

German International Fellow shares thoughts on Memorial Day

By German Col. Jens-Olaf Koltermann

Speech on Memorial Day to Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, Mechanicsburg, May 28, 2012

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honor and privilege for me as a German officer to speak to the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States. I want to share my personal view about how your country has positively changed Germany and how it has influenced my family. I can stand here today only because your veterans fought in World War II. They fought for the freedom of Europe. Your nation was able and willing to fight against the dictatorship of Adolf Hitler. You sacrificed young Americans to create a better world, and your whole nation suffered under the burden of the war. But at the end you succeeded. You helped to create a safer, more secure world in which democracy and well-being can flourish. And you helped to create a democratic Germany which was not easy after the years of Hitler's dictatorship.

Today on Memorial Day we are honoring those brave men and women who have fallen in the service of this country to keep your country free and to defend freedom in the world.

After World War II you were willing to defend Europe's newly gained freedom and democracy during the Cold War against the communist threat. Since 1955 more than 12 million American troops have been deployed in Germany to fulfill this task within the NATO Alliance. I was born in 1958. As a young boy, I knew American soldiers before I knew any German soldiers. My friends and I were always out watching the American troops around us. One of our games was to lie in the grass on our backs, counting the fighter aircrafts flying above us. We took great pride in identifying the various types of U.S. military plane.

During World War II my family lost its farm and windmill in Pommern, known by Americans as Pomerania. Our farm was then part of Germany, but it lay within Polish borders. When I was assigned

to the Multinational Corps Northeast, I was located in Szczecin, Poland, where my father was born. He could not believe the coincidence. During one of his visits, we made a tour through our family history. The farm and the mill were gone. But we found the millstones and posed for a family photograph at the site. Could any of you veterans imagine such a positive outcome when you fought in Germany? Former enemies like Germany and Poland now work together in a multinational Corps—no border controls are needed! This multinational Corps consists of 12 nations including the United States.

My family fled from the east in February 1945. Then my grandparents lived in Stuttgart in a Marshall Plan house. Again, you the Americans supported Germany and other war-torn European countries by giving monetary support to help rebuild European economies after [World War II](#) in order to nurture democracy and freedom.

While visiting my grandparents, I observed how many Americans lived in Stuttgart. At that time the Americans, even in civilian cars, were easy to identify: They had green license plates. My grandpa once took me to the American housing area to play miniature-golf, which was unknown to me and most of the Germans at that time. Your culture has greatly influenced Germany. This is an ongoing process. You are still, for the majority of Germans, the example of the “American dream.” While a minority may have louder negative voices, rest assured that Germans still remember what the United States and the United States military has done for our country.

English was my first foreign language in school. Learning your language gave us the opportunity to talk to the Americans. When I was a school boy in the 1960s and 1970s, there were always big NATO military exercises. My friends and I were eager to encounter U.S. soldiers maneuvering in our woodlands in their combat vehicles. We were curious about what they were doing and how they lived in the field. The big trucks, tanks, and other combat vehicles really attracted our interest. Also the soldiers shared their rations with us—peanut butter, chewing gum, jelly roles, canned bread, simply everything. These were mostly unknown to us. We even used these delights as currency. I’ll always remember the taste of the soldier’s supergum, a tasty chewing gum. I have enjoyed this flavor during my War College year—in Life Savers!

In 1978, I joined the Bundeswehr. Through our military partnership and exercises, I have learned more about our American friends. Yes, many U.S. troops continue to serve in Germany. As a company commander, I partnered with one of the companies of the U.S. Army’s 102nd Signal Battalion in Hanau. Also, we partnered with the 50th Fighter Wing at the former US Air Base at Hahn, which was only 15 miles away. But the U.S. military no longer uses these installations.

