

Opportunities

Robert D. Springer

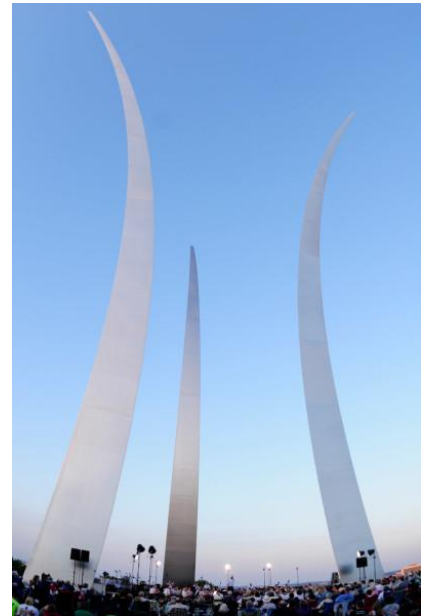
Virginia Research Lodge No. 1777

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Thank you Carl for that generous introduction. I very much appreciate being with you here in Richmond today. September has been an exciting month for me and my wife and this day is especially important to me.

I serve as the President of the Air Force Memorial Foundation. Our mission is to site, design and construct an appropriate memorial the United States Air Force and its predecessors, such as the Army Corps. On Thursday the 18th of September we dedicated the site for the memorial. As most of you know the 18th was the 50th anniversary of Air Force.

My job as President of the Foundation would be somewhat easier if I get the Marines to understand that the site of the Iwo Jima Memorial is certainly sacred and hallowed ground, but that ground doesn't extend to all of northern Virginia. I'll let Carl explain that to you later.



U.S. Air Force Memorial
Dedicated 2006

I mentioned that today is an exciting day for me also. It is. Today is my first opportunity to visit a lodge as a 33rd Degree. So I thank each of you for this meaningful experience. In light of my special activity in Grand Rapids, Michigan this week, I thought it may be appropriate to make a few remarks this morning about how Masonry has influenced my life. Unfortunately, we don't have time to cover just how incredibly important to me

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Masonry has been... but we do have time to cover the "beginnings". If I had to select just one word to describe my comments this morning it would be "**opportunities**".

I was born in Central Pennsylvania during the depression years. I was the last of eight children from my fathers' and mothers' two marriages each. My father was 53... my mother 40 when I was born.

Shortly after my tenth birthday, my father, who had been in ill health for as long as I knew him, passed away. We were excessively poor. I had a social security card when I was 10 years old. Not for ID purposes as today, but rather because I was working to help bring a dollar or two to the family.

A few years later when I was 14, I was offered an **opportunity** to attend the Patton Masonic School for Boys in Elizabethtown, PA. This was a school for boys whose fathers were Masons and whose fathers were dead.

Mr. Patton, who endowed the school with his fortune, was childless. So he and Mrs. Patton in the 1920's willed that their estate should be used to establish a school for boys whose fathers were dead, and where the Bible would be taught. Those were the only stipulations.

My father had not been a Mason. But the Old Fort Lodge in Central Pennsylvania had several brothers who were residents of my little hometown of 700 people. Needless to say, these were very influential and important gentlemen. They talked with the folks at Patton Masonic School... and they talked with my mother and told her they would be pleased to sponsor me to Patton School.

Fortunately, I had a loving and understanding mother. She realized that my opportunities at this school would be greater than she could afford me at home. So this teary-eyed 14

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year old went off to Patton School... about a hundred miles away. I had to skip ninth grade since the Patton Masonic School only offered grades 10 through 12.

We were a small group of about 35 boys. About a dozen in each of the three grades. Of course, that was a tremendous advantage from a teacher to student ratio.

We spent half of our day in academics, and half of the day in "shop" such as carpentry or machine shop. It was during my half days in carpentry shop that I realized how important it would be for me to get an education. I clearly did not have the skilled hands of a craftsman.

