

## 'Let us remember that they lived'

David Adlerstein

As the nation honored its war dead on Monday, the guest speaker at Apalachicola's annual Memorial Day ceremony reminded the audience to remember their lives, along with their deaths.

"Just as with the Gold Star families of the past, we say to the Gold Star families of our modern wars that your loss is our loss. The warriors you loved and lost are part of this unbroken chain of valor," said Peter "Pipes" Coffman, the retired historian from Tyndall Air Force Base's 325th Fighter Wing, who served for more than 28 years, including overseas in Korea, Abu Dhabi and the United Arab Emirates.



**Peter "Pipes" Coffman, retired historian from Tyndall Air Force Base's 325th Fighter Wing, delivers his remarks in front of the Three Servicemen Statue Detail. [ David Adlerstein | The Times ]**

"These are not just names on the list, they were the best and brightest of their hometowns. They were the kids who played on our streets, worked in our communities, worshiped in our churches, and fished in our waters," he said. "Let us not just remember that they died, let us remember that they lived. They lived with courage, with honor, and with a commitment to something larger than themselves."

In his remarks, Coffman recounted how the Three Servicemen Statue Detail that stood on a marble slab behind him, came to be, when Vietnam vet and former county commissioner Jimmy Mosconis drew on his friendship with Jan Scruggs, the founder of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, to arrange to have a statue made from the same molds that created the full-length statue alongside the Wall.

"Sculptor Frederick Hart created a masterpiece. He depicted three young men, Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic American, representing the diversity of the forces who served," Coffman said. "They are not generals or heroes of myth. They are infantrymen. They're weary, watchful, and forever united. And Hart positioned them so that they appeared to be emerging from the trees, looking towards the wall, as if searching for the names of their fallen comrades."

"One of the figures, the African American soldier was the very first such representation of a black soldier on the National Mall, and that might have been where the story ended – a powerful tribute in Washington, DC, but thanks to the unbreakable bond forged in the crucible of combat, that story found a new home."

Mosconis raised, and continues to raise, the hundreds of thousands of dollars needed to create the Veterans Memorial Plaza and to appoint it with the proper landscaping and brick work and flagpoles.

"It stands today as an unending expression of gratitude. And when we look at that statue, we see the faces of our neighbors, we remember the cost of freedom, we remember the names of the fallen from our own community," Coffman said, speaking before an exceptionally large crowd beneath a

shaded canopy.

The statue “is not a monument to war. Don’t let anybody ever say that, not a monument to war. There’s a monument to the warriors. It is a testament to the enduring spirit of sacrifice and service.”

“Today is not about us,” he said. “Please do not make that mistake. Memorial Day is not a day for celebration, not a day to congratulate a service member, it’s a day for reflecting on the sacrifices to honor those who fell, and for shouldering the sacred duty to honor those men and women who gave their last full measure of devotion.

“There’s a heavy and recurring thought that echoes in the hearts of veterans and their families, a very quiet, somber truth often spoken among many of us who have seen the face of war,” Coffman continued. “It is the idea that the best of us never come home. This is not a new expression, and it does not belong to any single conflict. It’s as old as our country. In fact, Union Army Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman once spoke of it as he quipped in his sardonic and cynical way, “I think I understand what military fame is, to be killed on the field of battle and have your name misspelled in the newspapers.”



**Samantha Odom sings “God Bless America.” [ David Adlerstein | The Times ]**

Emcee Karl Ivey, from Eastpoint, a retired Army veteran and West Point graduate, moved the ceremony along briskly on the fiercely hot morning, as the Franklin County High School Cadet Core presented the colors.

Army veteran Thomas Everitt led the singing of the National Anthem, and after an introduction of several guests, including Mosconis and his wife Ella, Mark Shields, the commander of American Legion Post 106, and Myrtis Wynn, both retired from the Army, and Jimmy Atkins, retired from the Coast Guard, laid wreaths on the ground in front of the statue.

Scott Bush, retired from the Air Force, introduced Coffman, and after his remarks, Air Force retiree Nancy Genry, and retired Navy veteran Dick Huguenin read the names and rang a solemn bell for the veterans from Franklin County who died over the past year.

Samantha Odom, who earlier had moved the crowd with her singing of patriotic songs, joined with Everitt to lead the gathering in the singing of “Mansions of the Lord,” a hymn written by Randall Wallace for the 2002 film We Were Soldiers.

Navy veteran Richard Fravel played Taps and the program closed with the retirement of the colors by the Cade Core Color Guard.