Your enduring support to defend freedom and democracy with US troops in Germany led to our next success. In 1989, the Warsaw Pact finally collapsed. Now our eastern neighbors are enjoying

democracy and new freedoms. The NATO Alliance has expanded. For us Germans, reunification was an imperative. But Great Britain and France, among other European nations, opposed a unified Germany. Again you, my American friends, with your leadership, allayed their fears of a unified Germany. You made our reunification possible. Without your strategic leadership, Germany would possibly still be separated into two countries.

In 1990, Germany received its full sovereignty—and with that more responsibility. Two years later the German Army conducted its first deployments abroad: Under the lead of the United Nations, the German Army supported operations in Cambodia—then later in Somalia. In Germany, this was a real paradigm change. Indeed some of my comrades left the Bundeswehr because they were not able in good conscience to participate in these new missions. With the deployments, the first post-World War II fallen soldiers came back to Germany—a situation which was then unknown to my nation. So we began to talk about soldiers who died in missions. Only in 2008 did our Minister of Defense Jung utter, for the first time, the words “fallen soldiers”.

The war in the Balkans followed. Again Europe was not able to solve the problem without U.S. assistance. In 2008, during my first deployment, I served as Head of the IT [information technology] and Signals Division in the Headquarters KFOR in Pristina, Kosovo. The Chief of Staff was an American Brigadier General. I had the privilege of leading many highly trained and skilled U.S. soldiers in my division. As a small boy in Germany following American soldiers on maneuvers, I never imagined, I would grow up to lead them in wartime. That is an experience I will always treasure.

U.S. soldiers have fought a long and hard war in Iraq. However, my nation was not able yet to join you in this operation. Please consider Germany’s historical background. We are still growing into our global responsibilities. You cannot give an adult task to a six-year-old. The German Army’s first real combat after World War II took place in Afghanistan in 2007. Germany realizes that such deployments can involve genuine combat. So please be patient with us and give us some more time to grow up. I am sure we will become in the future what President Bush offered us some years ago: partners in leadership.

In 2010, I had my most recent deployment to the Headquarters ISAF in Kabul, Afghanistan. I served under the lead of General Petraeus, a brilliant officer from whom I learned a lot. I worked together with four American Colonels in the area of communications and IT. Our efforts supported the US and NATO forces in their combat missions.

We have now been engaged for 10 years in Afghanistan and the mission is not yet finished. It will take us more years to succeed in this difficult area. World War II in Europe lasted 6 years, but the American engagement in my region of the world is still ongoing, more than 55 years later.

Americans have proven over centuries that they are willing to commit themselves to fight for freedom

and democracy. They have the capabilities to succeed in current missions. Your long-term commitment brought Europe freedom and democracy. Your determined opposition eventually overcame the communist threat.

Today, you are further reducing your forces in Germany. This is good news because it means that the mission in Europe is almost complete. It took a long time. But your enduring engagement and your strong will have paid off at the end. You can be proud of what you have achieved in my region of the world. But this also reminds us that freedom and democracy have their price. They must be defended against the evil in world.

President Reagan captured the essence of this commitment to liberty in a speech he gave on the 40th anniversary of D-Day at Normandy: “You all knew that some things are worth dying for. One's country is worth dying for, and democracy is worth dying for, because it's the most deeply honorable form of government ever devised by man. All of you loved liberty. All of you were willing to fight tyranny, and you knew the people of your countries were behind you.”

Worthy veterans and family members: I would like to thank you all for your engagement and for what you have done for my country. Without America and your will to make the ultimate sacrifice for a higher good, I do not know where Europe and Germany would stand today. You sometimes have to fight to gain peace, freedom and democracy—to make the world a little bit better step-by-step.

Each person who died during the conflicts of the past was loved and cherished by family and friends. Each fallen soldier, sailor, airman, or marine was a loss to your community and your nation. Today we take the time to honor these fallen warriors. We remember and honor the sacrifice of those who died to fight for freedom and democracy. I personally can only say thank you for all the support you given to my nation, to Europe, and to my family. Your support and friendship have made it possible for me to join you here in this great nation today.

Thank you so much!