

Home of the Free, Home of the Brave

A Christmastime Salute to Our Troops

I was six-years-old at the time. It was wartime and I knew this, but not really. I overheard talk from grown-ups sitting at kitchen tables who discussed places with strange names on the other side of the world, and I listened. There had also been talk of sons called up and drafted out. I didn't know what kind of draft this was, and I never thought to ask. The only draft I was familiar with was the kind that blew in the door behind me on cold Wisconsin days.

My brother paid closer attention to the soldier talk than I did. Maybe this was because he was older. I don't know. Or maybe it was because he was a son and wondered if his name would one day be discussed around kitchen tables. Whatever his reason happened to be, he knew what it was, and I did not.

He kept a pile of small, plastic army men in his bedroom. You could buy a whole bag of these two-inch-tall green men, molded into many different positions, down at the Ben Franklin for a dollar.

My brother would line the soldiers up around his room—some on his dresser, some on his floor, and some on his windowsill hidden behind curtains. These plastic toys were the only experience I had with soldiers until the night one of them came to life.

It happened at the West Bend Christmas parade in 1969. My dad, my mom, and us kids were standing on a curb while the parade marched by. Everything we hoped to see that night came down the street from around the corner—snowmen, elves, gingerbread men, nutcrackers, and bands. Santa would be last, as he always was, and it was almost time to wave at the master toymaker. And that's when it happened.

From around the corner—the same corner we were expecting to see the Santa float come rolling around—came a long, flat trailer. No lights decorated it. No costumed angels or shepherds were riding on top. Nothing. Streamers didn't hang from its edges, and speakers weren't playing pre-taped holiday music from its rear. It was simply a long, flat, stark trailer, empty in all ways except for a lone man who stood at its center, a man who looked exactly like the green, plastic soldiers back home, but this soldier was real.

Painted on the backdrop behind the solitary man who stood at attention were the words "I'll be home for Christmas."

And then it started to rain. I will remember it for always.

It rained from the hearts of old men who saluted the soldier back, old men who knew of other Christmases and other wars, and I watched their memories run down their cheeks.

Tears fell from the cheeks of young women as they looked at the soldier who, in that moment, represented every soldier. Would they see their loves again? Perhaps soon, perhaps not. The sign on the reverse side of the backdrop answered such a question. It could be read as the plastic man who was real rolled past us, heading down the street.

There, in simple black letters on the rear of the trailer were painted the words: “If only in my dreams.”

Mothers set their jaws, squared their shoulders, and attempted to be brave. Were they thinking about their boys so far away, boys they prayed for as they marched into battle to protect the lives of their loved ones back home?

Something happened on that curbside. I was just a little girl, but I knew it, and felt it, and saw it. It would take a long time for me to figure out exactly what that was and, in truth, I’m still trying.

Looking back at the Christmas of the plastic man, as I’ve done most Christmases since, usually when I’m on my way to another parade, I remember the night I stood in my little fur-lined boots in the snow. What was the power in those moments that left its impression on my young life and is with me still?

Was it the contrast of two worlds meeting on that street corner, the contrast of a world where the bounty of freedom is enjoyed and a world where the price of that freedom is paid? Maybe. It’s hard to say.

Yet harder still is to remember that there are places where Christmas exists only in the hearts and minds of those who left it behind them, those who, like our soldiers, know all too well that there are no Christmas trees in trenches or choirs on the front lines singing about Bethlehem, places where it might be another year before you taste one of your mother’s Christmas cookies because you’re sitting in a fox hole instead of in your favorite chair beside the fireside back home.

We kiss our loved ones goodbye and they kiss us back. And then we send them off to places we’d rather not, and they go willingly because freedom has a price and bravery must pay it.

America has never been short on bravery—never, ever. It lies in the hearts of the ones who go, and it lies in the hearts of the loved ones who send them, those who must wave goodbye and wait and wonder about those places they’d rather not, for this too takes courage.

My husband and I will wander down to the Christmas parade again this year, as we do every year. The little ones we once towed along are now grown, our oldest being about the same age as the “plastic” man from long ago.

As the parade passes me by, I will think about my memory’s soldier and reflect on the price my own children and grandchildren may one day be called on to pay and, knowing this, I will keep my eye on the chair by the fireside come Christmas.

Rochelle Pennington

“Freedom is still expensive. It still costs money, and it still costs blood. It still calls for courage and endurance, not only in soldiers, but in every man and woman who is free, and who is determined to remain so.” Harry S. Truman

“America will remain the land of the free only so long as it is the home of the brave.” Elmer David

A Christmas Tribute on the 11th Christmas after the 9-11 Tragedy

The sky was blue until it turned black. It was black and blue in New York City on September 11, 2001. Black and blue—like the people pulled from the rubble beneath the tumbled towers.

