**Ret. CSM Rock Merritt – 29 October 2015**

**Speech to Friends & Family 508th PIR – San Antonio, Texas**

Good Morning, Troops.

First, I want to thank you for allowing me the opportunity this morning to talk to you about my generation of World War II veterans. I’ll bet it’s fair to say most you here at this reunion in one way or another have connections to my generation or to our World War II veterans. With that said, let me take you back to 1939.

I was 16 years old, from Oklahoma, and the country had just come out of a ten-year depression. John Steinbeck had just released his book, “The Grapes of Wrath,” which was all about the “Oakies” leaving the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma and going to California, and the number one hit parade song was “In the Mood” by Glenn Miller. Our Armed Forces strength was just 139,000. Germany had just invaded Poland, and Japan was rattling its sabers.

We had our hero, at least we thought. His name was Colonel Charles Lindbergh, and he was a friend to Adolph Hitler. Hitler invited Lindbergh four times to visit Germany (1939-40-41-42). All for the purpose of showing him just how powerful the German armed forces were.

Lindbergh tried to convince President Roosevelt that there was no way America could defeat Germany, but our President kept his promise and stood by our allies. Therefore, Lindbergh resigned his commission and started a three-year campaign to stop the United States from entering into war with Germany. He spoke to 20,000 people in Madison Square Garden. He also addressed a joint session of Congress. Lindbergh had 83% of Americans supporting him. On the 11th of September 1941, Charles Lindbergh lost all his grace and celebrity status due to a speech he made in Iowa titled, “Who Are the Agitators?”. He said, they are not the Germans, but that the greatest danger lies in the Jews—with their ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio, and our government. With those few words, Lindbergh tarnished his reputation and credibility.

At that point in time, America had no proof as to where his loyalty was, as Lindbergh kept telling the country how great Germany was. But after Hitler’s continued attacks on smaller countries, Congress did act. They activated the Draft in 1940, but only for single, 21-year-old men and only for one year.

There was a song out that made all the hit parades titled, “I’ll Be Back in a Year, Little Darling”. Two months before those Draftees’ year was up, President Roosevelt extended them another year. Now the word, “OHIO” started to appear at bus stops, railroad stations, airports, and federal buildings. Few knew what it meant and many didn’t seem to care. When the Draftees’ year was up on midnight, 30 September 1941, you guessed it, the word “OHIO” stood for “Over the Hill In October”.

Two months and seven days after the Draftees went AWOL, something big happened. Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on December the 7th 1941 and on the 8th of December 41, America declared war on Japan. Then on the 9th of December 1941, we declared war on Germany. Now all the Draftees who went AWOL returned to their units. Now you had to live to see this: Volunteers crowding all recruiting stations, trying to enlist. Long lines around the recruiting buildings, with even men 75-80 in age trying to enlist. Remember our Armed Forces strength before the Draft of the 21-year-old single men was 190,000. When Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, due to the Draft of those 21-year-old single men, our strength had jumped to 1.4 million, which is just about the strength of today’s Armed Forces. Oh, remember the hit parade song, “I’ll Be Back in a Year, Little Darling”? Well, that year turned into almost six years for many.

Overnight, our country built the most powerful armed forces this world has ever known—16.2 million men and women in uniform. Today, 15.1 million World War II veterans have passed on, leaving us with just 1.1 million World War II veterans, and they are dying at the rate of 1800 a day.

So let me leave you with this relevant thought. If you happen to meet one of my generation of veterans, you usually will meet a quietly growing old man. He probably has lots of grey hair, or no hair at all, wears glasses, perhaps uses hearing aids, has false teeth, and now carries a cane instead of an M-1 rifle.

What you don’t see or hear are memories. He won’t tell you the time his closest friend died in his arms on the field of battle. He won’t tell you how he endured freezing cold, or blazing hot weather, or that he often lacked shelter or longed for a hot meal and a shower. He won’t tell you about the times he was terrified and just plain scared to death, or that he had countless dull boring hours just waiting, often lonely at times and dreaming of home. In fact, many a soldier will say that war was 99% boredom and 1% fright.

Let me leave you with this quote, uttered over 150 years ago by one of our great leaders: “We will never be defeated by the outside unless we flounder our freedom from within.” This great quote came from our 16th President, Abraham Lincoln, and let us pray to our almighty that this never happens to this great country.

Now, as we kick off these reunion days, if you are one of the remaining 1.1 million of the 16.2 million World War II veterans, please rise to be duly-recognized.