

MEMORIAL DAY ADDRESS – STRATHAM, NH

26 May 2025

Good afternoon, Stratham.

I am grateful to stand before you today—on this day of solemn remembrance—as we gather to honor the men and women of this community who gave their lives in service to our nation.

I must begin with a confession. My family and I have only lived in Stratham for 20 months. That's brief, I know—but such is the life of military service, yet it's been enough time for this village to become our home. In the last 10 years, the Air Force has moved us around a lot—we've lived in 10 different houses. Ten. But none compare to *this*. On our very first day in town, Stratham welcomed us with open arms, open hearts, and more kindness than we could have hoped for. If the Air Force gave us the option, we'd plant roots here and never look back.

Today, though, is not about me. It's not about my family. It's about *your* sons and daughters. Your fathers and mothers. Your grandparents and great grandparents. Your husbands and wives. Your neighbors. Your classmates. Your friends. Today, we speak their names, if only in our hearts. We reflect on what they gave—and what we must do, now, to honor them.

Though I did not personally have the privilege of knowing the servicemembers from Stratham we remember today, I know people like them. I've served alongside them in the good times and in the tough ones.

- We've shared the experience of bidding farewell to our families, our friends, and our hometowns to answer our Nation's call to arms as we raised our rights hands "to support and defend the Constitution against all enemies."
- We've known the hardships and privation of basic training, the pride of pushing beyond our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual limits to achieve something and become someone we were not just a few months earlier.
- We've shared the knowledge that any of "our" achievements were not attained alone, but in brotherhood and sisterhood of a new family. We joined a long line of patriots extending from the first Minutemen who mustered at Lexington and Concord, defended the homeland in the War of 1812, preserved the union in the 1860s, fought in the Great Wars, and on the far-flung shores of Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf and in countless other conflicts.

- We've known the thrill and trepidation of our first deployment and our first moments in combat. And in those moments, time expanded and contracted all at once as we confronted the bewildering fact that someone was trying to kill us. Our training kicked in and we gave it our all. We gave it our all, for ourselves, for our brothers and sisters beside us, we gave it our all for our mothers and fathers, boyfriends and girlfriends, husbands and wives, grandmas and grandpas, siblings, neighbors, friends, classmates.
- And for some of us, that is where our paths parted. We came home and they did not.

These heroes rest in the knowledge that they gave their last full measure of devotion in faithful service. And I know that for every one of these heroes, there are family members and friends here in this crowd today who carry the weight of their loss every single day.

We who are left behind wonder if we could have loved them more or better? Done more to protect them or strengthen them? We are left to Mourn them. Honor them. Remember them.

Memorial Day is a national observance—a shared day of grief and gratitude.

But for those left behind, it's personal. I see you. We all see you. And we thank you for the unimaginable strength it takes to continue on in the shadow of such sacrifice.

My very first duty station was Columbus, Mississippi—a quiet, charming southern town not unlike this one, apart from the thick southern accent. You may not know this, but Columbus has a special place in Memorial Day's history. Back in the spring of 1866, just one year after the Civil War ended, a group of women gathered in a cemetery there to lay flowers on the graves of fallen Confederate soldiers. And then, unexpectedly—and without any fanfare—they walked across the cemetery and laid flowers on the Union graves, too.

No speeches. No ceremony. Just an act of simple humanity.

That act helped spark what we now call Memorial Day—originally known as *Decoration Day*. It was born not just out of grief, but out of a deeper recognition: that our country must remember *all* its fallen, and that in remembering, we must find a way to come together and heal.

As a kid, I spent a lot of time in 4-H Youth Clubs. Maybe some of you were in 4-H too. I can still recite the pledge that ends with: “To make the best better, for my club, my community, my country, and my world.” We recited it at our monthly club meetings on Tuesday nights. At the time, I thought I knew what it meant.

But now, standing here—on a day like today—I understand it differently. That pledge wasn’t just about growing better tomatoes or winning a ribbon. It was about taking ownership of our part in the world. It was a call to *live lives worthy* of the freedoms that others had bestowed on us through their labor and their sacrifice.

And that’s what Memorial Day asks of us—not just to mourn the fallen, but to honor them with how we live.

Abraham Lincoln, in the midst of a war that nearly tore our nation apart, dared to dream of “a more perfect union.” He knew it wouldn’t come easily. He knew it would take work—not just on the battlefield, but in our hearts, our homes, and our communities.

That dream lives on—not in grand speeches or national headlines, but in *places like Stratham*. In the ways we raise our children. In how we treat our neighbors. In how we serve one another. Because ultimately, Memorial Day is about the “one anothers.” The fallen gave their lives that others may live, and live in freedom. Their selfless sacrifice is unmatched. Yet in my family and I hope in yours, it elicits – even demands – a sacred duty to treat and love others well.

Building a more perfect union begins with small, quiet acts. Like walking across a cemetery and laying flowers on a grave that no one else visits. Like inviting a new family—mine, for example—into your town with warmth and kindness. Like showing up, year after year, on the last Monday of May, not to celebrate the beginning of summer, but to bow our heads in remembrance.

Today, I think of my own friends—fellow airmen who never made it home. Chris, Kelly, Rosalyn, David, Tyler, Tori, and Dan. I see their faces every Memorial Day. I carry their memory with me, just as this town carries the memory of its fallen sons and daughters.

Their absence leaves a hole that can never truly be filled. But if we listen closely, we’ll hear what they would say to us now:

Don't squander what we gave our lives for.

Don't take for granted the chance to cheer at a Little League game, the freedom to speak your mind, to worship your God, the right to live in a community like this.

Don't let division or cynicism rob you of hope. Don't forget that this country, imperfect as it is, was built on the idea that everyday people must come together and to do both the ordinary acts of governing ourselves and the extraordinary act of building a better country and a better world.

Live boldly. Love deeply. Serve others. Build something that lasts.

That's how we honor the fallen. That's how we extend the legacy of their sacrifice, for in their service, they did not look backwards at past grievances, but forwards, toward a better future for their Nation and their loved ones.

So today, as the flag flutters in the breeze and the bugle calls out *Taps*, let's not simply remember our cherished dead. Let's *recommit* to their legacy. Let's decide, together, that we will be a people worthy of their sacrifice.

Let's build Lincoln's "more perfect union"—starting here, in Stratham. In our homes, our schools, our workplaces, and yes—even in our town meetings. In the spirit of their sacrifice, let us lay aside our preferences, our prejudices, our pride, and our opinions, to see one another as a brother or sister, a neighbor and a friend. Let us do so to extend their hopes, dreams, legacies.

Let this be the kind of town, the kind of nation, that remembers not only with words, but with deeds.

May God bless our fallen heroes, may God bless their families, and may God bless this beautiful town we now call home.

Thank you.