

Transcript from Sgt. Kenneth Depew's speech at the "9-11: Never Forget" event held Friday, Sept. 10 on the University of St. Thomas campus.

Greetings fellow students, members of the faculty, and guests. Thank you for allowing me to speak today, but more importantly, thank you for your attendance as we honor those who perished from the results of the tragic events that occurred on September 11th 2001.

I am Kenneth Depew, I am a student at the University of St Thomas, and a veteran of the United States Army. It was nine years ago tomorrow that our country was rocked by a tragedy seen and heard the world over. On that day I was standing in my uniform, in a very different place, performing a very different task. I was a member of the Third United States Infantry Regiment, the Old Guard, which is widely known for the guards at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the Army Silent Drill Platoon, and the caisson platoon which rides the horses that pull the caskets of the fallen.

The morning of Sept. 11, 2001, we loaded the bus that took us from Fort Myers Virginia into Arlington national cemetery where we were laying to rest a military veteran. We had heard someone say that a plane had flown into a building in New York City. We loaded the buses as if nothing significant had occurred; we had all figured that there was probably some form of operator error, or some other explanation to what we had just heard. We arrived at Patton Circle, where the coffin of the deceased was to be loaded on the horse drawn caisson and then transported to their final resting place. As we were told the family of the deceased and the casket were en route, we were also told a second plane had crashed into another building in New York. At this point we did not know the extent of the events but sensed the significance of the occurrences. As we assembled there was an air of concern, discomfort and ignorance to what was going on outside of the brick walls of the cemetery.

We executed the honors earned by this mans service as we had at all previous funerals, but the feeling within our platoon of Infantryman was something not experienced before. As we loaded the buses to take us back to our barracks and prepare for the next funeral it was silent. We were normally jovial on the ride back, or at least talkative; the silence made the shaking of the bus all the more pronounced. We thought the bus behind us, which carried the casket bearers and firing party had hit us in an attempt to leave first. The guy in the very back said they were still back there, in place, a few meters behind us. We were unaware that merely 600 meters away a third plane had been flown into the Pentagon. The silence persisted; minds were racing trying to guess what had happened, we still did not know as we took the longest ten-minute bus ride of our lives.

As we arrived back at the barracks the buzz of intense and serious labor was occurring, we were greeted off the bus with the proclamation that "We are at war, they flew planes into the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in New York!" We looked towards the direction of the Pentagon and over the trees could see a thick plume of black smoke rising behind the lush green leaves of the trees. The confusion remained as we reacted to the Firing Party platoon sergeant yelling with his thick New England accent to "go to the arms room and get your weapons, we're at war."

We did not know who, just they; we did not know why, they just did. We were told to turn in our cell phones because we couldn't tie up the lines, we would get a chance to call our families later and let them know that we were okay. We were ordered to guard the base, stand the wall in case there was an attempt to assault our base; we had yet to find out that there would be no ground assault.

My squad and I stood our post, still not fully knowing what had happened in New York, Pennsylvania or just a mile and a half away from us. Bits and pieces of information reached us over the hours as we stood guard and looked at the Air Force fighter jets traveling across the sky of our nations capital; the anonymous parties had flown planes into the world trade center, the pentagon, and another plane had crashed in a field in Pennsylvania, the towers had fallen, New York was covered in smoke and dust, there was more coming. Our Lieutenant told us we would be going to the Pentagon in one hour, go get your packs, make sure you bring your shovel and flashlight; we are going into the building. We loaded the transport truck with meals-ready-to-eat, extra water, our packs and ourselves. We loaded up at 6p.m. and just continued to sit. Someone had a radio that he had tuned into the President as he spoke to the nation and told us "our way of life, our very freedom came under attack."

We also heard that what had happened was planned by a guy in a cave in Afghanistan who promised 100 days of terror would follow.

At 2 a.m. on the 12th we were told to go inside and be back by 3:30 a.m.; we would be en route by 4:00 a.m.. When we returned we did not have to wait. We still did not know if there-was there more coming, could there be 100 days of this? What's going to happen tomorrow? What is happening now? As we arrived at the Pentagon's eastern corner none of us knew what to expect, none of us knew what we would see. After arriving we marched to the Southern side of the building, where the plane had hit. "Keep your eyes to the front men, you are in formation!" our platoon sergeant ordered. We had caught glimpses on TV of the collapsed towers in New York, and the fallen portion of building at the Pentagon. It did not prepare us for what the giant floodlights illuminated.

