

Remarks by Ambassador David H. Wilkins

Calgary Military Museums Society

May 2, 2008

As prepared for delivery.

Thanks Julian for that kind introduction.

Minister (Diane) Ablonczy, friends of the Military Museums, it is indeed an honor to be with all of you in beautiful Calgary this evening.

And after the winter we've had in Ottawa, I'm really grateful to be anywhere outside of Ottawa!

As I was flying in, safely ensconced in my Air Canada seat, it reminded me of another time I was soaring over the skies of Alberta when I was taken for a ride in an F18 over Cold Lake. If you don't like roller coasters, you wouldn't like this. I was never so happy to see the ground.

And I have to admit appreciating the ground without any snow is a newly acquired appreciation on my part since living in Ottawa.

Never knew dirt looked so good!

Some of you have heard me say this before but I expected and wanted to experience my first white Christmas when we moved to Ottawa.

I didn't expect to see my first white Easter!

If I see my first white Canada Day...I'm outta there!

Minister Ablonczy, I think you'll agree the theme of this grand celebration, "Between Friends," comes at the most opportune time in our two nations' history.

Because when you get right down to it there simply is and hasn't been in world history, two better, stronger, more peaceful and productive nations living side-by-side who do more good on the world stage than Canada and the U.S.

I am blessed to be reminded of that fact every day in my job as a representative of my country in yours.

But last month it was brought home to me in a particularly significant way when your Chief of the Defence Staff General Rick Hillier announced his retirement.

Because you see, General Hillier is not just a Canadian hero.

General Hillier is a hero in my country as well.

He was the first Canadian to take command of U.S. troops at Fort Hood Texas. He was in charge of the NATO stabilization forces in Bosnia and NATO-led forces in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Anyone who believes that liberty's light is more powerful than the forces of darkness appreciates General Hillier's leadership.

But Rick Hillier is the first one to tell you it's not about him.

It's about the heroic young men and women of the Canadian Forces he's been privileged to lead.

"Canada's greatest credentials and national treasures," the General calls them.

And so I say to all of them tonight, to all those who wear or who have worn the uniform of the Canadian Forces, and to all Canadians on behalf of my country and my president:

It is an honor for the United States of America to serve alongside the valiant men and women of the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan, just as it was in both World Wars, in Bosnia, in the Gulf War and wherever we are asked to work with you in answering freedom's call.

This is one of the messages I carry with me as I travel to Canadian Forces Bases across your vast and beautiful country.

I think it's one of my most important responsibilities – visiting with your troops and letting them know first hand they're deeply appreciated and admired by Canada's allies in this war on terror.

Before the terror attacks of 9-11, I think most of us – rightly so – regarded the heroes of the World War II generation as what Tom Brokaw described as "the greatest."

But as I meet with, listen to and learn from Canadian and American forces fighting this difficult war on terror, I am convinced their great grandfathers would be proud.

Just last month President Bush bestowed my country's highest military award – the Medal of Honor – on Navy Seal Michael A. Monsoor.

Monsoor was stationed in Iraq, on a rooftop in Ramadi with his two American teammates and members of the Iraqi Army, when out of nowhere a live grenade bounced off Monsoor's chest.

He could have done what most 25-year-olds would have done: taken the clear path to safety he had open...the one unavailable to his friends.

But Monsoor was a United States Navy Seal.

He was a military man.

And that made him different. Special.

He threw himself on the grenade, sacrificing his own life. Saving the lives of all his comrades.

A very emotional President Bush told Monsoor's grieving parents, "America owes you a debt that never can be repaid."

And when you get right down to it, how do any of us adequately ever say, "thank you" sincerely enough to those who willingly stand up and proclaim, "Send me!"

Those who ask to stand in the gap between us and evil?

Those who like Calgarians Nikola Goddard, Nathan Hornburg and Kevin Dallaire volunteer to defend our way of life and values and make the ultimate sacrifice –building a better life for strangers in Afghanistan?

Those who like Mike Monsoor throw themselves on the grenade?

The truth is, I'm not sure we ever can repay that debt in a way that truly matches the service and sacrifice of our troops and their families.

But for me...I think...nights like this make a start.

And I applaud the Calgary Military Museums Society for your commitment and dedication in honoring your proud military history.

Canada does this so profoundly well.

Last spring I was out in Manitoba and visited the Brandon Commonwealth Air Training Plan Museum.

Few folks know from 1939 to 1945, the skies over Canada served as a strategic training field for allied pilots from Australia, New Zealand, England and Canada.

