

## Memorial Day keynote speech

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By: Capt. Mary Ross

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Rockville Centre Memorial Day Parade Grand Marshal Capt. Mary Ross gave a speech to all in attendance about her experiences helping soldiers. Ross was part of the 2007 troop surge, and was responsible for providing mental health services to the soldiers there. Prior to that, she spent over three years in Heidelberg, Germany. "It was a complex, intense task and the very one that I joined the service to perform," Ross said. "And one that has changed my views on so many things in my life and in the world we live in." Below is the text of her speech, in full.

Up until a few years ago, Memorial Day to me was a day to remember all of those who died serving our country in the pursuit of preserving our freedom and way of life. To me, it meant honoring those who died during the World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, OIF/OEF and I would think a lot about Pearl Harbor and memorial walls of fallen soldiers. And for those Americans who have not been affected personally by a war, I'll assume that the meaning of Memorial Day holds similar sentiments for them as well. But they should know that in some way or in some fashion, a soldier is affecting their life. They just need to look a little harder for a little longer.

During the last several years, Memorial Day has come to mean so much more to me. I am no longer focused on those that have perished during battle or by a sniper or an Improvised Explosive Device (IED). And perhaps Veteran's Day is reserved for everyone else. But I can't help but think of the hundreds of thousands of soldiers who returned from war with life altering, debilitating wounds, both seen and unseen. Sixty-four percent of returning OIF/OEF soldiers are suffering from some sort of mental health issue, from depression and/or anxiety to full blown Post Traumatic Stress Disorder-originating from World War I as shell shock, in which symptoms ranged from moderate panic attacks causing soldiers to flee from the battlefield and quite often court martial for desertion, to full-blown psychosomatic paralysis of one or multiple limbs. And this disease is just as deadly as any sniper or IED.

Mental health research and resources have come an extremely long way in treating PTSD. But what have remained constant are the symptoms. They haven't changed. At least 109 service members killed themselves in the first four months of 2009. That's almost as many members of the military who died during the same period in Iraq and Afghanistan, which is 128.

Sixty-four of those who committed suicide were in the Army, which is on track to break last year's record, 318.

Since 2001, 988 soldiers in the Army, Army Reserve and Army National Guard have killed themselves and about four of every five of them were on active duty. At least another 997 in the Navy, Navy Reserve, Air Force, Air Force Reserve, Marines and Coast Guard killed themselves in the same period. The Air National Guard gave no figures.

The total, 1,985, is nearly three times the number of all U.S. troops killed in Afghanistan since 2001, now at 683, and is approaching half of the entire military death toll of 4,296 in the Iraq war. Perhaps most startling are suicide attempts. The Army last year said attempts had "climbed exponentially," from 350 when first tracked in 2002 to 2,100 in 2007. The other services had fewer, the Navy leading with slightly more than 500 that year.

Failed relationships, tangled finances and legal problems, combined with the effects of this long war, play roles in suicides. While the factors contributing to this alarming rate, and there are many more to be sure, I cannot help but believe that the pace and frequency of multiple deployments figure in as well. You will not find the names of these soldiers on any memorial wall or honored in any fashion. But believe me, they are most certainly casualties of war. So please, if they are not honored publicly, please do so privately.

Their suffering as well as their courage and determination compound my thoughts and what I saw in Baghdad left me in utter and complete awe of the human will, courage, and persistence in the face of such an unpredictable and evil enemy. Mission after mission, day after day, month after month these young men and women faced their worst fear, over and over again. They are simply amazing and I am convinced that there is no one anywhere that is greater, more courageous, tenacious, than an American

soldier. And I have to say: those 19-year-old female MP gunners were awesome!

Our new combat veterans are coming home heroes, being greeted with hometown parades, waving flags, and having streets named after them. But the soldiers of Vietnam didn't come home to waving flags and parades. As a young girl, I remember a lot of hostility and anger regarding that war.

Then as a woman working at Nassau University Medical Center, and networking with many of Nassau and Suffolk Counties' hospitals, housing resources, and mental health clinics, I found out what happened to many of them. And it really was no secret to me why that happened. And I knew that if the community, and the Department of Defense (DOD), and mental health services were not supporting our new combat veterans, things were not going to be any different for them. That's what drew me to the military at this time of my life. Now we have a Veteran's Administration that is following up with their medical needs with impressive proficiency and a mental health directive from the DOD unlike any in the history of this country. There is a Veteran's Mental Health Alliance of Long Island, consisting of over 75 local not-for-profit organizations that have instituted programs directly geared towards meeting the needs of these veterans, both new and old. This is a far cry from what our Vietnam vets came home to.

Now, there is so much community support and pride for our service members. But even among all of this, the best support I found was walking into the American Legion hall. Any soldier can tell you a story, but it will never compare to the experience. And when I came face to face with the members of the Legion, I felt that I didn't have to say a word. They present with the unspoken knowledge of the experience of combat. The feelings of isolation and estrangement vanished and it felt good. These men and women just took me in like I was a long lost relative and they would tell me their war stories of D-Day and the battle at Normandy, and I'm thinking, "WOW...these guys are the real deal." And I am so honored to be among their ranks. A brother or sister in arms exists throughout and among the generations. And this is what I want every young vet to know. I want them to go there, whether it's the Legion or the VFW. They need to know that their battle buddies are not in North Carolina or Texas or Georgia. But they are right here. So, if you know anyone, please encourage him or her to go.

It might just be what saves their lives. And if you already are a member, let's work together to make our posts more inviting to the youth, with new programs and events that will encourage new membership and participation. And I ask anyone in the advertising and marketing industry to donate some time on the behalf of these organizations to come up with ideas with which we can employ to succeed in this mission. I hope you all have a wonderful Memorial Day.