

The Virgin Islands Consortium

'It is the Solider, Not the Poet That Gives You Freedom of Speech': USVI Joins U.S. in Remembering Fallen Soldiers on Memorial Day

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USVI soldiers have served in all arms of the U.S. Military, including the Dept. of the Army, the U.S. Marines, the Dept. of the Navy, the Dept. of the Air Force, and the U.S. Coast Guard. By. KYLE MURPHY/VI CONSORTIUM

The U.S. Virgin Islands joined the United States in observing Memorial Day Monday by hosting three simultaneous ceremonies on St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix, in remembrance of all military members that have passed away.

A brief history of Memorial Day was detailed in a booklet provided to event attendees. It described the first holiday remembering fallen soldiers, when it was called Decoration Day. People decorated the graves of fallen soldiers by placing flowers on them in May of 1868, after the civil war at the Arlington National Cemetery in Washington D.C.

In 1971, Memorial Day was declared a national holiday, placed on the last Monday in May and expanded to honor soldiers who died in all American wars. In 2000 "The National Moment of Remembrance Act" was passed, which encourages all Americans to stop what they are doing at 3:00 p.m. local time for a minute of silence to reflect and remember the fallen soldiers, according to the booklet.

At the ceremony on St. Thomas, which took place at the Smith Bay Cemetery, remarks were given before the roll call of deceased veterans in the past year, followed by the placing of wreaths, rifle salute and the playing of TAPS.



In his remarks, Governor Albert Bryan said, "I am not one that is big on tradition, but as I grow older in this job I am understanding why we do these things."

He spoke on how in crisis, like the Covid-19 pandemic that the world has endured for more than a year, "You really appreciate what it means to be an American. And being an American is not something that came freely; there are hundreds and thousands of men and women that have died in toil for us to enjoy these freedoms." Mr. Bryan then mentioned the federal support the U.S. has provided to its citizens during the pandemic and said, "These are the benefits we live today because so many have come before us and died. I want us to be really grateful today."

The governor expressed disappointment in what he deemed a diminishing of the Memorial Day holiday. "It is especially alarming to me when Veterans Day and Memorial Day become occasions to go to Atlanta, Florida and other places for carnivals to party and not remember our veterans," he said.

Mr. Bryan brought up the recent student protests because he believes it shows that young Virgin Islanders understand the freedom they are afforded by living in a U.S. territory — which is protected by the armed forces. "It is fantastic because our young people are learning the traditions of a peaceful protest, it is fantastic because they understand what it means to be an American and to be born in a country where you can go and protest," he said.

In her remarks, Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory explained the importance of Memorial Day, "It's one day that is set aside to remember and honor those servicemen and women who lost their lives to our nation... those men and women that made the ultimate sacrifice. It is not only for us to remember the individual service member but to also remember and honor the families of the fallen, for it's the families that gained and lost so much. As somber as Memorial Day is, it reminds all of us that freedom is in fact not free."

Patrick Farrell, director of the Office of Veterans Affairs, explained the importance of families of veterans. "Family members, I am not sure you recognize it, [but] your presence while your loved one was serving was probably even more important than that serviceman or woman that was serving simply because you were the lifeline. You were that person that they could look to, call on, send a letter or send an email to get the life back into them to go back out there and do what needs to be done so that we can continue to live the lives we live today."

Ms. Frett-Gregory ended her speech with a poem from an anonymous author that she felt "perfectly encapsulates the meaning of today." She read the following: "It is the soldier not the reporter who gives you the freedom of the press, it is the soldier not the poet that gives you the freedom of speech, it's the soldier not the campus organizer who allows you to demonstrate, it's the soldier who salutes the flag, serves the flag, whose coffin is draped with the flag that allows the protester to in fact burn the flag. We may never know them all, but we owe them all."

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