

Founding chapter member Sandra Spatz-Wiszneaukas, now residing in Lake Oswego, Oregon, gave the following 2023 Memorial Day speech in ceremonies there.

Today is Memorial Day. A day dedicated to remembering and honoring those who died in battle in our Nation's wars. This is a somber day for our Nation. Wars are fought at a great price, the greatest of which is the loss of life. Yet, without paying that great price, we would lose what we all cherish: **liberty**.

Please join me in a moment of silence to reflect on the souls who wore military uniforms, and fought and died for liberty, since the time of the **Revolutionary War**. If we rang a bell for our military service members who died fighting for **liberty**, the bell would toll *one million three hundred and two thousand seven hundred and twelve times*. (1,302,712 times) And that's a conservative estimate.

The *Civil War*, *WWI*, and *WWII* claimed the greatest number of troops. Humanity never wants to see wars waged on that scale again. It's my belief that anyone who has ever experienced war *prays* for universal peace. Speaking as a Vietnam veteran, I know I do.

Folded in your program is *A Proclamation on the Commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Vietnam War* signed by President Obama on Memorial Day 2012 and *effective until Veterans Day 2025*. In part, the *Proclamation* calls upon *Federal, State, and local officials to honor our Vietnam veterans, our fallen, our wounded, those unaccounted for, our former prisoners of war, and families, with appropriate programs, ceremonies, and activities*".

In keeping with the *Proclamation's* call to remember Vietnam veterans, Bob Hill, member of the Board of the LO Veterans Memorial and in partnership with the City of Lake Oswego invited me to be keynote speaker today.

And on behalf of the *other thirty-four women Marines who served in Vietnam, and all Vietnam veterans*, I am honored to accept the invitation. Approximately **seven-thousand-five-hundred U. S. military servicewomen** were stationed in Vietnam. **Eight servicewomen** died in-country.

Take a moment to observe our surroundings. *You will not find a better place than this for a Memorial Day ceremony*. *Lake Oswego Veterans Memorial* is **nestled** within nature. It recognizes the service of veterans *from each branch of our Armed Forces and our police and fire departments*. It flies the POW-MIA flag with the American flag reminding us that *America never forgets the imprisoned veteran and always searches for the missing*. The *Memorial's Foothills Park* location abounds with the spirit of many Lake Oswego residents past and present. *Personally speaking*, I love this Memorial. *I felt like the City of Lake Oswego said, "welcome home" and "thank you for your service" the first time I saw this Memorial*.

In Washington, DC, there's a descending-ascending V-shaped shiny black granite monument that points and leads to the Lincoln Memorial in one direction and the Washington Monument and the United States Capitol in the opposite direction. It's called The Wall. The Wall solemnly bears the names, in chronological order, of the more than 58,000 servicemen and servicewomen killed in Vietnam.

Since its dedication on Veterans Day 1982, millions of visitors have streamed past The Wall and thousands of hands have touched its surface. Many visitors rub a lead pencil over a piece of paper they've placed over the name of a veteran, taking with them something tangible to keep. The Wall draws visitors from all over the world, notably **Southeast Asia**.

One Vietnamese man who was held for seven and a half years in what he described as a concentration camp in Vietnam said of visiting the Wall:

. . . every time I go to the Memorial, I always lift a prayer to God for Him to receive the sacrifice of my brothers and sisters as **heroic** souls.

They **sacrificed** their lives for humanity.

I pray for God's blessing of power and grace in the **heart** of every **American citizen**, the lives of **military families of Vietnam veterans**, as well as for **humanity around the world**.

When Vietnam veterans returned home, we found we were unwelcome in established veterans' organizations. Outraged and hurt by the rejection, Vietnam Veterans **chartered** their own organization now **well-known** as Vietnam Veterans of America. Chapters were formed across the country. And the new organization's guiding principle became: **Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another.**

I am one of the founding members of Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter #641, in Silver Spring, Maryland. Members of Chapter 641 have been highly effective on Capitol Hill in advocating for veterans' rights. Additionally, Chapter members who knew service members whose names are on the Wall, worked out a plan with the U. S. National Park Service to keep The Wall's surface pristine.

For thirty years, Wall washings have been scheduled throughout the year. Cleaning materials are made available and there's been a steady stream of individuals and groups that *volunteer* to wash the Wall. Chapter 641 designed a coin that reflects the Chapter's close ties with the Wall. I'm going to give out four of those coins today.

I want to invite **Bob Hill** to stand, for a moment, if you will please. Cities need a place to visit to remember the cost of freedom. Bob, in **recognition of your dedication** to creating a place in Lake Oswego for people to visit to reflect on the service of our military, police, and fire departments and in **appreciation for your military service** with the Amphibious Forces in the United States Navy from 1965-1971, I want to present to you VVA Chapter 641's Wall Washing coin. Welcome home, Bob, and **thank you for your service to our country and our community**.