And red like the blood. And yellow like the fire. And white—white ash from the yellow fire was falling everywhere, on everyone, and little children in short-sleeved shirts wanted to know why it was snowing.

What would you have told those little kids? I really don't know what I would have said, and so I ask.

How does a person look into innocent eyes and explain that the snow falling is not the weather kind, but the destruction kind?

It snowed on September 11, 2001, this “Second Day of Infamy,” as it had snowed back on the first in 1941 when six million Jews were being incinerated in concentration camp furnaces across Germany. Their ashen remains then poured forth from great smokestacks and were carried away by pallbearer winds.

A young woman recorded the horrors of what happened when hell came knocking on Germany's door in her little diary. Her name was Anne Frank, a mere child who wrote with the wisdom of an aged one. Reading her words can make a person's hair stand on end, especially if it's dark—like it was in Germany when those Nazi furnaces were burning long and hot. It was a time in our world's history when darkness came calling, and decided to stay.

The Nazis were coming for the doomed Jews, and this meant they were coming for Anne. She knew it. Many whom she loved had already been turned into snow—and not the weather kind. But before those Nazis came, young Miss Anne had something to say, and it was this: “I still believe that people are really good at heart. If I look up to the heavens, I think that it will all come right, and that peace and tranquility will return again.”

That, my friend, is the voice of hope. I can stare long and hard at her words, reading them over and over, and still they will affect me.

What made it possible for Anne to see past the hatred and horror living in her midst and hold fast to a belief in peace, tranquility, and goodness? If she had survived, we could ask her, but she didn't. So now we must seek for ourselves other voices who, like Anne, understand the language of tears, and yet keep believing that light will find its way—despite the pain, despite everything.

Such voices were found in New York City in December 2001, three short months after the Twin Towers were thrown down, and nearly 3,000 lives with them.

The voices I speak of were gathered around a Christmas tree. It was a huge tree, absolutely gigantic. Those New Yorkers went out and cut themselves down the biggest tree they could find and erected it in Rockefeller Center. Then they started putting lights on the tree. Lights and more lights. Why? Because New Yorkers had a message

they wanted to send to the world about how they were doing since the 9-11 tragedy assaulted their beloved hometown, and they chose their tree to say it: “Never brighter!” So said the tree.

The eight-ton evergreen was reported on by *The New York Times* under the headline “Tall Enough for the World to See.” Those who were privileged to look upon the tree say that they will remember the sight always—especially the lights.

There were blue lights—blue like the uniforms police officers wore as they ran alongside firemen into buildings that everyone else ran out of on September 11. And white lights—white like the hospital uniforms doctors and nurses wore as they toiled tirelessly, serving victims wheeled into ERs around the city; and white like the signs held up on street corners when the sirens passed by, signs that read: “Thank You,” “You’re Appreciated,” “God Bless America,” and “Keep the Faith.”

And red—red like the hearts inside of all those heroes at Ground Zero who felt the blood of bravery pumping through their veins.

Hearts have pounded before, triumphing over tragedies that tested them. What do you suppose you would have heard if you had listened to the chest of one of the Allied soldiers who stormed into Germany to shut those furnaces off over a half a century ago? You would have heard something that sounded like a jackhammer, that’s what you would have heard. On a beach named Normandy, on a day called “D,” those soldiers set out. If they hadn’t, would the six million have turned into sixty? I don’t know, but what I do know is this: When a trial is at its worst, courage is at its best. That’s how it works.

We saw it on September 11, 2001. That was the day that four hi-jacked planes were crashed into three buildings and too many people died. It was a punch no one saw coming—a hard punch that knocked a couple of really big buildings in Manhattan down. But that punch could not knock the spirit of the people down. Those New Yorkers believed they were bigger than their tragedy, and stronger than their pain.

And then they put up their tree as a testimony that light could shine out of darkness. And so it did.

Rochelle Pennington

In Honor of Veteran’s Day Let Freedom Ring!

The wooden steps creaked beneath me in welcome as I approached the screen door above. Little did I know that two worlds met on the hinge of that old door—the world of time racing by from the outside, and the world of time standing still from within.

The Victorian farmhouse, built in the 1800s and set among rolling hills, had been in the same family for four generations. It was one of the great-grandchildren of the original pioneer settlers who homesteaded the place who invited me over to see some antique books, leather-bound and printed in the 1700s, stored in the attic.

