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Excerpts from Keynote Speaker Robin Higgins, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs

By Robbin Higgins

Robin L. Higgins, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs in the Department of Veterans Affairs, is responsible for policy, management and operation of the National Cemetery Administration. Mrs. Higgins is the widow of Colonel William R. (Rich) Higgins, a Marine officer taken captive by terrorists in Lebanon in 1988, and later murdered. She is the recipient of numerous awards, and is a member of the Jewish War Veterans, Disabled American Veterans, the Retired Officers' Association, Gold Star Wives, the American Legion, AMVETS and the Marine Corps League.



I recently visited the JWV Museum in Washington DC, and I was greatly impressed to see the faces of many of those Jews, including the founding fathers of the JWV.

Today the Jewish War Veterans is the oldest active national veterans service organization. The Jewish War Veterans have supported the legitimate needs of our nation's veterans; promoted our nation's democratic principles, and defended the causes of importance to Jews throughout the world.

Much like the Jewish War Veterans, the National Cemetery Administration traces its history to the Civil War also. NCA in fact pre-dates the VA. In July 1862, Congress enacted legislation that authorized President Lincoln to purchase "cemetery grounds" to be used as national cemeteries "for soldiers who shall have died in the service of the country." Fourteen cemeteries were established that first year and that is the origin of the National Cemetery Administration.

I am proud and humbled to be leading this organization that has grown from 14 national cemeteries to today's 119. How I got here is a story I think you'd appreciate:

In 1988, I was serving in the Pentagon, and my husband, a Marine colonel, was on an overseas assignment with the United Nations in the Middle East.

One morning in February, he was captured by terrorists in Lebanon, and my life was changed forever. Until a gruesome picture of him hanging appeared in newspapers and TV screens around the world - a year and a half later - I had no idea if he was dead or alive. Almost 4 years after he was taken, his body was dumped on a Beirut street — on my birthday — what would've been our 14th wedding anniversary.

Whether we like it or not, those who wear and have worn their country's uniform are in a business filled with adversity. Fighting wars and keeping peace is the most difficult and demanding of jobs.

Veterans understand the duty to country that causes a man or woman to risk his or her life to try to make a difference.

There is nothing that can take the place of that selfless devotion. My husband used to have a small plaque on his desk; it's on mine now and it says:

"War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things; the decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks that nothing is worth war is much worse. A man who has nothing for which he is willing to fight; nothing he cares about more than his own personal safety; is a miserable creature who has no chance of being free, unless made and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself.

I believe there is a fabric that weaves people of conscience through the ages and around the world. That fabric is bound with the moral and spiritual lineage of men and women of honor, courage, and integrity; those who value something more than their own personal safety. Bound into this fabric are the lives and loves of soldiers and their families from all times, those who came home and those who didn't and those whose fate remains unknown.

Jews know about valuing something more than their own personal safety, and Jews know about that fabric that binds people with a bond stronger than life's adversities.

During the tragic years of my husband's captivity by Arab terrorists, I had to keep my Jewishness hidden. Ironically, however, it was that very Jewishness that helped me to survive.

I was the oldest child of a high school English teacher on Long Island. I always felt I was destined for something special. Maybe it was my father who instilled that in me, because I was always special to him. First-born Jewish children are often vested with high hopes that parents - while loving all their children equally - may not necessarily have for the others.

Like so many first-born, by the time we left the Bronx and settled down in our middle class community on Long Island, I was too old to begin Hebrew school. I watched my brothers and sister become bar and bat mitzvah, and I discovered my "Jewish roots" in high school. I was attracted to Mordecai Kaplan and his reconstructionist ideas which celebrated civilization, culture and brotherhood over a theology which was unknown to me.

In my second year of college, I was dismayed by the "hippie" movement. I didn't know enough about the Vietnam war to crusade against it, but felt I would be left out if I didn't. So rather than drop out, I boldly went to Israel for my junior year. I was scared and alone, but I learned to see past my fears and not do simply what everyone else was doing. That taking control of my fears - that I learned during my first trip to Israel in 1970 - was a turning point and was to become very important in my life, I was to see. Nice little Jewish girls from Long Island don't become soldiers - let alone Marines. But after studying to be a teacher like my father, and after two years of teaching, my wanderlust struck. Again I found myself stepping away from what I thought to be conventional wisdom, again I found myself moving past my fears of the unusual - and again it was a turning point.

But I now know that military service is not contradictory to Judaism. In fact, because Judaism stresses ethics and community, I am surprised that more Jews are not drawn to the military.

Rabbi Harold Kushner in a beautiful book entitled "To Life!" says: Jews "are called on to do something for God and for the world. We are important; we are empowered. It is our obligation to be a role model for all nations." He says: "Judaism is less about believing and more about belonging. It is less about what we owe God and more about what we owe each other, because we believe God cares more about how we treat each other than he does about our theology."

