



United States Congressman — First District, Nebraska

JEFF FORTENBERRY

Remarks at Dedication of Utah Beach Higgins Memorial

Sainte-Marie-du-Mont, France

******As prepared for delivery******

June 6, 2015

Tout d’abord, je voudrais remercier Henri Milet le Marie de Saint Marie-du-Mont et Charles de Vallavieille le Président du Musée du Débarquement Utah Beach et Adjoint au Maire de Sainte Marie du Mont, pour leur direction et leur hospitalité. C’est aussi un plaisir de vous voir ainsi, Ambassadeur Hartley. Il est significatif que nous sommes ici, ensemble.

On the night of June 6, 1944, President Roosevelt came on the radio to tell Americans that the greatest battle of their time had begun. He led our country in prayer. America held her breath and her people lifted their eyes to heaven for those who were hitting these beaches, an ocean away.

Along this coastline, the future of civilization hung in the balance. Young soldiers were given the assignment to land in the face of a ruthless, well-trained Nazi enemy. As their Higgins boats opened, machine guns fired and mortars fell from well-concealed German bunkers. Some soldiers drowned before making it ashore. Others died instantly in the hail of gunfire. As General Omar Bradley said, “Six hours after landing we had ten yards of beach.” But somehow, inch by inch, these brave young men, fighting through the storm of bullets, managed to secure the beachheads.

Last year I was privileged to represent America at the 70th anniversary of the great battle. President Obama and President Holland spoke movingly about what D-Day meant and continues to mean. As President Holland said, “France will never forget.” A number of veterans made it to the ceremony. Most were over 90—and all in good cheer. One of them said to me, “I haven’t been here in 70 years. Much better reception this time!”

Something else happened to me while I was last here. I met a historian, a retired officer in the British military, Major Timothy Kilvert-Jones. He gave an extraordinary overview of D-Day with an absolute command of the details of the battle. I was so impressed with the major’s speech that I invited him to Nebraska last summer to give a presentation to our community. While in Columbus, Nebraska, we visited the Andrew Jackson Higgins World War II Memorial at the entrance of that community. When he saw the Higgins Boat and the statue of the troops, Major Kilvert-Jones simply said, “This belongs on Utah Beach.”

Today represents a remarkable effort by the people of Columbus, Nebraska, that small prairie community in America’s heartland, nestled along the Platte River, along the very route where the first Western settlers journeyed to build their

new life. The people of Columbus have now built a memorial to life—in honor of the lives of those men who gave their all. In honor of the veterans who are still with us. In honor of the people of America whose spirit of generosity helped liberate Europe. And in honor of the French, whose partnership and friendship we deeply value.

Back home, the original monument was the idea of high school kids: students in Mr. Jerry Meyer’s Columbus High School social studies class. I want to thank all those noble, hardworking people of Nebraska who I represent in the United States Congress. And I want to thank Major Kilvert-Jones for recognizing the meaning of this monument and conceiving the idea of it on Utah Beach.

I think this effort is worthy of the World War II generation—the Greatest Generation, as we call them today. We reflect fondly and appropriately on that great generation. We admire their courage. We are nostalgic for their values. We want what they had: purpose, determination, and a can-do spirit.

So, let’s do it again. Let’s attack the disquiet that is affecting so many of our countries. We live in an age of deep anxiety. We long to rediscover our narrative, to recover the source of our strength. If we retranslate the ideals of the Greatest Generation for our time, perhaps we can reclaim that legacy.

Chaos and disorder are not inevitable in this century. Let’s defeat them, along with the imperialism of despair. As members of the community of responsible nations, let’s elevate the values of courage, compassion, and commitment. As we reflect on the agony and pain of war, let’s not be afraid of grace and beauty—goodness and truth. Given the complexities of our time, perhaps we must become the “next” great generation.

God bless America. Vive la France!