

The Washington Oxi Day Foundation's Greatest Generation Awards Ceremony
Remarks of The Honorable Zachary J. Lemnios
October 24, 2012
National WWII Memorial, Washington, DC

Introduction

I'm honored to be here with you today and I would like to thank The Oxi Day Foundation for inviting me to present opening comments as part of the two day celebration.

Welcome, Ambassador Panagopoulos, Secretary Mooney, today's honorees, and other distinguished guests.

I am particularly honored to again see His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios'. Your Eminence, you may recall your last visit to our small parish of St. Nicholas in Lexington Massachusetts just a few years ago. In fact, I carry the small icon that you gave me.

In preparing my comments for today, I must tell you that I'm struck by the life's work of Pakistan Social Activist, Dr. Fouzia Saeed, and the Chinese civil rights activist, Mr. Chen Guangcheng, both of whom the Oxi Day Foundation will be honoring tomorrow evening. It is right that they are recognized for their courage in facing personal danger to promote human rights

I am also deeply moved by the courage of Malala Yousufzai, the Pakistani teen recently shot by the Taliban for speaking out for basic human rights.

The Oxi Day message carries on today through these examples ... and countless others. Tyranny and oppression cannot survive when good people stand tall and say 'no more' just as freedom loving peoples during WWII stood tall to oppose tyranny.

One simple word, "Oxi", exemplified the courage and perseverance of the Greek Nation in 1940, qualities also possessed by our world war II veterans and which live today because of their sacrifices.

WW II Veterans

Today's ceremony is very personal for me. I was first here on Saturday May 29 2004, with my wife Stephanie, our daughter Sarah and my parents, when this monument was dedicated. On that warm sunny day, thousands gathered to recognize the WWII veterans as a part of the greatest generation and those who sacrificed to preserve freedom and democracy around the world.

No one can stand in this memorial without recognizing the treasure that was paid..... for the freedoms we cherish.

That weekend, my father William Lemnios, rejoined others that were part of the 20th Armored Division, in which he served. Dad was born in Athens and grew up in Newburyport,

MA. On his 18th birthday, just after he finished his first semester at MIT, Dad joined over 16 million others to wear our Nation's uniform.

The little parish of the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church in Newburyport, formed in the 1920's by Greek immigrants, sent 50 or so young Greek Americans to serve in WWII. Many did not return. Others returned wounded. My Grandparents, Zaharias and Evangelia, served many years in that church and knew each of those families.

To this day, Dad tells me that what he did was neither unique nor unexpected. "We all were expected to serve (and we did). We were trained and assigned duties and we carried them out as best we could."

But the story is a bit deeper. This Division of young men, the 20th Armored Division, landed in Le Havre, France and went through Belgium, southeastern Holland, and into the Rhineland a few miles north of Cologne. They crossed the Rhine River, traveled southeast toward Frankfurt, Wurzburg, across the Danube and on to capture Munich. On the way, elements of the Division (including Dad's battery) together with elements of the 42nd Infantry Division liberated the Dachau Concentration Camp. The 20th drove deep into the Nazi homeland to defeat Hitler and his armies and finished on the German-Austrian border just north of Salzburg, Austria. It's a remarkable story of courage for a Division of young men, many of whom never previously ventured beyond their hometown.

The 20th Armored Division came not as conquerors, but as liberators... for which they earned their nickname.

Closing

The accomplishments of those patriots during the war are legend. Equally impressive is what they did after the war-----this greatest generation set about rebuilding Europe into a bastion for democracy and human rights that has stood the test of time, and crises. They also went home and built America into the world's greatest democracy and arsenal for freedom and human rights.

After the war my Dad finished his studies at MIT. He pursued a career in science and engineering that contributed to our national security. Like many other Greek Americans, he helped make our country strong through hard work, self-sacrifice, and respect for the rights and dignity of all peoples.

The courage and sacrifice that we commemorate on Oxi Day is right and just.

I know I speak for all of us when I say we are inspired by their lives, and pray that when faced with the darkness of tyranny and oppressionwe too will stand tall and defend freedom and human rights.

Thank You