Good morning

Distinguished guests, Ms. Olivia Thompson, Essex Fells veterans, Neighbors and Friends, welcome to our Memorial Day Remembrance at Essex Fells Borough Hall.

The letter.

This day is really about “the letter.”

There is a scene in Steven Spielberg’s World War II film “Saving Private Ryan” that tears at the heart of any American. The scene lasts only about 90 seconds, but its affect on the American soul and spirit is ever lasting. It opens with a single, green Army staff car driving along a dusty, lone, dirt road in Payton, Iowa, making its way up to the Ryan family farm. In the car is a driver, a chaplain, and an officer of the United States Army. We are then brought into the Ryan kitchen, viewing the scene with Mrs. Ryan in the shadows, who is quietly doing the dishes in front of a window. Suddenly, Mrs. Ryan briefly catches a glimpse of the staff car’s approach, pauses, and then goes pale. She gently moves the window’s curtain out of the way, as if to think, to hope and pray, that perhaps she is not seeing what in fact, she sees. We then watch an unsteady Mrs. Ryan, still silhouetted in shadows, walk uneasily, slowly, and somewhat awkwardly from the kitchen, through the living room, to the front door, and then out to the porch, just as the staff car pulls up. As she steps onto the porch, the Army officer, who carries a letter, and the chaplain begin to approach her. Grasping the totality of the moment, Mrs. Ryan slightly backs away from them, as if this could prevent her from receiving the harsh and painful reality of what she is about hear – that her son is dead. Her knees buckle, and she slowly collapses. Without any words being said, we last see the chaplain and Army representative quickly, yet always gently and reverently approach her with arms outstretched, all the while, holding “the letter,” in an attempt to help her endure the unendurable.

Brilliantly, Spielberg never really shows us Mrs. Ryan’s face, for I am certain, he wanted Mrs. Ryan’s face to be the face of every American mother who ever lost a son or daughter while serving in the defense of, and service to, our country.

Tragically, this is painful scene played out for 5 Essex Fells families, five families who lost a son, a husband, a brother, and an uncle. With respect to their privacy and with the highest sensitivity of the families of our 5 fallen sons, I want to read to you a letter which is typical of the sort of letter that was received by families of
those who have fallen in the field of battle fighting to protect our freedoms and liberties and the honor of these United States:

Dear Ms. Harrison:
It is with deep regret that I inform you that your son Pte. A.G. Harrison, No. 62732 of this Company was killed in action on the night of the 21st. Death was instantaneous and without any suffering. The Company was taking part in an attack, and your son's gun team was one of these which advanced against the enemy. The attack was successful, and all guns reached and established new positions. Later in the night the enemy shelled our lines and one shell fell on your son's gun position killing him and wounding a comrade.

It was impossible to get his remains away and he lies in a soldier's grave where he fell.

I and the C.O. and all the Company deeply sympathize with you in your loss.

Your son always did his duty and now has given his life for his country. We all honour him, and I trust you will feel some consolation in remembering this.

His effects will reach you via the Base in due course.

In true sympathy.

Sincerely,


David James Stanley, who lived at 77 Oak Lane (Bobby and Denise Black’s house today) served in the United States Maritime Service and was lost at sea on June 1, 1943, when the ship on which he was assigned, the SS John Morgan collided with the SS Montana while approaching Newport News, Virginia, killing 42 of her crew members and 25 armed guards. Although the family held out hope that David survived the explosion because he was such an accomplished swimmer, “the letter” came to the Stanley home notifying them of David’s death. Lem Andrus, then a young boy, remembers that day clearly, even today, and the heartbreaking anguish of Mr. Stanley, who was heard uncontrollably sobbing throughout the night.
Nathaniel Austin Hanau, who lived at 9 Inwood Road (today, Gloria and Luke Nitti’s house) served in the United States Army Air Corps and died in action on June 1, 1944 while attacking the forces of the Empire of Japan in the Chin Hills section of northern Burma in Central Asia when his B-25 Bomber crashed in a storm after having successfully completed their bombing run. Although the Hanau family was first informed that their son was missing in action, it was not until two years later that his family received “the letter” changing his status to killed in action. To this day, Lieutenant Hanau’s remains, along with those of his crew, lay lost and alone somewhere at the base of the Himalayas. Commenting on his family receiving “the letter,” Nathaniel’s brother told me stated, “Where his bones lay, we know not, though we are consoled in our belief that the Lord took him quickly to himself.”

John Kremer, Jr., who lived at 26 Wootton Road (today the McAlinden’s house) served in the United States Naval Reserve and died on December 30, 1944 when a Japanese kamikaze aircraft struck Commander Kremer’s ship, the USS Orestes and he suffered fatal wounds. “The letter” was delivered to Commander Kremer’s wife and he left behind several children. John Steinbeck, author of “Of Mice and Men,” “The Grapes of Wrath,” and other American classics, was a war correspondent during World War II and knew and wrote several pieces about Commander Kremer and his remarkable character. Upon learning of his death and Mrs. Kremer’s receipt of “the letter,” John Steinbeck wrote to her and stated, “There is nothing whatsoever I can say except I wish, very profoundly, that I had been with him. I am so sorry.”