Many ambitious American pilots were anxious to fight fascism before the U.S. officially entered the Second World War in 1941 and so they joined the Royal Canadian Air Force.

A Roll of Honor at the Brandon museum lists the names of the more than 800 young Americans who lost their lives while serving with the RCAF.

This includes the 379 Americans who died serving in bomber command whose names are listed in the Roll of Honor at the Lancaster Museum in Nanton, Alberta.

The training all these allied pilots received here in Canada contributed immeasurably to victory in World War II, so much so that President Roosevelt referred to it as the "aerodrome of democracy."

A decade after the end of that war, Canada and the United States entered into one of the most successful and unique peace-keeping agreements the world would ever know.

In May 1958, the people of our two sovereign nations partnered to form the North American Aerospace Defense Command, or NORAD, monitoring both the skies and the seas for man-made threats to North America.

This month we're celebrating the 50th Anniversary of this historic partnership.

For me, NORAD stands as the single most profound example of the enduring success of this relationship of ours. NORAD works because our military leaders are smart...savvy and dedicated to the same goals.

As I'm sure many of you know, during the murderous attacks of September 11, 2001 when North American air space was closed and U.S. Air Forces were ordered into the skies with the authority to shoot down any threatening aircraft, it was a Canadian General sitting in the NORAD chair making those life and death decisions.

And it was Canada who accepted hundreds of diverted aircraft and thousands of scared and stranded passengers that fateful day, offering up your hearts and homes in an unprecedented display of compassion, replacing brutal images of destruction and terror with grace and mercy.

For that and for Canada's countless acts of kindness during those dark days, America will always be grateful.

And we need to be.

America must never forget the lessons from the worst terror attack in our nation's history.

9-11 taught us a lot of things. It taught us that heroes aren't movie stars or pro-athletes. Heroes put on uniforms and badges and rush into burning buildings; they race to car wrecks and crime scenes. Right now you can find them at Cold Lake and Petawawa and half a world away in places called Basra and Kandahar. It was heroes like those from the 3d Princess Patricia's Light Infantry who at the early stages of the war in Afghanistan engaged the Taliban and helped save U.S. infantry lives in some of the most intense fighting in the war on terror.

Heroes enlist and serve because they understand freedom belongs to all.

It's not a gift given only to the lucky, precious few.

They understand that tyrants and despots must be confronted and stopped by those who can.

They are patriots.

And I think it's so very important today that we teach our children that patriotism is noble, that it is good and right to remember and respect the sacrifices of all those who went before.

It's not about teaching our kids to fight.

It's about teaching them to protect and defend what is sacred....

And loving their countries like Navy Seal Mike Monsoor, Nikola Goddard, Nathan Hornburg and Kevin Dallaire did ...without reserve.

Shortly after I arrived in Ottawa, I met a fine Canadian gentleman at a synagogue there. He wanted me to know how very much he loves the United States. How next to his country, he holds the U.S. in almost holy reverence. He also wanted me to know that he supports the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. He told me great countries cannot appease evil. And he bears the scars of what happens when nations turn away and hope for the best. It was then he rolled up his sleeve and showed me the numbers and the triangle the Nazis had tattooed onto his arm.

He is a survivor of Hitler's concentration camps. Brutalized and tortured at Auschwitz and Dachau.

Liberated in 1945 by the United States Army.

The same Army that now stands with your Canadian Forces and our NATO partners in Afghanistan.

Decades later we face a different enemy with different tactics but whose goals remain the same: destroy what freedom has built.

And we face the same choices. Confront terror and tyranny or look away.

I had the great privilege of visiting Afghanistan over Christmas with Minister MacKay and General Hillier. I saw firsthand the tremendous strides we're making and how far yet we have to travel. I saw hope in the faces of the Afghan people. I saw resilience and pride in the faces of your Canadian Forces and our American troops.

In a time when we demand and expect instant gratification – progress, sometimes, cannot come swiftly enough.

But rest assured it comes.

In Afghanistan and Iraq because of the best and bravest citizens our countries have to offer – the men and women of our military forces – progress comes.

Perhaps one of the United States most hard-charging combat generals, George S. Patton, Jr., said it best:

“Wars may be fought with weapons, but they are won by men. It is the spirit of the men who follow...and of the man who leads...that gains the victory.”

We are truly blessed to be in such capable hands.

May God bless all our troops and their families. We honor them, their service and their sacrifice.

Thank you for allowing me to share this evening with you.

May God bless Canada.

And God bless America.