Philip Bixby was a 1st lieutenant tank commander with the 67th Regiment, 2nd Armored Division (also known as "Hell on Wheels").

Remarkable isn't it?

As Ron told me, the message is that war affects everyone, including future generations, and in ways that are not perceptible. All we need to do is look around and talk to our neighbors like Ron and I did, and we'll find ample evidence of this truth.

I know many of you have stories just like mine and Ron's. Charlotte here, I just learned, lost a step-brother in World War Two.

I have never really questioned why or how my Uncle Whitney became such a big part of my life.

I didn't lose my father, like Ron. Uncle Whitney was my mother's older brother. I never knew him. He died 14 years before I was born. And it wasn't as if my mother mentioned his name constantly, which she sorta did, and it wasn't the photograph that hung in our house that she had photo-shopped to include her two sisters and their dead brother... it was HOW she – with my wonderful aunts – made the effort to simply keep their big brother's memory IN OUR LIVES and to give us kids a model of heart-breaking truth. The price of freedom.

This is how President Reagan put it – this is what I'm trying to say – this is what I think my mother and my aunts knew instinctively. Reagan said: "We must try to

honor those who fell —not for their sakes alone, but for our own. And if words cannot repay the debt we owe these men, surely with our actions we must strive to keep faith with them and with the vision that led them to battle and to final sacrifice.”

In an era of Super Heroes and celebrity and media-driven nonsense, we lose track of what being a hero really means in wartime – or ANY OTHER TIME. More than a few veterans – including some here – have said to me that the only real heroes are the ones that don’t come back. That’s why we’re here today. That’s why we have a Memorial Day.

Led by the example and leadership of our veterans, I’m honored to be here today at your side. And our whole community thanks you for your leadership, your service, and for your example of REMEMBRANCE.

Thank you.