



Brian J. Cummins '82
BC Veterans Reunion Speech
June 3, 2017

Colonel (Dan) Arkins, Father Penna, my fellow Boston College brother and sister veterans, I'm very humbled that you have invited me here today to address you. This is a capstone of the things that are most important to me: my family, my faith, my country—all of those things are interwoven in one form or another with Boston College. I'm most happy that my wife Patty, my children, and my mother-in-law Carolyn Foley '56, and my father Dan Cummins '58, USMC, are able to join me here this morning. I'd also like to recognize a classmate of mine: Ms. Cindi Bigelow, president of the Bigelow Tea Company, whose efforts since 2009 in providing free boxes of tea to deploying troops is a testament of how fellow Americans, a BC alumna in this case, support our service members.

Many, many years ago a senior officer shared a great pearl of wisdom with me. He said: "Gentleman, you need two attributes to have a successful military career: a small brain, and a big bladder. With those you'll be able to endure any long-winded staff meeting."

Well you clearly don't have small brains—you did go to BC—and as for big bladders, I will not try to find out. In that spirit I will try to keep my comments to the point and hopefully engaging.

Today I'd like to explain a program that the Washington, D.C., alumni chapter has been participating in for a number of years called Wreaths Across America. It's a national program, originating from Maine in 1992, to honor veterans by placing wreaths on their graves at national cemeteries, most notably at Arlington National Cemetery. Their motto is: Remember, Honor, Teach. The event is usually held on the second or third Saturday in December. For 2017, the event is Saturday, December 16.

You may have read about this event through *BC Magazine* or *Chronicle*. Some of you have joined us. This year, however, we have an expansion opportunity here in Massachusetts, if you are interested. The Northern Virginia/D.C. alumni chapter takes the national Wreaths idea a step further where we purposely seek out the site locations of interred BC alumni, family members, and friends to place a wreath at the grave. The intent of all this is an 'Act of Remembrance' in the same spirit that enabled that beautiful veterans memorial and the Chartres Cathedral-inspired labyrinth dedicated to the 9/11 Boston College victims.

Here is a thought: "If I have no memory, I have no real identity" that is rather sad. At the Wreaths event we participating alumni re-affirm our identity through the reflection and remembrance of those before us. My friends, the Wreaths event is not for the benefit of the dead. They have no need. The beneficiaries are the living. We are the ones who reap the rewards as enabled through the life and acts of those whom we seek to honor and remember. This is not a new principle, but it is an enduring one

that brings us back to our core values—and what makes this special is that it's placed in context of our Boston College Alumni Veteran family.

Friends, if you think about it, we veterans are a fairly exclusive 'club' of sorts, and are becoming more so upon each passing year.

Let me share some very interesting statistics from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

- In 2016, our country had 324 million citizens—the largest our country has ever been and it continues to grow without pause. In contrast, the veteran population was just over 21 million or about 6.5 percent of the total population—and continues to shrink by about 400,000 with each passing year.
- That's not all: of the 21 million vets, 11 million of those are age 60 and up, with another huge chunk closing in fast on that age 60 bench mark. I'm in that group, as is my classmate CDR Mike Cura.

With that in mind, I believe our efforts of remembrance, as a veteran family, are all the more important.

My first Wreaths Across America event was in 2008, upon my return from a combat tour in Iraq. While helping place wreaths on graves at Arlington National Cemetery I asked myself, who from BC is buried here? Surely someone must be, given our school's noted service to our country.

At the time I asked a couple of guys at Alumni Relations if they knew of anyone buried at Arlington. They had a single name, Captain Joseph Grant '60, USA, and the only BC alum awarded the Medal of Honor. Later Paul Delany '66 and other BCVAN members provided a few more names who they personally knew from the Vietnam era.

The problem, you see, is that no school keeps burial records. They want to know where you are when you are alive—that's for certain! I get letters and outreach from BC all the time. As a matter of fact I'm a pen-pal with the Advancement Office. But once we push on, things get quiet.

The real breakthrough was when we started making outreach to the greater alumni community through BC communications, like *BC Magazine*, asking for names of alumni or family members interred at Arlington National. Then the numbers grew as families came forward telling us of grandfathers, fathers, uncles, brothers, moms, and friends dear to them, who they so wished we could place a wreath at their grave.