She called from beyond the screen, “Come in!”

Her grandfather, who lived to be over 100 years old, resided in this place his whole life. A birthday card from the White House, commemorating his centennial milestone in 1996, was still proudly displayed on the refrigerator.

As noteworthy as the announcement was, the refrigerator called for a second glance as well. It was quite unlike anything I had ever seen. The young woman, noticing my curious stare, explained that her grandparents purchased it in the 1940s and never replaced it because it ran perfectly all this time.

And then there was the stove. It, like the fridge in the corner, had been in use for over 50 years. Incredible! It spanned half a wall and contained both electric burners above an electric oven on the left, and cast-iron burners above a wood burning stove on the right.

The kitchen was without traditional cupboards, and old-fashioned hutches, filled with dishes visible from behind glass doors, were in an adjacent pantry.

Two beautiful, hand-carved pieces of furniture stood near an open foyer area. The young woman explained that these were carved by her great-great Uncle Herman on her mother’s side, and then added three amazing little words: “who was blind.”

Opening the hall closet, which was only about four feet in total width, she commented on the size of closets back then compared to now.

It was while she stood next to the open door that impulse, and a disregard for proper manners, overtook me. I reached inside and pulled out one of the coats.

“What is *this*?” I asked (even though I knew perfectly well it was an army uniform with a decorated sleeve of accomplishment).

“Oh, that’s my father’s uniform from World War II, and my uncle’s is beside his,” she said.

“And this one?” I asked of a third uniform. It was unlike the others, with a much longer, woolen coat.

“That’s my grandfather’s uniform from World War I,” she answered.

I was speechless. The little hall closet, barely an arm’s length wide, held only nine coats—a barn coat for Grandpa, and one for Grandma, too, a couple of everyday jackets, two dress coats for Sundays, and three uniforms.

“How long have these uniforms been hanging here?” I asked.

“Well, for as long as I can remember,” she said. “My grandfather was grateful for the freedom of America. The uniforms served as a reminder to him every day. His certificate from the American Legion is framed on the wall next to the kitchen table.”

I had arrived that day expecting to find extraordinary things in the attic. Eventually we did go up there, and my expectations were fulfilled. But it was the extraordinary attitude of her grandfather that left the most profound and lasting impression on me.

This simple man led a simple life—quiet and unassuming. He raised a large family and instilled values, ethics, and faith into those entrusted to his care, never forgetting that freedom allowed him to do so.

When he was on his way to church on Sunday mornings and reached for his dress coat in the closet, the uniforms were there to remind him that freedom allowed him the privilege to worship. When he attended one of his children's programs at school wearing his everyday coat, the uniforms in the closet reminded him that his children could live a life of learning, instead of a life of hopelessness and restraint. And when he reached for his work coat before going forth into the fields to labor at his trade, the uniforms were there, always there, reminding him that freedom allowed him to choose his life's path, to choose his pursuit of happiness.

Freedom. It was precious to him, and the uniforms hanging in the closet testified to this. He could look on them in pride, remembering the price both he and his boys contributed to the freedom their family cherished so.

Rochelle Pennington

"Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, and oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty."

John F. Kennedy

"Those who expect to reap the blessing of freedom must undergo the fatigue of supporting it."

Thomas Paine

"If a nation values anything more than its freedom, it will lose its freedom; and the irony is this: if it is comfort or money it values more, it will lose that, too."

W. Somerset Maugham

"History does not long entrust the care of freedom to the weak or to the timid."

Dwight D. Eisenhower

John Quincy Adams, sixth President of the U.S., left this message to the citizens who would come after him: "Posterity: You will never know how much it has cost my generation to preserve your freedom. I hope you make good use of it."

John Quincy Adams was the son of John Adams, second President of the U.S., signer of the Declaration of Independence, and defender of liberty. John Adams died, coincidentally, on July 4, 1826, Independence Day. He offered a final toast to the day's celebration before he entered eternity: "Independence forever!"

One Nation Under God

It's Sunday, November 8th. At the moment, I'm sitting in a church pew writing this column. I've not done this before, and perhaps shouldn't now, but I am.

A choir of men is singing what I believe to be the most moving rendition of “The Star Spangled Banner” I have ever heard.

Among the men stands an aged grandfather. Two of his sons are gathered beside him, as well as a son of a son—three generations in all.

The organ is silent, as is the piano, but their voices are not. “Oh, say can you see, by the dawn’s early light, what so proudly we hail.”

