

Memorial Day Remarks
Richard Debany, Colonel, US Army
May 28, 2018, Springfield, PA

Distinguished guests, American Legion Post 227 Vice Commanders Smeck and Clark, fellow residents of Springfield, family members of our fallen heroes, and, especially, the family and friends of Theodore (Ted) Burton...thank you for attending.

Post Chaplin Art Gutzler and Fr. Anthony Costa, thank you for today's heartfelt prayers.

My name is Rich Debany, because of the Army, I and my family are Springfield residents and I'm blessed to begin my 27th year this month as an American soldier on active duty. I'm both humbled and honored to again be invited by my American Legion brethren to join you this Memorial Day.

On this day, our nation and our community pause to remember and pay tribute to all of our nation's fallen heroes. While they paid the ultimate sacrifice, this national remembrance is also about the living in that we also honor our surviving family members who sacrificed their husbands and wives, moms and dads, sons and daughters, grand daughters and grand sons, and sisters and brothers. Their grief is eternal. No words we say or write can end the pain they perpetually hold; we can only offer our appreciation to them and our prayers for their fallen in hopes to deliver solace. You might see a tiny metal button with a gold star on a field of purple surrounded by laurel leaves worn on the lapels of our fallens' immediate family members. The wearers' bear a loss heavier than any symbol can convey; however, the pin is intended to be recognition from the nation of that loss and as a subtle but outward sign of their sacrifice. I invite any Gold Star family members here today to please stand. Springfield and our nation thank you and we forever honor you and your lost loved ones. Please retake your seats.

Since April 19, 1775 over a million of our nation's sons and daughters have perished on our behalf – for our present and our futures -- for our children's futures. Our society and our culture are intact today because they gave all. On each Memorial Day, we pray that our nation's most hallowed roster doesn't grow longer -- that another mother doesn't have to grieve; that another young spouse doesn't receive a flag on behalf of a grateful nation; that another child doesn't begin a life forever thinking 'what if...' But we are, unfortunately, and we must not forget, still a nation at war and have been for the last 17 years. In Afghanistan, three Army soldiers were killed on June 10, the first since last Memorial Day. Their names and their stories are important: Sergeant William Bays, 29, of Barstow, California; Sergeant Eric Houck, 25, of Baltimore, Maryland; and Corporal Dillion Baldrige, 22, of Youngsville, North Carolina. Two wives, five very young kids, seven parents and step-parents, and three sisters between them. After William, Eric, and Dillon, 31 more perished since I last spoke to you with Army Specialist Gabriel Conde, 22, of Loveland, Colorado, killed in Afghanistan April 30 the most recent. His parents Bob and Donna, sisters Olivia and Priscilla, and grandparents Carolyn, Robert, and Angie are our newest Gold Star family members.

Since World War II, Springfield gave 42 sons. Of that, the Burton family gave one. To them, he was the most important one. To him we dedicate this remembrance and celebration.

Ted was born November 13, 1946 to Robert and Mildred Burton. His younger brother Mark was seven years his junior. From Clifton Heights, the family moved to 145 Locust Avenue in Springfield when the kids were young. Sadly Mildred passed away in 1958 when

Ted and Mark were just 11 and four. About a year later, Robert was remarried to a gal named Marjorie. Together, they had another son, Ken, when Ted was about 15. Ted attended the Woodland Ave Junior High, now ET Richardson Middle School, and then, Springfield High. Maybe because Robert worked so much, or maybe it was just Ted's big-brother nature, despite the age difference, he and Mark were particularly close.

Ted was friendly, kind, and extremely smart – he excelled in high school. He had a knack for languages, speaking fluent Spanish. He was quite active in the Boy Scouts and formed strong relationships through scouting activities. He set a fine example for the many other, mostly younger, kids in the neighborhood. His next door neighbor, Jon Schwenzer, was three years younger and, like Ted, the oldest kid in his family. He looked up to Ted and admired him for both his academic and athletic achievements. Jon played catch in the yard and Monopoly and Chutes and Ladders in the house with the Burton brothers. For years, Ted mentored and set an example for Jon and many others in a variety of ways.

Ted graduated from Springfield High School in 1964, moved to North Carolina, and attended Duke University for a few years.

He entered the Army and after Officer Candidate School was commissioned a second lieutenant in the infantry. Times being as they were, on February 24, 1969 he arrived in Vietnam. He first served as platoon leader with Company C, 2nd Battalion, 39th Infantry; and, later, as a platoon leader in Company B, 2nd Battalion, 47th Infantry Regiment -- the Panther Battalion. Both battalions were under the 9th Infantry Division. In 1969 these battalions operated in the Long An province within the interlaced rivers, flood-plains, and rice paddy dominated Mekong Delta region of southern South Vietnam.

As an infantry platoon leader, Ted led scores of soldiers. At just three months past his 22nd birthday when he arrived, he was only a couple years older than most of his troops.