The Proclamation calls for us to honor families of veterans. I want to honor three family members from three generations who are here with me today. Each has a connection with the Wall. Each will receive a coin at the end of today's ceremony.

Please stand when I call your name. David Wiszneaukas, my husband, and Loyal Escort for thirty-one good years. David's a Life Associate Member of VVA Chapter #641 and a Life Member of the Loyal Escorts of the Women Marines Association. David has washed, *and wept at*, the Wall.

Greg Gerding, my son, whose father is a Vietnam Veteran. Greg knows of the loss and heartache of the Vietnam war. He's been to the Wall many times. Greg's a Life Member of the Loyal Escorts of the Women Marines Association **and he has always been very supportive and steadfast in his love for his Vietnam veteran parents**.

Jack Gerding, my twelve-year-old grandson who **loves** to play soccer. Jack's always been inquisitive and eager to learn. Jack's learning about his connection with the Wall. **I know the more you learn, Jack, the more this coin will mean to you**.

I've never known anyone with purer hearts than David, Greg, and Jack. I am **very** fortunate.

Inscribed on Lake Oswego Veterans Memorial's markers and benches are names of veterans who served in or during *Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi freedom, the Global War on Terror, Desert Shield/Desert Storm, Vietnam, Korea, and WWII*. These veterans raised their right hand and solemnly

*affirmed that they would support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic and bear full truth and allegiance to the same.*

One of the names inscribed is George R. Wiszneaukas, my very much loved but now deceased father-in-law, a remarkable family man and Captain in the U. S. Army Signal Corps during WWII. *His name is etched next to mine, and I feel his presence every time I walk in Foothills Park.*

My name, *was simply Sandra Spatz* when I served in the United States Marine Corps. *Sandra*, as name origins go, *means helper of mankind*. The German name, *Spatz*, translated into English means *sparrow*. Sparrows are ubiquitous largely inconspicuous birds. *Helper of mankind. Part of a ubiquitous but largely inconspicuous species. That describes every veteran I know!*

Veterans are *everywhere* working *inconspicuously* side-by-side with others striving to build happy, healthy, productive lives for themselves, their families, and their neighbors. Most veterans do not talk about their personal experiences unless they are talking with other veterans, or they are invited to educate and enlighten others.

I went through Parris Island Marine Corps Boot Camp Training in the autumn of 1966. *Forty-six women Marine recruits were in my platoon. Two women drill instructors were assigned to our platoon.* One was a petite, quiet-mannered brunette named *Sergeant Burke*. The other was a petite, louder-in-manner, curly-haired natural blonde named *Staff Sergeant Eliasen*. *Staff Sergeant Thibodeau* was a ramrod postured male Marine assigned to teach drilling. *Captain Elaine Filkins*, who I knew by name only, was Company Commander.

On a typically hot, humid afternoon of exhausting drilling, *Staff Sergeant Eliasen* and *Sergeant Burke* were standing outside the *barracks portal* waiting for their recruits. After a minute or two of watching their recruits *walking toward the barracks and through the portal*, and a moment before I reached the portal, *Sergeant Eliasen* barked, "RUN!" Flanked by *Sergeant Burke* and *Staff Sergeant Eliasen*, I stepped through the portal and said, "*ladies don't run.*" *Staff Sergeant Eliasen* looked at *Sergeant Burke* and asked, "*what did she say?*" Surprised by my own comment I thought, *Yikes. What did I say?* *Sergeant Burke* answered *Staff Sergeant Eliasen*, "*she said ladies don't run.*" I had just a split second to catch their facial expressions. To my relief it looked like *Sergeant Burke* was suppressing a smile. But *Staff Sergeant Eliasen's* facial expression looked more like a *smirk*, and I was afraid she was thinking, *we'll see about that.*

The last week of boot camp we were taken to a place called **Elliot's Beach** for gas chamber training. Each recruit was given a gas mask, instructed to mask when told, enter the chamber when told, unmask, and sing as many stanzas of the *Marine Corps Hymn* as they could before exiting. I think I got as far as, *From the halls of Montezuma*, and maybe as far as, *to the shores of Tripoli* before bolting outside to escape the noxious tear gas. *Staff Sergeant Eliasen* was positioned to monitor each recruit when they exited the chamber. *Running out*, I heard her voice. But my *eyes were on fire* and *flooded* with tears. I could barely focus on her silhouette, let alone her face, to see if she was wearing a smirk that said, "*Gotcha!*"

On the last night in boot camp, *Sergeant Burke* and *Staff Sergeant Eliasen* came into the barracks. After turning out the lights, *Staff Sergeant Eliasen* said, "*Sergeant Burke has something she wants you to take with you to remember these times.*" **To my surprise**, *Sergeant Burke* started singing *what I would later learn was a Rogers and Hammerstein song from 1946*. Maeve will sing that song for you at the end of my speech. (*You'll Never Walk Alone*)

My enlistment was for two years. From 1967-1968 I was assigned to the *Marine Corps Personnel Section at Bethesda Naval Hospital, Bethesda, Maryland*. There, I interfaced with hundreds of seriously injured

Marines orienting them and walking them through what they could expect following treatment at Bethesda.

