

Remarks
IAFF General President Harold A. Schaitberger
2009 Fallen Fire Fighter Memorial
September 19, 2009
Colorado Springs, Colorado

Good afternoon.

It's heartwarming to see so many of my sisters and brothers, friends and citizens of this beautiful community and – most importantly, the families of those we are here to honor – gathered together today.

I want to begin by recognizing the tremendous efforts of Local 5 here in Colorado Springs.

Mike, your entire board and your members really deserve our thanks and gratitude for helping keep this memorial – this sanctuary to our fallen – so beautiful. We truly appreciate your dedication and hard work.

On behalf of our General Secretary-Treasurer Vinnie Bollon, our International Executive Board, who are here with us, and on behalf of the 296,000 fire fighters and EMS professionals across two great countries that I am proud to represent, we salute and welcome each and every one of you. – our family and friends – who came here to pay your respects and to celebrate and commemorate your loved ones – those from our ranks who have joined so many before them on this Wall of Honor.

Every year, I sit and stare at my computer, looking to come up with the words that will do justice to the men and women who sacrificed all they had and who we are here today to pay tribute to.

This is such an important day to me and to this great union of ours – of theirs – that each time we gather here, I want to make sure I give our brothers and sisters who fell in the

line of duty their due, the full respect they have earned because each and every single one deserves the absolute best send off we can give.

And every year, I wonder if I can come up with just the right phrases and the appropriate and poetic words that make it clear to you how personal this memorial is to me and to all of us.

In trying to express our profound respect for those we lost and to you, their loved ones, it is my intention to celebrate and recognize their service, duty and lives – not to reopen the painful wounds that were caused by losing your father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter or grandchild.

And while I know that you will remember this beautiful memorial and this grand service, I also know that Abraham Lincoln – the author of the Gettysburg Address and the most eloquent memorial speech ever written – was right when he spoke of the battlefield in rural Pennsylvania where brave souls sought to protect and come to the defense of their nation and their ideals.

He honored those who willingly and knowingly put themselves in harm's way by talking about the soldiers who perished in the battle. He offered that 'the world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.'

For us and for those we celebrate today, I believe the words offered 146 years ago remain as true now as they were then.

And while what I say here today will not be long remembered, those 122 brave souls whose names are chiseled on this beautiful black granite Wall of Honor behind me – who they were, what they did with their lives in service to their communities, what they meant to their families, their friends, their crews – will never be forgotten.

Brave men and women who were united by one cause – the defense of others and a

commitment to respond to those in need – share a unique bond with each other that is different than a friendship and which comes from this profession, this calling we all call ‘the job,’ a bond that those outside of our profession can’t fully comprehend or appreciate.

And all of us joined together here today who have entered this noble profession of ours are united because the dangers of the job – both seen and unseen – are simply too enormous at times. Too often the odds stacked against us.

It doesn’t matter how pure your purpose, nor how righteous your intentions, the beast that we fight doesn’t care, and that means this will always be a dangerous profession.

And when disaster strikes and takes the last breathe from one of our own – whether in a catastrophic single incident or from the ravages on our bodies by the exposure to terrible elements and environments over time – it is our commitment that we always honor them here in this dramatic setting at this beautiful memorial.

We take comfort in this ceremony, in this peaceful park and in each other’s company.

The Honor Guard marches with pride to the rhythm of the pipes and drums playing their traditional tunes. We raise and lower the flags of our two nations. We toll the bell for the Last Alarm and we play the haunting 24 notes of Taps.

These are the customs and traditions we embrace to honor our own and you their families.

We read each name because each one is more than a name on a wall; each one was a special human being and a member of our fire fighting family.

For you – their family – we close our hands on yours, put our arms on your shoulders, embrace you and remember the wonderful stories and times of our fallen with you. We give you a piece of this union in symbol and spirit.

We cry with you and we laugh with you because this is not just a ceremony to us – this isn't about pomp and circumstance. This is a day to remember them, to share their real character – the good as well as the mischievous.

With each other, all these strong men and women dressed in their Blues, find it natural and easy to embrace each other as we remember and reminisce about our comrades.

We tell the tales of the station houses and use that famous firehouse humor to hide our own sadness and pain. We recount stories of the saves they made, the jokes they pulled and how we – their extended family – are going to look out for the loved ones they left behind.

We tell their children and their children's children that they didn't just save people and property, but that they reunited loved ones when disasters tried to rip them apart and created calm out of calamity.

We remember that they made a living standing for something important – that the legend of each of those we honor today is that of a true life worth living. We must never forget what our brothers and sisters accomplished, the other lives they touched and the lives they changed.

Others not in this profession call them heroes – but their brother and sister fire fighters will never call them that because they would never think of themselves in such a way, just as no one here today from our ranks thinks of themselves as heroes.

No. The real compliment that matters from those on this job is the simple but the greatest compliment you can receive from one of your own: 'Yes, they were a hell of a fire fighter who was just doing their job.'

There are 2,274 names on these walls.

Most of us didn't have the privilege of personally knowing more than a few.

But we do know who they were; they were quietly as tough and rugged as these mighty Rocky ranges surrounding us. They had a free and strong spirit like the thunder of the bikes and the riders that rode in here today. They had steel in their spines, but compassion and caring in their hearts.

They were the epitome of humility when it came to the job they did – never wanting to bring the spotlight of attention onto themselves for their work protecting others.

They read to their children at night, rocked them to sleep and helped them with homework.

They coached little league teams, were big brothers and sisters, led boy scout and girl scout troops, helped at their church, raised money for those in need and watched out for the kids of their brothers, sisters and neighbors.

They were fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, friends, aunts and uncles – and their parent's children.

That's who the 2,274 were – along with every single one of the 122 of your loved ones we added to these walls this year.

And they were taken from us too soon, and that's why it hurts so much to not have them here with us anymore.

It will be the memory of their lives that reminds us there can be no greater sacrifice than what they gave so others could live.

Our unfinished work today is to honor that memory and celebrate their deeds.

Or, in the words of President Lincoln, 'It is rather for us to be here, dedicated to the great task remaining before us — that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that they shall not have died in vain.'

That is our task; that is our duty.

For this union, we never forget your loved one and we will always be here for you.

We built this memorial so we can take the lessons our fallen have taught us and commit those memories to the greater good.

They left an indelible mark on our lives, so we will always have them here in our hearts and we will always have their names here at this sacred site.

Thank you for allowing us to spend these days together remembering lives well-lived.

God bless all of you and may God bless all of our fire fighters and Armed Forces on the frontlines everywhere.