Robert H. Crum, Jr – who lived at 55 Rensselaer Road (now the Giordan—Nicony house) served in the United States Army and died on May 22, 1966 while serving as Platoon Leader on a sweep and clear mission near the Binh Dinh Province, in Vietnam. Despite being fatally injured and trapped in a deadly Viet Cong killing Zone, Lieutenant Crum directed a platoon assault against enemy positions demonstrating fearless and courageous leadership. For his actions that day, Lieutenant Crum was posthumously awarded our nation’s third highest honor for gallantry in combat, the Silver Star with Gallantry Cross and Palm. Lieutenant Crum’s widow and my dear friend, Ms. Olivia Thompson is here with us today, as she has been for the past several years. Olivia and Lieutenant Crum’s sister, Stephanie Leonard, graciously allowed me the opportunity to read “the letter” received informing them of Lieutenant’s Crum’s death in the service of our country – I will only comment that that “letter” and its contents is something that I consider very personal and private to them, and their allowing me to read it is one of the highest honors upon which I have ever been bestowed.
William Brent Bell – who lived at 16 Holly Lane (now Richard and Natalie Peck’s home) served in the United States Army as a Ranger. He died on March 27, 1969 when, after his unit performed textbook insertion of a platoon, the Huey helicopter that he was riding in was shot down by the enemy. There were no survivors. The Bell family received “the letter” on Easter Sunday morning, 1969. Brent’s sister, Ellen, told me that Brent’s funeral procession went from St. Peter’s Church all the way to Mount Hebron Cemetery in Montclair, where Brent is laid to rest, with full military honors.

When we think of Memorial Day, we think about the soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and coastguardsmen who paid the ultimate sacrifice, but we also have to think about those left behind - the mothers and fathers, the wives, the sisters and brothers, the families – who had to endure the unendurable upon receiving “the letter.”

Now, fellow long-time Essex Fellsian, and my dear friend and personal hero, Captain William Hocart, proudly served our country as a member of the United States Marine Corps overseas in the Republic of Vietnam and at home. For those of us who know him, you know that Captain Hocart, this barrel-chested devil dog, is a great American and a great Marine, one of the toughest sons of a gun you’ll ever meet – EPA and USSS pin. Make no mistake about this - Captain Hocart is Marine’s Marine – I swear it wouldn’t surprise me that each night he concludes his prayers and with, “And God Bless Chesty Puller!”

Oooh-rah, Captain Hocart!

Now what you may not know is that upon honorably completing his service in combat in Vietnam, Captain Hocart came home and was assigned the unenviable task of being the representative of the United States Marine Corps and notifying the next of kin of the death of their Marine and of bringing “the letter” to the families of those loved and lost. I can not imagine a more difficult assignment. As his daughter Jody James proudly tells me, Captain Hocart acted not only as the representative of the President of the United States and the United States Marine Corps, but also as a counselor, mourner, and friend to a family who lost a fellow marine on the field of battle. Jody told me that, for many years afterward, Captain Hocart would in fact receive warm and thankful cards and letters from the surviving family members of those he comforted.
Other than those who receive “the letter” directly, I believe that no one knows more about what “the letter” means than someone like Captain Hocart, and just how important it is that we, as a Borough and a nation, never forget the true meaning of Memorial Day. Thank you my friend Captain Hocart for your service to our country; thank you Captain Hocart for being there for our Marine families when they had to endure the unendurable; and thank you Captain Hocart for helping them understand that we as a nation mourn with them, even to this very day.

Today, we again honor, respect, and remember our fallen soldiers:

David James Stanley  
United States Maritime Service  
Lost at Sea – Second World War  
June 1, 1943

Nathaniel Austin Hanau, Jr.  
United States Army Air Corps  
Died in Action – Second World War  
June 1, 1944

Commander John Kremer, Jr.  
United States Naval Reserve  
Died in Action – Second World War  
December 30, 1944

Second Lieutenant Robert H. Crum, Jr.  
United States Army  
Died in Action – Republic of Vietnam  
May 22, 1966

First Lieutenant William Brent Bell  
Ranger 75th Infantry - Airborne  
Died in Action – Republic of Vietnam  
March 27, 1969

Today, we remember that these five men our heroes of freedom. These young soldiers, sailors, and airmen paid the supreme sacrifice by giving up their
tomorrows so we could have our todays. And all that they would ask of us it to remember them, and to remember that the cost of liberty and freedom is very dear.

I can think of no greater tribute to our five fallen soldiers that to once again call forward our Borough’s veterans and to thank them and let them know how proud we are of them for their sacrifice, courage and devotion to our country.

If our veterans would please come forward - Please hold your applause and appreciation until the last soldier joins the ranks with his comrades as each comes forward and identifies himself by his name, rank, branch of service, and years of service.

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Ladies and Gentlemen, I am proud and honored to present to you, the men [and women] of Essex Fells who have honorable and proudly served their country. These are our veterans, these are our heroes, and these wonderful Americans will forever have our deepest and sincere thanks and appreciation.

Each year at this ceremony, I read a letter that is considered one of the most beautiful ever composed. It was written to a Mrs. Bixby in Boston:

Dear Madam:

I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjunct General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any world of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic that they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Yours very sincerely and respectfully,

A. Lincoln

Like Mrs. Bixby, Essex Fells lost five sons on the field of battle: David James Stanley, Nathaniel Austin Hanau, Jr., John Kremer, Jr., Robert H. Crum, Jr., and
William Brent Bell. Each died gloriously and is laid upon the altar of freedom. Each displayed great courage, love of country, and steadfast dedication. They made the supreme sacrifice for us, for our Borough, and for our country. Nothing can compensate the families of these brave men for the tragic loss they suffered; but please know that they have the eternal thanks, gratitude, respect, and admiration of all of the citizens of Essex Fells.

Blessed God, please let there be no more. Yet, although we always pray for peace, let us never settle for appeasement. We pray for an end to all violence and human suffering, but we also recognize that freedom is not free. We pray for our cause, for our cause is just, and we pray for the safety of the protectors of liberty and freedom. Please watch over our sons and daughters who serve in our armed forces, for as these five heroes demonstrate, the pride of Essex Fells will always answer our Nation’s call and do thy will.

God bless you all, God bless Essex Fells, and God bless these United States.