

The Virgin Islands Consortium

They Secured The Freedoms We Take For Granted: Territory Remembers Those Who Died While Serving

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ST. CROIX -- "It is the veteran, not the preacher, who has given us freedom of religion. It is the veteran, not the reporter, who has given us freedom of the press," said Annie Day Henry, the mistress of ceremony at Monday's Memorial Day ceremony in Frederiksted at the Verne Richards Memorial Park, reading from a popular poem. "It is the veteran, not the poet, who has given us freedom of speech. It is the veteran, not the campus organizer, who has given us freedom to assemble."

Those words would set the tone for the remainder of what was a memorable event following a gathering at the Frederiksted Post Office Square and a procession at the Frederiksted Cemetery, where departed comrades were honored.

With simultaneous events taking place here and in St. Thomas, Governor Kenneth Mapp participated in the Charlotte Amalie affair, while Lieutenant Governor Osbert Potter engaged on St. Croix.

The dayslong event included a march from the Frederiksted Cemetery to the memorial park on the waterfront, and included a variety of high school bands and other groups proudly parading through the town of Frederiksted. Yet, the exuberance of the performances could not take away from the central focus of Memorial Day: the men and women in the U.S. armed forces who gave the ultimate sacrifice while serving.

"The veterans we pause to remember on Memorial Day are the patriots who left their homes and families when their country called," said Charles David, Legionnaires District #10 commander.

"We will not forget those who died so that we could be free," said Brigadier General Deborah Howell."

The ceremony included a service remembering Prisoners of War (POW) and Missing in Action (MIA) soldiers, which saw Mr. Potter carrying a wreath to one of the POW memorials.

The ceremony's keynote speaker, Retired Command Sergeant Major (CSM) Christopher M. Dubose, said the day, in many respects, should be one that is celebrated, noting the ultimate cost paid by so many for the security of freedom that Americans enjoy. But he pivoted to a more solemn tradition that highlights the cost borne by family members left behind. With the help of two service members, CSM Dubose performed a roll call, seeking the response of three soldiers but receiving answers from only two.

"Cadet Robinson," he called, receiving no response. "Cadet Joe Robinson," he called out a second time to no avail. "Cadet Joseph Michael Robinson," CSM DuBose uttered a last time as he demonstrated the reality of war and cost of freedom.

"The dead silence you hear is no one answering for Cadet Robinson because he's no longer with us," he said. "It's a devastating and emotional feeling that gets to me every time I attend one of these ceremonies." He called the names of six Virgin Islands soldiers who paid the ultimate sacrifice, stating, "I ask you today, if you have the good fortune of running into a family member of one of these great Americans, that you take time to give them a great big hug and a special thank you for their family member's sacrifice."

Mr. Potter followed along the same lines in recognizing the freedoms secured by the sacrifice of those who served, but he also expressed dissatisfaction with the relatively small turnout yesterday, and encouraged greater participation for the coming years.

"I know if this was a pre-j'ouvert morning celebration that all of us love to be a part of, the place would have been lined with people -- you would even have vendors selling and it would just be a big party," the lieutenant governor said. "I love a j'ouvert, you see me in it all the time. But I also recognize why a day like today is set aside, and I'm hoping that the people in this territory going forward would be able to get to seriously understand and recognize why this special day is set aside for us to remember."