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## At Frederiksted Ceremony, Leaders Say Memorial Day Demands Gratitude, Responsibility and Remembrance

**At a solemn Frederiksted ceremony, officials urged Virgin Islanders to honor fallen service members with more than reflection, calling Memorial Day a time for gratitude, responsibility, and renewed commitment to preserving the freedoms they died defending**

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Family members and veterans stand along the Frederiksted waterfront holding flowers before placing them in the ocean, honoring service members who were lost at sea during war and remembering the sacrifices behind Memorial Day. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM.

Virgin Islanders gathered Monday morning at Vern Richards Veterans Memorial Park in Frederiksted for a solemn Memorial Day ceremony honoring fallen service members, with

officials calling on the community to treat the day not as a routine holiday, but as a responsibility to remember those who gave their lives in military service.

The May 25 ceremony, held under the theme “For We Are Grateful,” included remarks from military and government leaders, musical selections, a POW/MIA tribute, the placement of wreaths, and a ceremonial salute by members of the V.I. National Guard, who fired their weapons three times in honor of fallen comrades. Family members also placed flowers in the ocean in remembrance of soldiers lost at sea, while the V.I. National Guard band performed several selections during the program.

A similar Memorial Day observance was also held on St. Thomas.

Keynote speaker Major Arthur R. Burton, commander of the 285th Virgin Islands Air National Guard, centered his remarks on the meaning of sacrifice across every branch of service, from soldiers and Marines to sailors, airmen, Coast Guard members and members of the U.S. Space Force.

Burton said the creeds and traditions of military service are “declarations of service, declarations of loyalty, declarations of sacrifice, and declarations of love.” He urged those gathered to remember not only the service member who died in combat, but also the Virgin Islander who left home in service to the nation and never returned.

“We remember every service member whose final act was one of love for this nation,” Burton said. “They were more than uniforms, they were sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, neighbors and friends, Americans who believed freedom was worth defending.”

He said Memorial Day requires more than reflection, calling it a reminder to live in a way that honors the lives lost.

“Because of them we are free to gather here today, because of them our flag still flies, because of them this nation endures,” Burton said. “So, Memorial Day asks something of us, not only remembrance, but responsibility to live lives worthy of their sacrifice, to protect the freedom they defended, to care for one another, to teach future generations the true cost of liberty, and to never forget that freedom is never free.”

Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett also addressed the gathering, saying Memorial Day is a solemn occasion of gratitude and remembrance, and that the Virgin Islands has made an outsized contribution to the U.S. military.

“Our islands may be small in size, but they are immense in their contributions to the United States military,” Plaskett said, noting that Virgin Islanders have served across generations and conflicts.

She said the territory’s history is tied to America’s wars and struggles for freedom, with Virgin Islanders serving in World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, Afghanistan and Iraq. Plaskett said the territory has one of the nation’s highest per-capita rates of military service, and the highest percentage of women in uniformed service among all states and territories.

Speaking from Vern Richards Veterans Memorial Park, Plaskett said the site itself carries deep meaning for those who served. “This park was dedicated in 1972 to the memory of all of those who have served these Virgin Islands,” she said. “We owe them more than a ceremony. We owe them a commitment to build a nation worthy of their service.”

Plaskett said her office continues to advocate for veterans' benefits, healthcare and support systems, including for the families of fallen service members. She referenced work related to Tricare Prime, veterans assistance funding during the pandemic, National Defense Authorization Act provisions supporting service members, coordination with the VA Caribbean Healthcare System, and legislation aimed at creating hiring incentives for veterans, Guard members and reservists.

She also urged residents to remember Gold Star families and those who still carry the grief of losing loved ones in uniform. Plaskett shared that she had called a family member that morning whose own memory of loss went back to World War II, when the family learned that her uncle Earl Slater, a U.S. Navy member, had been lost.

"Too often the sacrifice of the territory of veterans go unseen. Too often our islands are an afterthought in the national conversation. Too often, even here at home, we have forgotten," Plaskett said.

She warned that the world remains unstable, with "wars and rumors of war" not far from the region, and said the territory must continue to honor the fallen through action.

"We will do the work of memory, we will build the monuments, we will say the names, we will honor those who have served," Plaskett said. "To the fallen, we remember you, we honor you, and we will never let you be forgotten."

St. Croix Administrator Samuel Sanes, representing Governor Albert Bryan Jr. and Lt. Governor Tregenza Roach, used his remarks to remind residents that the freedoms exercised every day — including the right to assemble and the right to speak freely — were secured through the sacrifice of service members.

Sanes also pointed attendees to the 9/11 monument dedicated the day before, saying the names etched there would remain a lasting reminder of the ultimate sacrifice made by Virgin Islanders.

He then challenged the community to show stronger support for future Memorial Day observances, noting that the number of empty seats at the ceremony stood in contrast to the territory's military contributions.

"We have more empty seats here than occupied seats," Sanes said. "A territory that per capita has given to the military, more as the honorable delegate mentioned, more per capita. Imagine that. This should be filled to capacity."

Sanes said Memorial Day should draw families, friends and neighbors in large numbers because it honors those who made it possible for citizens to speak, assemble and live freely.

"My homework now to you individuals is that when you come back next year, bring your friends, bring your family members," he said. "Let us honor those that has given up, giving so much. Let us ensure that their memory will be remembered forever."

The St. Croix program also recognized honored veterans whose names were read during the ceremony as part of the "Forever Remembered" tribute for May 2025 through May 2026:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Date of Death</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Branch</b>
John A. Fought	06/08/2025	AT2	Navy

<b>Name</b>	<b>Date of Death</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Branch</b>
Lionel A. Andreas	06/09/2025	PV2	Army
Marjorie Ann Drummond	07/18/2025	SP4	Army
Robert P. Yearwood	07/28/2025	SGT	Air Force
Courtney W. Woods	08/03/2025	PFC	Army
Bernard Christian	09/24/2025	PFC	Army
Selassie A. Newton	10/02/2025	SP4	Army
Raul A. Garcia	10/19/2025	SP4	Army
Christian Olaf Christensen	10/27/2025	SP5	Army
James A. Maynard	11/09/2025	CPL	Army
Gordon M. Haynes	11/14/2025	SPC	Army
John C. DeGrasse	12/01/2025	PFC	Army
Alric M. Battiste	02/28/2026	PFC	Army
Richard A. Schrader	04/09/2026	CW2	Army
John A. Bell	04/20/2026	PFC	Army
Andres Avila-Esperanza	04/30/2026	SP4	Army

The ceremony closed with the same message carried throughout the morning: that Memorial Day is not only a time to mourn those who died in service, but a call to protect their legacy through remembrance, gratitude and care for the families and communities they left behind.