

# Memorial Day 2015

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Good morning and thank you for coming. It is an honor to see so many people here on a day like this.

I would like to thank the students—the students who recited the Gettysburg address and Logan’s General orders so that we will never forget the sacrifice of the men and women who fought 151 years ago this year to keep us free in the civil war, and students who entertained us ....

Today, I would like to thank all the veterans who have served us in all wars, and ask all those who have served, in war and in peace, to please raise their hands and be recognized.

I want to pause today to recall one specific group of veterans, and one particular day in history, that day, 70 years ago on June 6 and a small beachhead in France at a place that few people at that time had ever heard of – a place called Normandy. This June marks the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the greatest amphibious landing ever attempted, before or since, the landing at Normandy.

Let me take you back to those days in World War 2. America had been in the war for only two and a half years—less than that really since it takes time to train men, deploy them and put them in to battle. It is hard to imagine today, but the war had not gone well at first for the Allies. Allied forces had been driven from Belgium, from Czechoslovakia, France had been overrun, Paris was run by Nazi soldiers, Italy was run by Mussolini-- a Nazi ally, 340,000 British soldiers had been forced to retreat from Europe back to Britain at Dunkirk. Virtually all of Europe had been overrun by the Nazi’s. Many thought that a Nazi victory was inevitable.

When the United States entered the war, Stalin, our ally, began pressing for a second front in the west. Everyone, including Hitler, knew that an invasion was inevitable on the Atlantic coast. Hitler put his top General, Field Marshal Rommel, in charge of the defenses and ordered the entire coast of the Atlantic, from Spain to Norway to be fortified with what came to be known as the Atlantic wall. This is what the Allies faced as they set out from England to bring the war home to the Germans.

There has been a lot written about how the Allies deceived the Germans into thinking that the invasion would come at the French port of Calais, and certainly many Germans were deceived. But Rommel was not completely deceived. He believed from the start that the invasion would come at Normandy he had thousands of troops deployed to stop it. Rommel had the beaches

at Normandy mined, with barbed wire, machine gun nests and the fields around the area booby trapped with devices designed to rip to shreds any paratroopers who landed in them.

Let's go that day, 70 years ago. I want you to imagine what it was like for these young men, some of them just barely men, in their teens, as they came ashore at places with code names like Omaha beach, Utah beach, Gold Beach, Point du Hoc, Sword Beach and Juno Beach.

They faced an intense gunfire from thousands of German soldiers. Rommel had tripled the number of mines in the weeks before the invasion so as they approached the beaches, they and their landing crafts faced mines that would rip them and their ships apart if they hit them. They faced intense gun fire from concrete machine gun nests all around the beaches. The trees, shrubs and ground cover had been stripped from the beaches so there was no place to hide from the machine gun fire. At Omaha beach, some of the ships hit sandbars and the men had to wade ashore facing intense gun fire with water up to their necks, carrying their guns and gear while in water up to their necks. Hundreds of men never made it to the beaches and died in their ships or trying to get ashore.

If they made it to the shore, there were tangles of barbed wire and booby traps. To make sure that paratroopers did not land or survive to help them, Rommel had arranged for booby trapped stakes know as Rommslepargel to be installed in the meadows and the fields to rip anyone to shreds to landed near them.

There were 2,000 American casualties on Omaha beach alone, but the men kept coming. As night fell, these young and often inexperienced men faced intense enemy fire, they saw men all around them drowning, hitting mines, dying, but they kept coming and they kept fighting.

On that first day alone, on D-Day, 4,400 brave Americans paid the ultimate price for freedom—twice what we had lost at Pearl Harbor-- , and another 8,000 were seriously injured. Altogether there 12,000 American casualties, on that one day, but they kept fighting and they kept coming, 160,000 of them in 5,000 assault craft and 289 escort vessels. They never gave up, they kept coming and by the end of June 875,000 troops had crossed into France to take the war home to Germany.

We lost a lot that day in June 70 years ago, and all too many gold star families were created.

But we gained something too. That day, 70 years ago on June 6, marked a turned point in history. American and British forces gained a foothold that would never be lost, even when Hitler finally committed his Panzer divisions it was too late. Our forces, our brave men and women gained a foothold that could not be taken from them, and within a little more than a year, the war would be over. Never again would the Nazi war machine threaten our world or

our freedom. The sacrifice that day kept us free and ended the war. Today, our freedoms are intact, our right to vote is protected, our freedom to worship and our freedom to speak out, and our most precious freedom, our right to vote, are intact because of the sacrifices that they and so many other veterans have made over the years.

There are so many more stories to tell like this, at Iwo Jima, at Guadalcanal, in Iraq, and Afghanistan, in Vietnam, in Korea, of our troops fighting in war so that the war will not come here, serving in peace so that there will be no war.

So for all those who have served to keep us free, let us pause as a city to remember and to say two simple words: thank you.