At the Wreaths event we tend to follow a fairly simple ritual: We initially gather as a group where we introduce ourselves, we distribute grave assignments, and then disperse into smaller teams to visit graves throughout Arlington National. At every BC-associated grave the team places a wreath adorned with a BC pin or maroon and gold ribbon. A prayer is recited—often the prayer of St. Ignatius, our school's patron saint—and lastly we take a photo if the grave is new to us. At the end of the Wreaths event we gather again as a group at a local establishment for fellowship. The experience is memorable.

Each year our named roster grows a bit more—we now have about 30 names—and the level of alumni participation has grown in tandem, where in 2016 over a hundred volunteers signed up.

Sometimes families of the deceased join us and that is really special. In other cases we send a photo of the wreath-adorned grave when families can't travel. We've touched the hearts of many a BC family who could not join us, such as an aging spouse who received a photo of their loved one's grave. To the families it meant that BC cared.

Last November we learned of a two new alumni: Captain Thomas Danehy '31, USA, who died in 1959, and LTC Joseph Mariani Jr. '67, USA, who died in 2009. Loved ones must have seen our most recent notice and sent in the names to the alumni office. Wreaths were placed on their graves.

Who are alumni who rest at Arlington? Well, they span the eras.

The oldest known at Arlington National is LTG Hugh Aloysius Drum, class of '98– 1898. Fort Drum in upper state New York is named after him. I think a number of you trained at Camp, and later, Fort Drum. In his day Drum was a highly decorated officer from WWI, a thought leader, and senior staff officer to General John “Black Jack” Pershing. Just before the outbreak of WWII, Drum expected to take command of allied armies, but President Roosevelt was not fond of Drum, and passed him over for one of Drum's protégé's George Marshall—you know the rest of the history.

Another is Judge John O'Malley Jr. '51, MA'52, who later became a very distinguished federal administrative law judge. However, in late December of 1944, young Corporal John O'Malley of the 84th Infantry Division, the “Rail Splitters,” his unit was pulled out of badly needed R&R break; the troops were put in trucks and driven all day and night to be dropped off at a frozen windswept field somewhere in Belgium. They were told to dig in and to expect a German Panzer regiment to break through a wood-line to their front. Their orders were to hold at any cost. When they asked about where were supporting American tanks, they were told there were none—you hold with what you've got. It was a tough situation. Against all conventional wisdom, the German army launched a surprise major attack in the Belgium Ardennes in the dead of winter on 16 December 1944, better known in the press as the Battle of the Bulge. So there they were, the Rail Splitters, literally freezing to death, waiting for the German attack that would eventually come and was repulsed. Judge O'Malley died in 2014.

We have a number of Vietnam era veterans buried at Arlington, and Charles Benedict '67, our next speaker, will mention a few in his Golden Eagle Reflection.

As touching as the Wreaths event is for BC, other schools discovered our program and they asked to join in with us, desiring, like us, to find their alumni family members. It started with Holy Cross three years ago and has expanded to include other schools: Gonzaga, Fordham, Xavier, Catholic University, St. Louis University, Loyola, Le Moyne, and in 2016, John Carroll University. They gather with us. By joining together in an expanded co-fraternity of Catholic schools we've rediscovered a number of past alumni relationships among these schools, especially with Holy Cross.

Friends, I believe that in this Wreaths event, we have ignited a fire.

If this event strikes your interest, you, your family, and friends can join in. All are welcome. This event is wonderful for children and grandchildren. It is an outstanding service project for school age kids that can involve the whole family.

How? You can come down to Washington, D.C., and participate at Arlington National Cemetery with me along with the other schools. You will have a memorable experience. But coming to Washington can be hard, not always convenient, especially in December near Christmas.

However, this year, 2017, you have an opportunity to participate right here in Massachusetts at the National Veterans Cemetery at Bourne, Cape Cod. The cemetery fully participates in the Wreaths Across America national program.

If you would like to be involved all we need are two things:

- Do you know of any BC alumni buried at Bourne? Surely alumni are there, but we need the names. Remember schools have no burial records. If you know of someone interred at Bourne, please share with the BCVAN. Jean Chisser is the BC Alumni Association point of contact, or you can submit this information through an online form at www.bc.edu/bcvan.
- The second thing we ask, is please just come. Bring your family. The event costs nothing but your time and desire to participate in an act of remembrance.

My brother and sister Boston College veterans: you've been a most gracious audience. Thank you for the time you have given me to explain the Wreaths Across America program and I hope I have ignited interest in you to consider joining us, whether at Arlington National Cemetery, the National Veterans Cemetery at Bourne, or perhaps at another Wreaths Across America participating location throughout the United States.

Thank you - and **GO EAGLES!**

Brian J. Cummins '82

Lieutenant Colonel US Army (ret.)