Indeed, military service is a perfect place for Jews. My second trip to Israel was during Chanukah 1987 when I traveled there to visit my husband to celebrate our 10th anniversary. Rich was a Christian, but he was proud to show me how much he had learned about Israel, the people he had met and loved, and we talked about possibly going back to live there someday.

I returned home to the U.S. in January, and in February, Rich was taken. His captors accused him of being an Israeli spy. I knew immediately and instinctively - like millions of other Jews had so many years before me - the greater danger to his life should his captors find out I was a Jew.

So, I hid my Jewishness. I instructed my father to remove all Jewish symbols from his home, since the media was everywhere. He didn't like that, until his Rabbi told him it was OK - under the principle of pikuah nefesh.

My name was my husband's name - no one would ever guess that I, Lt. Col. Higgins, was Jewish. No one knew I had Rosenbergs and Auslanders and Silvermans in places like Delray and Boca and Miami.

And the cards and letters came. Thousands of them from all over the world. Most of them had beautiful Christian sayings in them. They gave me strength because they came from the heart.

Hundreds of people prayed for me - Christian prayers and Jewish prayers. Christians prayed that God would fulfill my needs, keep Rich safe and bring him home. Jews prayed that God would stay close to me and help me cope. Rich did not come home, but I felt God's nearness, and I survived.

I learned some important lessons in the past 11 years, and they are important Jewish lessons (many of which are referred to by Rabbi Kushner in his book): - Rich lived a full and important life. He served his country for over 22 years, and his country and the world is better for his life. Duty, honor, and country were always more important to him than personal safety. He lived life with God; I know that now. - I know that "death is not the end, that people live on in our hearts, in the difference they made to the world, and in the mind of God." - I've learned that most Americans are "impatient with history, eager to forget" and to move on. However, Jews and veterans tend to cherish history, even when what we remember is painful. We must never forget Rich and millions of others who gave their lives for our freedoms. - I've learned "you don't have to go to synagogue to worship God." For many years I studied and reflected alone - for years, I was afraid to step foot inside a temple. I read books on terrorism, POWs, and coping with adversity. I reflected on the lessons Rich taught me - that when you're out front, people will shoot at you. That every problem is an opportunity, and that one person can make a difference. - Judaism insists that "knowledge not only can make people smart but can make them good." We learn, and then must live our lives differently according to what we have learned. - I have done that, for my life is changed forever. I give interviews and speeches and have testified before Congress on behalf of military men and women and veterans, because I must do this for Rich.

My messages are clear:

We owe a special debt to the men and women we send into harm's way to ensure that 1) this country has a clear, unambiguous, and achievable goal in taking this drastic step, 2) we are prepared to defend them with all our will and with all our might when they fall, and 3) we do not send a peacekeeper where there is not peace. Being Jewish is a privilege bestowed on only one out of every three hundred people in the world. About 1/4 of 1% of all Marines are Jewish, and further, when I retired I was one of only 8 Jewish women officers. Jews exult in our uniqueness — stepping away from the usual.

I am indeed privileged. And in Judaism, Rabbi Kushner says, "Gratitude is perhaps the fundamental religious emotion."

I am privileged in many ways but especially so because President George W. Bush has appointed me now to this very important leadership position in the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Our veterans, nearly 25 million, were there for our Country when we needed their service. Now, it is our Nation's opportunity to be there for them when they need help – healthcare, education and training and memorial affairs.

Since the creation of the Veterans Administration by President Lincoln our nation has been the world leader in the care of veterans and the delivery of benefits.

Nowhere else in the world is there a system and network for the delivery of health, education and memorial benefits for a nation's veterans as there is in the United States today.

Under the Administration of the first President Bush, when I was at Veterans' Employment and Training at the U.S. Department of Labor, I had the opportunity to foster programs that put veterans to work in the private sector.

Most recently, as the Executive Director of Florida's Department of Veterans' Affairs, I had the opportunity to work with veterans to enhance benefits and the delivery of those benefits.

So let me reassure you that the delivery of the entire range of federal and state benefits and state veterans benefits to our nation's veterans is not unfamiliar territory for me.

Having just moved up to Washington to serve in the VA, I am now learning about another aspect of the delivery of services to veterans, although having buried my husband in a national cemetery, I come at my job as a "customer" as well as an advocate.

As the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs, I am responsible to ensure the delivery of the final benefits a grateful nation may bestow, and perhaps the most sacred.

The National Cemetery Administration maintains 119 national cemeteries across our country – a total acreage of over 13,000 acres and maintains the gravesites of over 2.3 million people.

At the Department of Veterans Affairs our daily mission, 24/7. Its origins are from President Lincoln who gave the VA its motto: "to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan," – these words are even inscribed on a plaque outside of our headquarters building across the park from the White House.

At the National Cemetery Administration we are working hard to keep that faith and ensure that the burial benefits promised to our veterans are available to all that choose to take advantage of them.

I don't have to remind you how many veterans we will lose this very day. By 2006 veterans deaths will peak to around 687,000 deaths and remain high for about 15 years.

