

WITNESS TO VALOR

By Charles "Chuck" Tatum

Dedication of the Fifth Marine Division Cemetery at Iwo Jima

From time immemorial survivors have had to perform the grimmest task: clearing the battlefield by burying the dead quickly for sanitary reasons. With thousands of dead soldiers littering the fields, the possibility of an epidemic of Biblical proportions was a definite threat. The very ground where the combatants fell became their cemetery. As it was at Gettysburg and other American battlefields, so it became at Iwo Jima. But not just for sanitary reason, but as a place of honor, a site to commemorate their valor. The Fifth Marine Division Cemetery is the final resting-place for its fallen.

The men who trained side by side now lay in rows side by side waiting for someone to say those final words to mark their passage to eternal life, Little white wooden crosses marking their last earthly abode.

On March 21st 1945, the day the Fifth Marine Cemetery was dedicated, many spoke words evoking and praising the valor of these men. Most of what had been said has been forgotten with the passage of time. However, one man's words remain, Forever enshrining the memory of these valiant Marines, the words spoken by Lieutenant Ronald B. Gittelsohn, USN. A Fifth Division chaplain. The text of Rabbi Gittelsohn sermon follows.

On March 21, 1945 the Fifth Division Cemetery had been formally dedicated. Commander Warren Cuthriell and other chaplains prayed, and General Rocky added his tribute to the dead. As the ceremony continued, some one else begin to talk:

“This is the grimmest, and surely the holiest task we have faced since D-day. Here before us lie the bodies of comrades and friends. Men who until yesterday or last week laughed with us,

joked with us, trained with us. Men who were on the same ships with us, and went over the side with us as we prepared to hit the beaches of this island.”

The speaker was Lieutenant Roland B. Gittelshon, USN a Fifth Division chaplain.

“It is not easy to do so,” He continued.

“Some of us have buried our closest friends here. We saw these men killed before our very eyes. Any one of us might have died in their place. Indeed some of us are alive and breathing at this very moment only because men who lie here beneath us had the courage and strength to give their lives for ours. To speak in memory of men such as these is not easy

“No, our poor power of speech can add nothing to what these men and the other dead of our Division who are not here have already done.

All we can even hope to do is follow their example. To show the same selfless courage in peace as they did in war. To swear by the grace of God and the stubborn strength and power of human will, their sons and ours will never suffer these pains again. These men have done their job well. They have paid the ghastly price of freedom. . . .

“We dedicate ourselves, first, to live together in peace the way they fought and are buried in this war. Here lie men who loved America because their ancestors generations ago helped in her founding and other men who loved her with equal passion because they themselves or their own fathers escaped from oppression to her blessed shores. Here lie officers and men, Negroes and whites, rich men and poor--- together Theirs is the highest and purest democracy.

“Any man among us, the living, who fails to understand that will thereby betray those who lie here dead. Whoever of us lifts his hand in hate against a brother makes of this ceremony and of

the bloody sacrifice it commemorates an empty, hollow mockery.

...

“To one thing more do we consecrate ourselves in memory of those who sleep beneath these crosses and stars. We shall not foolishly suppose, as did the last generation of America’s fighting men, that victory on the battlefield will automatically guarantee the triumph of Democracy at home. This war with all its frightful heartache and suffering, is but the beginning of our generations struggle for democracy

“Thus do we memorialize those who, have ceased living with us, now live within us. Thus do we consecrate ourselves, the living, to carry on the struggle they began. Too much pain and heartache have fertilized the earth on which we stand. We here solemnly swear: This shall not be in vain! Out of this, and from the suffering and sorrow of those who mourn this, will come—we promise – the birth of a new freedom for the sons of men everywhere.”

The flag rose, then descended to half-mast. Taps echoed across the volcanic ash dune that was Iwo Jima. The above was taken from the *Spearhead. The World War II History of the Fifth Marine Division*, by Howard M. Conner. Text and pictures appear on pages 121 to 124.

Chaplain Roland B. Gittelsohn’s, Sermon on the Dedication of the Fifth Division at Iwo Jima, has been described by many as the Gettysburg address of World War II. No one since, Lincoln has written words that have affected men’s souls, as does Rabbi Gittelsohn sermon on the dedication of the Fifth Marine Division Cemetery at Iwo Jima.

Its message was unmistakable, Men must live together in peace. If only men had listened

Rabbi Gittelshon was asked to repeat his sermon on many occasions. I was privileged to be in the audience, when he delivered his sermon to the Iwo Jima Veterans gathered in Washington for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the famed battle. His

words and the message of the sermon delivered stirred me. I felt his sermon was so commendable it deserved to be recorded for future generations to listen to and be moved by his immortal words.

So others could hear Rabbi Gittelsohn sermon on tape. I recruited a fellow Marine, Mr. Richard Ramos HQ CO-G2 to help me. I believe Richard's rendition captures the essential quality and message of Gittelsohn's sermon in words we can listen to for all time.

Semper Fidelis

Pfc. Charles W. Tatum

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