

Remarks by Cadet Mason Westphal, Air Force ROTC
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National Prisoners of War and Those Missing in Action Recognition Day
Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks

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On September 17th, 1944, the 19-year old radio operator, Buford Milner, watched as his B17 burst into flames. The rest of the crew bailed but a piece of flak severed Buford's communication line and his parachute caught fire before he was able to get out. In the last few months, he had survived a four-engine failure and a flak hit to the wing, which left a hole big enough for three of his flight mates to stand in but now he stood 30,000 feet in a burning plane without a parachute. He quickly searched for a usable parachute but only found two burnt ones. He was contemplating jumping without a parachute assuming that he would fall unconscious well before hitting the ground and that seemed preferable than being burned alive. But at that moment, a voice from the back of his head repeated, 'Bomb bay, bomb bay, bomb bay.' He sprinted to the bomb bay and discovered a smoldering parachute bag. Burning his hands as he tore the bag open, by a miracle the parachute was still intact.

There was no doubt in his mind he set the world record that day getting that parachute on! As he jumped out of the plane, he wondered where he was. He knew they were over Holland but was he close to ally lines? His flight suit had protected his body well, but his face and hands were substantially burned. As he drifted down, he noticed the little dots of men below. They were all in grey. Once on the ground, he was greeted by a squadron of German infantry. After being captured, the Germans treated his wounds even applying burn cream that likely saved his eyesight. The captain of the unit was the only one who spoke English and admitted he knew the Germans were going to lose the war, and that he asked Buford if he could report the good treatment he had received here.

Another major action started on September 17, 1944 and was why Buford was in the air that day. Operation Market Garden was large air born assault across the Netherlands designed to crack open Northern Germany to allied armies. Buford's squadron, 750th Bomb Squadron, was tasked that day with bombing targets in support of the British First Airborne division. Buford was scheduled to be transferred to a prisoner of war camp later that day, but fate intervened. Eight hours after he crashed, the German unit he was captured by were overrun by the advanced units of the British 30th Corps and Buford was freed. Buford pleaded to the commanders of the unit to push forward and that his fellow airmen were only a few miles further, but they were on strict orders to hold at the current position.

While Buford only remained captured for eight hours, the rest of his crew were held as POWs 'til the end of World War II. You may wonder how I possibly know the inner thoughts of a man during events that happened nearly 75 years ago. Technical Sergeant Buford Roberts Milner is my great grandfather and I wouldn't be speaking here today without him surviving the impossible odds of that day. From finding a parachute to not being shot on site by the Germans, he is a truly blessed man.

Inspired by men such as my great grandfather, grandfather, and uncle, I am pursuing a commission in the world's greatest Air Force. I would like to discuss what it is like to be pursuing a commission in remembrance of those that have gone before. President Ronald Reagan said, 'Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We didn't pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same.'

I have often pondered how lucky I am to live in America. I can say what I want, believe what I want, and complain about what I want without the fear of been beaten, thrown in jail, or even killed. That is just not the case across the world, and the maintenance of those freedoms are not free. It takes brave men and women across this great nation to fight and sometimes die to prevent those freedoms from dying. Today we remember those who have withstood torture and immense suffering as Prisoners of War. We also remember the men and women who completely disappeared and have not yet returned home to families and a hero's welcome and remain missing in action. I personally have felt an obligation to serve, and to preserve all the freedoms generation after generation ahead of me fought so hard for.

The Air Force ROTC program has provided me with a way to pay for college, job security, and immense leadership skills just in the two short years I have completed. But the biggest opportunity ROTC has given is a path into the world's greatest Air Force to protect the freedoms of everyone across this great nation. When people ask why I joined military, I believe one of our most famous prisoners of war who spent five and a half years as a prisoner at the Hanoi Hilton Senator John McCain said it best, 'Nothing in life is more liberating than to fight for a cause larger than yourself, something that encompasses you but is not defined by your existence alone.'

According to the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, as of August 30th 2019, 82,018 service members are unaccounted for across the world. Around 88% are from World War II, nine percent from the Korean War, two percent from the Vietnam War, and one percent from the later conflicts in our nation's history. Each one of these soldiers had families, ambitions, and dreams but gave their very existence in service to this country. Today we fly the solemn black and white POW/MIA flag in reembrace of each one of those soldiers. We will continue to make every effort to return these heroes home. We shall never forget them.

Shortly I will read part of one of the most famous speeches in American history, but first let me give you some context. The Civil War tore this country apart. Over 400,000 soldiers were prisoners of war with thousands dying in squalor that rivals Hades in camps such as Andersonville. Accounting for the missing was pioneered during Civil War, by people such as Clara Barton founder of the Red Cross, yet thousands were left in unmarked graves. Now I want to read to a portion of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address: We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.' Our brave service members have continued to consecrate fields across the world after that day and it is incumbent on each one of us to continue preserve the freedoms so often protected by the sacrifices of the living, the dead, the imprisoned and the missing.

Today it has been my great honor to tell you about the story of my great grandfather, the pursuing of a commission in remembrance, and finally why we are all here today in remembrance of POW/MIA. We can never fully repay them for the sacrifices they have made for this country, but we will never....*never* forget them. Thank you."