In order to meet the increased demand for burial benefits, we are expanding our burial capacity.

Currently, we are in the process of opening an unprecedented 6 new national cemeteries within the next 3 years, in: Fort Sill, Oklahoma; Sacramento, California; Detroit, Michigan; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Atlanta, Georgia and in south Florida.

We are finding and negotiating to buy land adjacent to our current national cemeteries, so that, wherever possible, we keep our current open cemeteries open. And we are building columbaria in response to the increased trend to cremations.

Additionally through our state cemetery grants program we are helping states to build their own veterans cemeteries to meet the increased demand for burial and to supplement the national cemetery system.

Thank you for everything you have done, are doing, and will do for all of those who have served in our nation's armed forces, particularly our Jewish veterans.

Together we can ensure that the benefits our veterans deserve are second to none and that a veteran's opportunities will be limited only by his or her ambition, aspirations, and ability. For the next 4 years, you have a "landsman" in Washington to ensure we hold veterans in the palm of our hand and bury them with dignity and honor when they die.

Thank you. God bless you, and God bless America!

Convention 2001 Overview

By Alan Zimmerman

It was an invasion, but a friendly one, as Baltimore played host to the 106th Annual Convention of the Jewish War Veterans of the USA (JWV) August 26 through September 2.

Hundred of the Jewish War Veterans gathered from across the US to conduct the business of the organization, as well as to renew old friendships, according to outgoing JWV National Commander Ronald Ziegler. "JWV is an active, working organization, involved in the issues facing the Jewish community and strongly supportive of Israel," Ziegler explained.



As always, there was more than just work to the gathering. Monday saw a full (plus one) bus load of JWVers on a tour of the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, lead by Convention Chairman Edwin Goldwasser, with stops at the World War II Memorial and Ft. McHenry before day's end. Tuesday afternoon and evening saw two buses carry over 110 conventioners to Washington for the dedication of a new exhibit at the National Museum of American Jewish Military History, The Hall of Heroes. The Hall is dedicated to and honors Jewish members of the US Armed Forces who were recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor. Tuesday evening was a lecture seminar on Nazi Doctors and PLO suicide bombers with Dr. Michael Franzblau, member of our San Francisco Post and PNC Bob Zweiman covering the crassness of sophisticated murder by doctors and murder by violence leading to the same sought for result - the death of Jews.

The feature speaker on Wednesday, at the joint opening ceremony of the JWV and Jewish War Veterans Auxiliary (JWVA) was Robin Higgins, Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs in the Department of Veterans Affairs. Mrs. Higgins is a member of the Jewish War Veterans, and the recipient of numerous awards from JWV, the Marine Corps League and the American Legion Auxiliary, among others. She is the widow of Col. William R. (Rich) Higgins, a Marine officer taken captive by terrorist in Lebanon in 1988 and later murdered. She is an internationally known speaker on surviving adversity and terrorism. Excerpts of her talk appears in this issues on pages 10 and 11.

Wednesday evening again offered tourist options to that attendees. Over 130 went to the harbor as part of the dinner cruise of the Century Club. Good food, good company and the beautiful sights of the Harbor made for a wonderful evening for all who attended.

For the sports-minded, Wednesday night offered an alternative. The Baltimore Orioles were playing in town at Camden Yard, just blocks from the hotel. It was one of the last dozen or so home games before the Iron Man, Cal Ripken, retired. Dozens of JWVers took advantage of the opportunity to see this star one more time.

On Thursday morning, the guest speaker was Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Anthony Principi, a Vietnam veteran who previously served as Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs from March 1989, to September 1992,

when he was named Acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs by President George Bush. He held that position until January 1993.

As VA Secretary, Mr. Principi heads the nation's largest health care system, plus a multi-billion dollar benefits program and a nationwide network of cemeteries. With an annual budget of \$48 billion, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) employs about 219,000 people at hundreds of medical centers, clinics, vet centers, benefits offices and national cemeteries. Excerpts of his talk appear in the issue on pages 12 -14.

The Convention featured sessions dealing with a wide variety of Veterans and Jewish issues, including veterans benefits, membership and outreach, insurance, Women in the Military, resolutions and scholarships. Resolutions on numerous issues were brought to the floor of the third business session (they appear in this issues on pages 23 and 24).

Speaker from the VA system addressed the VAVS workshop, and the VA again sponsored a health fair, offering conventioners that opportunity to have their vital signs checked. A variety of booklets and brochures on VA benefits and programs was made available to all who attended.

The Hospitality Suite was sponsored mornings by the Department of Maryland, under Department Commander Erwin Burtnick, and afternoons/evenings by the Committee to Elect Bernie Becker National Commander.

As with every National Convention the culmination was the Commander's Banquet, followed by the installation of the new National Commander. They were truly the peak of the Convention, as the program flowed without error or complication, and those attending heard the thanks, from the heart, or their departing leader. As midnight approached, the incoming National Commander announced his leadership team, and the future of JWV was in good hands.