There is an American flag behind the men. This flag is beside an altar, and a cross is beside the flag. It’s this flag, and our pledge of allegiance to it, that have come under attack in recent years. Specifically, those taking issue are troubled with the words “one nation under God.” This puzzles me, especially now, at this very moment, as I listen to the singing and look upon the flag.

To believe that our country achieved its greatness, or can maintain its greatness, apart from an adherence to Godly principles, is to fool ourselves. Nothing could be further from the truth. “America, America, God shed His grace on thee!” Our independence was established by founding fathers who held dear to a dependence upon God. This is our heritage.

Those who came before us set forth their commitment to freedom, and issued their warning to those generations following for keeping it. Patrick Henry wrote, “It is when a people forget God that tyrants forge their chains... a corrupted public conscience is incompatible with freedom. No free government, or the blessings of liberty, can be preserved to any people but by a firm adherence to justice, moderation, temperance, frugality, and virtue.”

President George Washington delivered these words in his Inaugural Address: “The propitious smiles of heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which heaven itself has ordained.”

And Benjamin Franklin, speaking at the 1787 Constitutional Convention, addressed his peers with the following suggestion: “I therefore beg leave to move that henceforth prayers imploring the assistance of heaven, and its blessings on our deliberations, be held in the Assembly every morning.” Franklin, who was eighty-one years old at the time, added: “I have lived, Sirs, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?”

Our founding fathers repeatedly acknowledged an independence hinged to a Godly dependence. Even our country’s Liberty Bell is inscribed with a Bible verse from Leviticus: “Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.” (The Liberty Bell was rung in 1776 when the Declaration of Independence was read in Philadelphia. The bell was then hidden in 1777 beneath floorboards in a neighboring church when the British attacked the city because it was feared enemy soldiers would melt the bell down and cast it into cannons.)

“If we ever forget that we are ‘one nation under God,’ then we will be a nation gone under,” said President Reagan when similar agendas to eliminate God from our society emerged during his term. “If we look back through history to all those great civilizations, those great nations that rose up to world dominance and then deteriorated, declined, and fell,” said Reagan on March 23, 1984, “we find they all had one thing in common. One of the significant forerunners of their fall was their turning away from their God. Without God, there is no virtue, because there’s no prompting of the conscience. And without God, democracy will not—and cannot—long endure.”

When will we learn the lessons of history? Will it be when every display of the Ten Commandments has been removed from our courtroom walls?

Recently, in July 2009, a lawsuit was filed to stop the Pledge of Allegiance and the words “In God We Trust” from being engraved on a wall at the newly-constructed Capitol Visitor Center in Washington. This controversy followed the removal of “In God We Trust” from the face of Presidential Dollar coins minted in 2007 and 2008. (The words were inserted on the thin edge surrounding the coin.) The words were moved back to their former place of prominence in 2009 after citizens expressed concern.

It is a sacred heritage we are heir to, indeed, a “great charge committed to our keeping,” said President Andrew Jackson in his Farewell Address. “You have the highest of human trusts committed to your care,” he wrote. “Providence has showered on this favored land blessings without number, and has chosen you, as the guardians of freedom, to preserve it for the benefit of the human race. May He Who holds in His hands the destinies of nations make you worthy of the favors He has bestowed, and enable you, with pure hearts and hands, and sleepless vigilance, to guard and defend to the end of time the great charge He has committed to your keeping.”

We, as the “guardians of freedom,” must not allow ourselves to forget freedom’s foundation—a foundation visible before me as an aged grandfather, two of his sons, and a son of a son sing on in front of wooden pews.

The men finish and are seated, but I hear their words hanging in the sanctuary’s silence. “Oh, say does that star-spangled banner yet wave?” It is a haunting question which is answered in the largely unknown fourth verse of the anthem, written in 1814, printed in the hymnal on my lap on page 575. The pages of this old book are worn, but the message is not: “And this be our motto: ‘In God is our trust!’ And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave, over the land of the free, and the home of the brave!”

Rochelle Pennington

The Statue of Liberty Symbolizes Freedom—including Freedom of Speech

“The Statue of Liberty is more than a monument. She is a beloved friend, a living symbol of freedom to millions around the world,” proclaims the landmark’s literature.

Although we know her as Lady Liberty, her official title is “Liberty Enlightening the World,” words chosen by her French sculptor, Frederic Auguste Bartholdi, a man who cared so deeply about his creation that he fashioned her face after the likeness of his own mother, Charlotte. For those who have had the privilege of meeting Lady Liberty in person, it is an experience not soon forgotten.

