**REMARKS OF JOHN F. KENNEDY AT A MEETING OF THE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS, AUGUST 15, 1946**

Today I thought I would tell you the story of Lieutenant John McCarthy of the United States Naval Reserve whose experience in the war carries with it a very important lesson in the peace.

Lieutenant McCarthy was a Commander of the P.T. boat 153 of Motor Torpedo Squadron 9 in the Northern Solomon Islands campaign in the summer of 1943. On the 10th night of August, Lieutenant McCarthy received his orders to convoy a group of landing craft and cover their invasion of the Japanese-held island of Vella la Vella. This particular night the sea was calm and there was a full moon shining brightly in the sky. At about 10:20 in the evening a report was picked up that Japanese planes were approaching and it was at that moment that Lieutenant McCarthy swung into action. He turned the throttle of his P.T. boat wide open, and swung away from the convoy. His boat began to go in the water faster and faster until finally he was moving at over 45 knots. A great phosphorescent wake boiled behind his boat and rolled out like a great white carpet. He turned on his search light, his guns opened fire. For a moment no one could understand but his strategy quickly became evident. To the Japanese pilots above, his boat stood out as a brilliant target. They swept down on him, their bombs started to fall. He had taken their attention from the convoy. Through the succeeding hours that followed, McCarthy was bombed 33 times. Finally at 4:07 in the morning a bomb landed close to the starboard side of the PT 153, crushing in its side and killing several men. Among them was Lieutenant John McCarthy of the United States Naval Reserve. The convoy sailed safely through the night untouched.

Lieutenant McCarthy was posthumously awarded the Silver Star to which I think you will agree he was entitled. For in the words of Christ, "A greater love than this no man hath – that a man lay down his life for his friends."

I have told you this incident because I think it is well for you to keep constantly in your minds the extraordinary acts that many of your sons and brothers performed in the war. Remembering the job they did will help you to remember your obligations to them.

I am not claiming that John McCarthy made his prodigious sacrifice with any conscious end in mind – that he was helping the war effort – or even that he was helping the Japanese. Rather, I always felt that his courage was the result of his loyalty to the men around him. This loyalty was not based on affection – although there was that – but rather was the result of his recognition of the interdependence of the men with whom he fought.

Most people feel that heroic acts are done in the heat of passion – in anger over a friend’s death – or even in desperation when survival depends on desperate chances. In many cases, of course, this is true, but I have always felt that the greatest and the most common courage was the courage that came from men’s understanding of their interdependence on one another. It was the most common kind of courage because every day on different battlefields men were saving other men’s lives at the risk of their own simply because they realized that perhaps the next day their lives would be saved in turn. And so there was built up during the war a great feeling of comradeship and fellowship and loyalty.

Now some of these men are coming home. They are coming home to all of the things that they have ever dreamed about. The two or three or four years of waiting are over. They are becoming civilians again.

Coming home will have a different effect on every veteran. No one can speak with any great authority on what that effect will be. Some self-appointed spokesmen of the veterans whose presumption is only equaled by their inaccuracy have already told us what we can expect from the new veterans. They are presumptuous because no one can speak for the veterans – there are twelve million of them and they can think and speak for themselves. They are inaccurate because there is no universality in the veterans’ opinions, backgrounds, or ambitions. The campaigns were so far-flung, the duties so dissimilar, that the reaction upon individuals was varied rather than identical. So nobody can speak for the veterans as though they were a corporate body with a crystallized point of view.

But I think it is safe to say that most veterans will join a Veterans Organization. Veterans Organizations were formed with high ideals both to regain the comradeship of the war years and to help Veterans, both the well and the disabled, in their return to civilian life. The G.A.R. was formed at the end of the Civil War. The VFW, which was limited to the men who had served overseas, was formed at the end of the Spanish American War and the American Legion at the end of the First World War. Of all Veterans Organizations the VFW and the Legion are the largest the most potent, and the most important. They each number nearly two million and it is of the former – the VFW that I speak today.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars have been instrumental in securing much aid for the returned veterans. They have been responsible for a great deal of the legislation that has been so helpful for the veterans of this last war. In helping the veterans, the VFW has helped all of the people of this country. Veterans in other countries have been the cause of great unrest. Hitler and his immediate group were veterans of the First World War and his brown shirts were nearly all embittered veterans of the German Army. Not only in Germany but in other countries, veterans have frequently been ready material for ambitious demagogues. In America it has been different. Veterans Organizations have been instrumental in securing legislation that has been of tremendous assistance in aiding veterans to resume their normal position in life.

Many people feel that Veterans Organizations were formed for the express purpose of girding Veterans for treasury raids. I think that this view is wrong and that because of their help to veterans in becoming active citizens, they have been of great benefit to the people of this country as a whole. I urge therefore, every Veteran who is eligible to join the veterans of Foreign Wars. They will be helping not only themselves but their friends.

I cannot close without saying a few words about the VFW Convention of which I am Chairman which is to be held here in Boston from September 1 to September 6. We expect that over one hundred thousand veterans from all over the country will come to Boston, many of them for the first time. It will be a formidable task to feed, entertain and house this tremendous group. Housing in particular will be an important problem and there are now over 3000 people working on it under the direction of a very capable chairman.

This convention will be of great significance. It will be the first post war convention that any large veterans organization has held and it will have great importance in directing the course that veterans’ affairs will take in the coming years. And, it will also provide an opportunity for young men to renew the comradeships developed so strongly during the war years. Boston, I know, will as always do its utmost to make these men feel at home.

The War is over but much remains to be done. The tens of thousands of young men who returned so hopefully to their homes in the last months are now flocking by the tens of thousands to collect their Unemployment Compensation of $20. Truly our task has just begun, the men in the hospitals, the disabled, the well – they were all comrades of the Lieutenant John McCarthys and they bloodily won abroad the freedom we now enjoy. They deserve all of the assistance that the VFW and the other organizations can give them. They deserve truly the help of America.

*Source*: [David F. Powers Personal Papers](http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/DFPPP.aspx?f=1), Box 28, "Veterans of Foreign Wars, Parker House, Boston, MA, 15 August 1946." John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.