After hours of digging irrigation ditches to channel the mass amount of water that had been pumped into the building to extinguish the fires we were told to get ready to go in. We were tasked to go inside and rescue or recover anyone that remained in the building. We went in and saw the charred black walls, collapsed ceilings, small flames and glowing embers, desks which appeared to be untouched, singed papers; but it was the smell that was the most disturbing. If we found someone alive we were to get the medics from the fire department, if we found someone dead, we were to notify the casualty recovery team who would bring them out. Over the next few days we focused on cleanup and recovery, sorting pieces of building and plane into separate piles. Our days continued like this until October the 4th.

After this we returned to our normal duties. By this time we had a clearer picture of what had happened that morning, we knew we were at war, we knew some of us would see more of the war than what we had seen at the Pentagon.

Since conducting operations at the Pentagon I have been deployed to Baghdad, Iraq two times as an Infantryman. While there I had the privilege of seeing the United States return control of the Iraqi government to the Iraqi people, to see the first election in Iraq in more than half a century, to see the Iraqi people pass a referendum on their constitution, and to see them become a self governing nation. I most recently returned from Afghanistan, where I was a Human Intelligence collector in one of the most volatile areas in the country, Kunar Province, which straddles Pakistan and is the "home" of the infamous Korengal Valley and the site where the US outpost in the village of Wanat was almost over run on July 13th 2008.

While there I was fortunate to see the Afghan Army grow and mature, see the disruption and finishing of those who preyed on innocent civilians, and see the Afghan people vote in their second presidential election, some of them walking more than five hours over rough mountainous terrain under threat of reprisal from insurgents. I left Afghanistan after a grenade sent shrapnel into my knee, shoulder and arm; but I was lucky because it could have been much worse. I am alive, for that I am truly grateful. I have seen tragic, amazing and monumental things. I was fortunate to see these things of history that will one day be spoken of as if so long ago and unreal.

Tribute to the men and women who have served since that time

“The events of September 11th 2001 brought to the forefront of our consciousness the well deserved recognition of the heroes of America: the Police, the Firefighters, the first responders, and the members of the U.S. Military who have been ordered to war in defense of our country. Whether one agrees with the reason or manner of execution of the wars we currently fight, let us not forget that the Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, Airmen and Coastguardsmen are not the makers of policy, but merely the implementation of policy, they are apolitical.

The University of St Thomas has a rich contribution from the military; in addition to the President, Dr Ivany, being a retired Major General in the Army, there are slightly less than 100 student-veterans here obtaining their education and bettering themselves. Some veterans joined before September 11th 2001, some after; some have deployed overseas, some have not; regardless, they all volunteered to protect and defend the constitution of the United States of America against all enemies.

As a city, Houston is the biggest per-capita contributor to the armed forces. Texas is the home of the largest Army installation, as well as two other Army posts, three Air Force bases, a Naval station and multiple coast Guard facilities as well as many reserve component installations representing all branches of the armed services.

Let us take the chance to recognize the contributions the military makes to the freedoms we enjoy everyday, and let us not forget those who are currently serving and those that have served.

As President Calvin Coolidge said, “The nation which forgets its defenders will itself be forgotten.” These words extend to the victims of the tragedy of September 11th, 2001; the first responders who sacrificed their lives so other may live; those that bear the physical and psychological wounds inflicted upon them that day; and those who will take the mantle and serve us in the future; for they all have truly laid a sacrifice on the alter of freedom.

Remembrance of the events of that day and those lost

“It is my sincere hope that our children and grandchildren never have to experience what we did on that day nine years ago; that they never have to face the tragedy, the shock, the uncertainty and the fear that we did. I know we have all heard our parents and grandparents speak of significant events and where they were when they occurred; I am sure we will end up telling our children and grandchildren where we were when the events of that day unfolded.

We cannot live in that day forever, but to forget it would be a tragedy of its own. To forget the sense of unity we felt as Americans; to forget the renewed sense of purpose and life we felt for the days, weeks and months following the attacks; to forget the fact that we didn't blame or seek reprisal against a population as a whole but only against those who were tied to the act itself. If

we forget, we are allowing the 2,977 who died that day to have perished in vein, and I am sure we all agree that they deserve our commitment which can best be shown through our remembrance of them. They were rich and poor; old and young; white, black, Hispanic, Asian; Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Atheist, agnostic. They were representative of who we are as a nation; a harmonious mix of wealth, age, race, religion and beliefs. They were also mothers and fathers; sons and daughters, and husbands and wives.

They were people who met their end in a manner that now cannot be changed, but God willing prevented in the future. Let us look to our families and appreciate them as fully as possible. Let us look at our life and realize it is finite. Let us remember those who are no longer able to look at theirs.”

I would like to thank you for your attendance here today, and for your decision to remember the victims of September 11th 2001. Though it was 3,287 days ago, let us always remember it as if it were yesterday in order to ensure it is not our tomorrow. Thank you, God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.”