One Company B soldier was Dwight McNees, 19, from Bedford, Michigan. At Gull Lake High School, Dwight was quiet and soft spoken despite his 6.1, 225 pound frame. He played varsity football there and was close to his little brother Rodger who was only 11 months and one class behind him. In September of '68, when he was 18, Dwight married his high school sweetheart Roberta. Not drafted, Dwight was a volunteer. One of the reasons he enlisted was because he felt it was necessary to get gainful employment in the Battle Creek area. We can only imagine the anxiety his parents Clifford and Rosa felt as both Dwight and Rodger, their only kids, joined the military and served in Vietnam at the same time - Dwight a soldier, Rodger a Marine in the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marine Division just to the north of his older brother. Given his size and strength, it's no surprise he was eventually assigned as an M-60 machine gunner. At 23 pounds, the M-60 is quite a bit heavier than a rifle. Add a couple hundred rounds of ammunition to carry and you can imagine how size and strength matter. Dwight was so proud to be promoted to Spec-4 in January that he circled his name on his promotion orders and wrote "look" before sending them home to his parents.

It was young men, kids really, like Dwight that Ted led. Ted was unquestionably the type of leader who took the time to know his men and, in doing so, inspired them to achieve more. Like when he was the big brother on Locust Avenue, he found himself responsible for them and he placed his personal safety behind theirs whenever possible. That opportunity was frequent in Long An.

In one fight on March 27th, while assigned to the 39th, while Lieutenant Burton was leading his platoon to an ambush position, they came under intense enemy fire. Although Ted immediately positioned his men in defensive positions, the platoon suffered several

casualties. During the fight, he disregarded his own safety and, under a hail of gunfire, moved across open terrain to pull one of his wounded to safety. Again exposing himself, he adjusted artillery fire via radio which enabled his platoon to regain the initiative and put the enemy to rout. For his heroism that day, the Army awarded Ted the Bronze Star Medal. If not for his decisive leadership and his disregard for his personal safety, how many other soldiers would have died that March day? How many more would have never come home?

Those that have been in combat know that the intense moments are in between longer spans of normalcy and perhaps even boredom. 62 days into his tour, while now assigned as a platoon leader in Company B of the Panthers, April 26 started as most other days for Ted and his men. Bob Pries, another member of the Panthers, fondly recalls passing a football around with Ted early that fateful Saturday.

However normal the day may have started, it would end with great loss and with horrible, sustaining memories for the survivors. That day, an element under Company B, along with Lieutenant Burton, initiated a reconnaissance in force; the general purpose being to make contact with the enemy in an effort to gather information. Contact was made and the men of Company B came under fire from, as witnesses said, a substantial North Vietnamese Army rather than Viet Cong force. Once again, Lieutenant Burton selflessly and courageously left his secure position to help one of his injured soldiers. He moved in full view of the enemy drawing fire along the way. When he reached the soldier, he began administering aid still exposing himself to the determined North Vietnamese. Demonstrating the finest servant leadership, while helping and shielding the wounded man, Ted, son of Robert and Mildred, and then Marjorie, big brother of 15 year old Mark and 7 year old Ken, friend and inspiration to many, was shot and killed by automatic weapons fire. Killed in that engagement along with Ted, was a big but barely 19 year old kid, a husband, son, and brother, from Bedford, Michigan named Dwight. In the awful fight, each displayed such uncommon valor and gallantry that both were posthumously awarded the Silver Star, our nation's third highest award for valor. They fought for each other and the rest of the men in their platoon, they fought like the entire effort on that field of battle and across Vietnam rested on their shoulders alone.

Separated by just three lines, Ted's and Dwight's names are forever together on panel 26W on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. As we gather here this morning, Company B survivors of that fateful fight 49 years, 1 month, and 2 days ago will pause, as they do every year, on that spot to honor and remember their brothers – First Lieutenant Theodore Burton and Spec-4 Dwight McNeas.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to introduce Ted's brother, Mark Burton.

Thank you Mark. Our nation owes you, your family, and all our Gold Star families so very much.

On your way out today, I invite everyone to pause and honor the names on the bronze plaques just outside the door. These are the names of our neighbors whom, since World War II, gave their lives to defend our nation and our allies - 32 in World War II, one in Korea, eight in Vietnam, one in Iraq. Remember 24 year old Mike Smith who died in Ramadi in 2005, 21 year old Frank Holloway who died near Panmunjom in 1953, and the 40 others.

This morning is intended for mourning the loss and for honoring the sacrifice of our nation's and community's fallen heroes. At noon though, when the flag is raised to remind us

that the American Spirit can never be held down, celebrate, truly rejoice in the lives, the memories, and legacy of love left by Ted, Dwight, and by all our other fallen brothers and sisters.

Before I surrender the podium again, I have a few thank yous... To all the dedicated American Legion Memorial Day planning committee members, Bill Smeck, Bill Clark, Bill Lewis, Rocco Polidoro, Art Sweisfurth, and Gold Star sisters, Suzie and Maureen McHugh for their year-long effort to make today's remembrance possible. To all those that participated in the parade and the ceremonies especially the Springfield High School marching band, led by Ms. Marsha Bowe. To Rose Quinn and the editorial staff at the Daily Times for the amazing coverage you've delivered to our community of our remembrances. To Police Chief Joe Daly, the members of the Springfield Police Department, and all our other first-responders for facilitating the parade and for keeping us safe today and every day. To the Springfield Township Commissioners, and the various township employees that supported the effort. Thanks to *all* that made this remembrance possible. Finally, a special thank you to the family, friends, and neighbors of and the soldiers who served with Ted Burton and Dwight McNees who so graciously, openly, and *often painfully* shared their memories so that we could properly, however inadequately, remember and honor their loved ones. I and my American Legion brethren are honored by everyone's presence today.

God bless you, our nation's fallen heroes, our Gold Star families, our community, and the United States of America. I'll be followed by Chaplain Art Gutzler for the benediction.