When my two-year contract ended, I could have left the Marine Corps. But Headquarters Marine Corps asked me if I would extend my enlistment for another year to serve with *U. S. Naval Forces Vietnam*. Vietnam was a dangerous place. I needed no more proof of that than what I'd seen in my assignment at Bethesda. But what I'd seen filled me with a sense of duty and obligation to serve. And I reasoned that *I would not use my gender, or allow anyone to use my gender, to shield me from serving in Vietnam*.

In the nineteen sixties, *Congress hesitated in sanctioning sending women in the military, except nurses, into war zones*. Leaders in our *Armed Forces disagreed* with Congress. To circumvent, or assuage Congress, military leaders devised and executed a plan *to send **only women who volunteered** to serve in Vietnam*. *Moreover*, they would deploy the volunteers *without self-defense or weapons training*. Does "sitting duck" cross your mind?

My Commanding Officer in Vietnam was *Captain Elaine Filkins*, the vaguely familiar Company Commander of my platoon at Parris Island, South Carolina. I was lucky. *Captain Filkins* was a leader with good sense. Her women Marines were issued a sidearm to carry concealed in their handbags. I never used mine, but I always felt safer with it.

On one of our trips to Da Nang, *Captain Filkins* and I demonstrated, together, that *ladies do run*. The chopper we were riding in came under heavy ground fire as it approached the landing zone.

Sitting next to the door gunner I heard the door gunner yell over the thunderous sound of whirling blades and the rush of wind through the open door, "*when we land, hit the ground running for that building over there*." As soon as the chopper landed, I *sprinted* past the door gunner and *ran as fast as I could* with *Captain Filkins* close behind. We made it to the building only to receive a bombardment of rockets minutes later. Crouched beneath a metal desk, I looked directly into the face of an administrative male Marine crouched nearby. *He showed all the signs of shock. Sobered by the fear I knew was gripping him, it hit me, I could be injured or die here*. I didn't pay the ultimate price, in Vietnam, for freedom and liberty.

I returned home to see, over time, the heartbreaking fall of Saigon, the tragedy of Operation Babylift, the Cambodian genocide, the desperation of the South Vietnamese to escape on crowded, unsafe boats in the South China Sea, and stateside to see the home-grown terrorist bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, the catastrophic loss of life on 9/11, the killing of residents in my Silver Spring community by the Beltway Sniper terrorist, the carnage from all the wars in which our Nation has been engaged since Vietnam, and most recently, the January 6<sup>th</sup> assault on our United States Capitol.

Subsequently, communities across our nation have, mournfully, named more and more highways and landmarks after the fallen, and constructed *hundreds* of memorials to remind us of the cost of freedom.

*In closing*, I feel the need to talk about the unnamed domestic war into which we have been drawn today. The war that's slaying thousands of ordinary Americans living ordinary lives. The war that's robbing *all* of us of our right to live free. It's the war being waged against us with the use of AR-15s, and the issuing of sinister bomb threats.

Patriots who preceded us in *fighting for freedom and liberty since colonial times, and through the writing of the Declaration of Independence, and the drafting of the U. S. Constitution*, dedicated and sacrificed their lives to **prevent** the barbaric massacres occurring across our Nation in our time.

Today, we must be like the patriots of yesteryear. Today, we must be our Nation's citizen soldiers. **Everyone** with power, influence, and a passion for preserving and protecting our God-given rights *must push back*, individually, or collectively, *against the enablers and perpetrators in this war*. The most vulnerable in our Nation **depend on us to protect** them.

And our Nation, *if it is to remain a democracy*, within which all may live in peace, *needs a show of courage from all of us*. All who have ever recited the *Pledge of Allegiance* are recruits in this war. Today, as we remember the more than *one million three hundred and two thousand seven hundred and twelve* souls who died fighting for freedom, *let us **pledge to truly honor** their memory by pushing back against this brutal enemy, preserving our democracy, and protecting everyone's unalienable right to Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.*

May God shield and protect you and your families, our Armed Forces, and our Nation. May God's peace be upon all of our veterans living and deceased. And may God's favor rest, forevermore, on the United States of America.