

Ronald Wilson Reagan (1911-2004)

Remarks at a Memorial Service in Fort Campbell, Kentucky, for the Members of the 101st Airborne Division Who Died in the Airplane Crash in Gander, Newfoundland

given on December 16, 1985

We are here in the name of the American people. The passing of American soldiers killed as they returned from difficult duty abroad is marked by our presence here. At this point the dimensions of the tragedy are known to almost every person in the country. Most of the young men and women we mourn were returning to spend the holidays with their families. They were full of happiness and laughter as they pushed off from Cairo, and those who saw them at
5 their last stop spoke of how they were singing Christmas carols. They were happy; they were returning to kith and kin.

And then the terrible crash, the flags lowered to half-staff, and the muffled sobs, and we wonder: How this could be? How could it have happened, and why? We wonder at the stark tragedy of it all, the enormity of the lost. For lost were not only the 248 but all of the talent, the wisdom, and the idealism that they had accumulated; lost too were their experience and their enormous idealism. Who else but an idealist would choose to become a member of the Armed
10 Forces and put himself or herself in harm's way for the rest of us? Who but the idealist would go to hard duty in one of the most troubled places of the world and go not as a matter of conquest, but as a force that existed to keep the peace?

Some people think of members of the military as only warriors, fierce in their martial expertise. But the men and women we mourn today were peacemakers. They were there to protect life and preserve a peace, to act as a force for stability and hope and trust. Their commitment was as strong as their purpose was pure. And they were proud. They
15 had a rendezvous with destiny and a potential they never failed to meet. Their work was a perfect expression of the best of the Judeo-Christian tradition. They were the ones of whom Christ spoke when He said, "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God."

Tragedy is nothing new to mankind, but somehow it's always a surprise, never loses its power to astonish. Those of us who did not lose a brother or a son or daughter or friend or father are shaken nonetheless. And we all mourn with you.
20 We cannot fully share the depth of your sadness, but we pray that the special power of this season will make its way into your sad hearts and remind you of some old joys; remind you of the joy it was to know these fine young men and women, the joy it was to witness the things they said and the jokes they played, the kindnesses they did, and how they laughed. You were part of that, and you who mourn were a part of them. And just as you think today of the joy they gave you, think for a moment of the joy you gave them and be glad. For love is never wasted; love is never lost. Love
25 lives on and sees us through sorrow. From the moment love is born, it is always with us, keeping us aloft in the time of flooding and strong in the time of trial.

You do not grieve alone. We grieve as a nation, together, as together we say goodbye to those who died in the service of their country. In life they were our heroes, in death our loved ones, our darlings. They were happy and singing, and they were right: They were going home. And so, we pray: Receive, O Lord, into your heavenly kingdom the men and
30 women of the 101st Airborne, the men and women of the great and fabled Screaming Eagles. They must be singing now, in their joy, flying higher than mere man can fly and as flights of angels take them to their rest.

I know that there are no words that can make your pain less or make your sorrow less painful. How I wish there were. But of one thing we can be sure—as a poet said of other young soldiers in another war: They will never grow old; they will always be young. And we know one thing with every bit of our thinking: They are now in the arms of God.

35 God bless you.

(738 words)

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