

Going Over There

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By LTC Reichert

My comments this evening focus on the connection that this place has to our national security and to our history. For over two centuries, our service members have contributed to the defense of our freedom. Often times, they have done so on foreign fields, in places far different from where they have grown up. This fact was characterized in the popular song written in 1917 by George M. Cohan entitled "Over There." At that time, the phrase "Over There" referred to the fields of France during World War I, as the song was written as the United States declared war on Germany and entered the First World War. Since that time, it has come to represent the far corners of the globe where our brave young men and women in uniform have served our country with honor, and still do to this day.

Throughout history, our service members have began their journey "Over There" from facilities just like this. This train station represents so many places across this country that have seen our young men and women go off to war. Whether it was from a sea port, a train station or an airport, places like this have served as the starting point for men and women who have stood up when our nation needed them most.

This particular facility was built in 1911, and served as the primary ground transportation hub until the railroad ceased passenger service in Nacogdoches in 1954. Think of how many sons and daughters of Nacogdoches County left to go "Over There" from this very depot; men and women who served during World War I, World War II, and the Korean War. They served during a period of time that not only shaped the future of our country, but the very future of the entire world. It is likely that the majority of them had never left the local area, and now they would leave to go fight in places they may have never even heard of.

These men and women had several things in common that they share with all soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines throughout our history, past and present. As our service members go off to war, they encounter a variety of emotions and expectations. They feel a sense of overwhelming pride in serving their country. They share a sense of sadness in leaving behind their family members, friends and loved ones. And they share a measure of anxiety in the unforeseen challenges that lie ahead as they deploy to strange and foreign lands to put themselves in harm's way.

They also have a very unique desire that all service members share. They all long for the day when they will once again see that sea port, train station or airport, because they know that when they do, that means they have returned safely home to be reunited with those they had left behind, and to enjoy the freedom they had personally fought so hard to preserve. So these places represent a multitude of memories and emotions, some joyful, and some sorrowful.

There's one other trait that our service members share that I would like to highlight this evening, and it has to do with the period in between their departure and return. It is the timeless dedication and willingness to sacrifice that characterizes all of our service members throughout history. Since the birth of our nation, our men and women in uniform have served with honor, and have sacrificed so much to protect our freedom. They have demonstrated their willingness to pay any price for that freedom, no matter how difficult the task or how long it takes. This sense of dedication is characterized in the last line of the song "Over There" which states that "we won't come back till its over, over there." That sense of dedication continues today, and to illustrate this point, I would like to share a story from my most recent deployment to Afghanistan.

My unit was assigned to an area on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and was coming to the end of a 12 month deployment. It had been a long year, and we were looking forward to getting home to our families, and getting on with our lives. We had packed up our equipment, and we had even sent a detachment of soldiers back home to prepare for our return. The unit assigned to replace us had arrived, and we were busy with the task of transferring our responsibilities to them. Late one night, my fellow officers and I were summoned to our commanding officer's quarters. Knowing that good news is typically not delivered in this manner, we were curious as to what our commander would tell us. With a somber expression on his face, our commander informed us that our tour had been extended by four months, and that we would move north to a more dangerous area very shortly.

As you may imagine, this was difficult news to hear. We all had plans and expectations, and were eager to get back home to our families, friends, and loved ones. But as leaders, we realized that the hardest task was yet to come. It was our turn to inform our soldiers of this news. As hard as it may have been to accept, we had to inform our soldiers that they would continue to sacrifice for four more months.

I returned to my command post and assembled my soldiers, and with the same somber look on my face, I informed them that we would be staying another four months, and that we would move north in a few days. I recall that my soldiers received the news with blank expressions on their faces as they tried to process the information and comprehend its full impact. But very shortly, I saw the true dedication and loyalty of my soldiers. They began to look at one another for strength. Some shook hands with one

another, or slapped each other on the back. Some made jokes about being the only unit that could get the job done. Others nodded their heads intently and accepted the news with a quiet determination. The sergeants did what they do best, and began barking orders for the soldiers to get their gear ready to move north, and reminded them that it would be business as usual starting the next morning.

In the four months that followed, I never heard one complaint or selfish comment from my soldiers. They continued to do the outstanding job that they had done for the previous year, and dedicated themselves to their duties and responsibilities. We were also aware of the fact that in so many of our nation's wars, our men and women in uniform literally deployed until it was over, "over there." Thousands upon thousands of brave men and women served in locations around the world, in dangerous situations, with no predetermined end to their mission. We were proud and humbled to carry on their legacy of service, dedication and sacrifice as we strived to live up to their example.

We also recall the somber fact that as many young Americans left from this train station to go to war, fewer returned. In train stations, sea ports and airports across this country, our fallen heroes have returned to their loved ones in coffins draped with the American flag. In this respect, these places represent hallowed ground as our fallen warriors return home to be laid to rest. We are reminded that freedom truly is not free, but it comes at a high price, a price that so many of our young men and women have paid for the freedom we enjoy as citizens of this great nation. This sentiment is expressed in a poem attributed to Father Edwin O'Brien, who served as a Marine Corps chaplain in the Second World War. Father O'Brien wrote:

It is the soldier, not the reporter, who has given us freedom of the press.

It is the soldier, not the poet, who has given us freedom of speech.

It is the soldier, not the organizer, who has given us the freedom to demonstrate.

It is the soldier, not the lawyer, who gives us the right to a fair trial.

It is the soldier, not the politician, who gives us the right to vote.

It is the soldier, who salutes the flag, who serves beneath the flag, and whose coffin is draped by the flag.

This depot is a symbol of that commitment and sacrifice and represents the dedication and sacrifice of so many young men and women from this area, and from across this nation, who have answered the call to duty and were willing to go "Over There" no matter what the cost.