The statue, standing proud at the entrance of New York City’s harbor, with her flaming torch thrust heavenward, was a gift from France to America to commemorate our country’s centennial anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, described as “the most important document in human history.” Although France commissioned the undertaking with a completion date of July 4, 1876 in mind, the statue was not finished for nearly a decade after. Only the statue’s right arm and torch were completed by 1876 and were subsequently delivered in time for the anniversary celebration. The remaining 350 individual pieces were later transported by a ship which nearly sunk in a ferocious storm while on its way to America.

The statue, assembled on site, towered above the skyline, and laid claim to being the highest structure in New York City at the time. President Grover Cleveland, dedicating the gift on October 28, 1886, said, in part: “We will not forget that Liberty has here made her home.”

Lady Liberty, with her draped robe flowing high above the waters, is known as the “universal symbol of freedom” and one of “the most recognizable landmarks in the world.” The monument was even designated as a World Heritage Site in recent years, an honor shared with such places as the Great Wall of China and Stonehenge.

Hundreds of replicas of the Statue of Liberty, our “Goddess of Democracy,” have been erected across the globe in locations as far away as Austria, Japan, Vietnam, Brazil, Italy, and Germany. Lady Liberty’s “twin sister,” an exact duplicate (although smaller in size), can be found in France, the country of her origin. This French counterpart was intentionally faced westward so that her gaze would meet that of Lady Liberty who faces to the east.

Seven rays extend from the statue’s adorning crown, one ray radiating outward for each of the seven seas (or seven continents). The rays represent the hope for freedom to be spread across this wide world we share. Beneath the statue’s sandaled feet are chains and a shackle, broken and trampled upon, symbolizing our release from oppression and our “yearning to breathe free.” (Lady Liberty’s sandals are size 879. True!) The tablet held in her left hand simply reads: “July 4th, 1776.”

Independence Day. Our great country will again remember our forefathers who put pen to paper in their Declaration over two hundred years ago and outlined the framework for our freedom. And thus was born America. May God bless her.

The bold commitments of our country’s patriots of democracy are found in three separate documents: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, all of which encompass principles of freedom—freedom to assemble, worship, petition, publish, print, and speak without fear.

Freedom of speech. It is a liberty that some, presently, are attempting to suppress, and the discussion is mounting in volume. The ability to speak freely, to allow ideas to wrestle around, is a liberty our founders held dear. They believed that voices should be heard, whether those voices were expressing opinions in agreement, or in opposition, to the subject matter at hand.

“If the freedom of speech is taken away,” warned George Washington, “then dumb and silent we may be led like sheep to the slaughter.” I share his view.

Benjamin Franklin joined Washington in putting forth a warning: “In those wretched countries where a man cannot call his tongue his own, he can scarce call anything his own.” Franklin believed in the importance of citizens discussing, debating, and deciding for themselves.

Our forefathers understood that democracy would thrive in an environment where an open battleground for differing opinions was encouraged, not forbidden. They understood that citizens should be neither restrained nor restricted from adding their liberated voices to the spirited verbal engagements and vigorous exchanges in the public square.

I am not sure of many things, but I am sure of this: Brave men fought for the ideals of our freedoms. Their bodies were pierced through, bandaged, and lowered into graves for liberty’s cause. These men fought so that those who came after them, the nameless and the yet unborn, would be able to “breathe free.” And so we do.

Rochelle Pennington

“The only way to make sure that people you agree with can speak is to support the rights of people you don’t agree with.”

Eleanor Holmes Norton

“I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”

Voltaire

“The clash of ideas is the sound of freedom.”

Lady Bird Johnson

“Our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost.”

Thomas Jefferson

“No nation—ancient or modern—ever lost the liberty of freely speaking, writing, or publishing their sentiments, but forthwith lost their liberty in general and became slaves.”

John P. Zenger

“If the press is not free, if speech is not independent, if the mind is shackled or made impotent through fear, it makes no difference under what form of government you live, you are a subject and not a citizen.”

William E. Borah

“I would rather starve and rot and keep the privilege of speaking the truth as I see it, than of holding all the offices that capital has to offer to me from the presidency down.”

Henry Brooks Adams

“We believe that free communication is essential to the preservation of a free society. Intellectual freedom is the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction. It provides for free access to all expressions of ideas through which any and all sides of a question, a cause, or a movement may be explored.”

American Library Association

“To suppress free speech is a double wrong. It violates the rights of the hearer as well as those of the speaker.”

Frederick Douglass