We started each day with a Matin Service. Each meal was preceded by prayer. Remember Mr. Patton's will. The Bible will be taught. We were also encouraged to attend the church of our choice in Elizabethtown each Sunday morning.

With such few numbers in our overall student body, we were involved in every aspect of campus life. For example, in my senior year, the football program center section listed Springer, left halfback, #11, 5 feet 0 inches and 94 pounds. You got it. Five zip and less than a hundred pounds. That was a disciplining and learning experience I can assure you. Today, I probably couldn't pass out the programs at the football games, let alone be listed in them.

After three years at Patton School in Elizabethtown, PA, I was accepted at the nearby Elizabethtown College. I was fortunate enough to get a small academic scholarship stipend to help offset some tuition expenses at this nearby small church dominated liberal arts college.

But I also had another opportunity. Patton School for Boys let me reside in the dormitory and walk the two miles each way to college. Essentially, I was a commuting student.

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I had no room and board expenses because of the generosity of the boys home. Without that assistance, I would not have been able to afford college. I did work off campus since I needed money for college tuition.

In May of my sophomore year, a young Air Force Recruiter noticed me eating my boys home provided sack lunch in the student union building. He approached me and asked me how far along in college I was.

I told him I was completing my second year. He wanted to know if I was passing or failing. Passing, but not by much. In those days, one only needed two years of college or university to enter the Air Force's Aviation Cadet program.

The Aviation Cadet program offered an intensive training program for a year where you concurrently learned how to fly... and how to be an officer. If you were one of the successful ones, you were commissioned as a Second Lieutenant and received your aviator wings at the same time. A great program. A great opportunity.

So the recruiting sergeant asks me if I had thought about flying. I admitted that I really had not. Well, he got into his recruiting pitch, and after about 20 minutes, he tells me that if I were successful in the program, I would receive a salary, some money for housing, some money for food, and flying pay. That would come to \$422.50.

I asked every year... he said heck no boy every month.

Well I was carrying 18 semester hours... walking two miles each way to college daily... working 38 hours a week in a wheelbarrow factory and in a supermarket on weekends... and chasing a very lovely young lady in town.

So when he says **every month**, and realizing that I don't guess I had ever seen \$422.50, I grabbed that application form and signed on whatever line.

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Several months later I found myself in an Air Force uniform at Harlingen AFB, Texas. I was a 19 year old engaged to this young lady from E-town.

I was successful with the program. I got my gold bars. I got my wings, and six days later as a 20 year old Second Lieutenant, I married Bonnie.

Now I must tell you that the most macho thing I had to do on my wedding night . . . was to leave the reception . . . get in my father-in-law's stick shift automobile . . . drive two blocks up the street and turn right. And let Bonnie drive the car. **I had not driven a car. I had no driver's license.**

Naturally I could not afford a car before I joined the Air Force. We were not allowed to have a car in Aviation Cadets. So I had wings but no driver's license. I now enjoy telling my friends that I may be the only person they know who had two learner's permits on his/her honeymoon.

I spent 36 years in the Air Force. My family and I have traveled and lived throughout America, as well as in Germany and Japan. I spent a year in Vietnam as well. The Air Force gave me a chance to complete my civilian education with bachelor's and master's degrees from George Washington University.

I have flown . . . instructed . . . served as a staff officer . . . and had several **opportunities** to command. And "command" is the ultimate assignment. But more importantly, I had the opportunity to serve my nation and my God for 36 years.

Let's focus on the word "**opportunity**" again.

When I was in college, we were in the middle of the Korean Conflict. There was a lot of recruiting going on across the nation. And there was also a draft in place. The Armed Forces was a growth industry.

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In 1952 when I joined the Air Force there were nearly one million [973,474] men and women in the USAF. Forty years later in 1992 the number was less than half a million [470,315]. Today it is only 380,000.

Times have changed. With sophisticated computers, smart weapons, high tech aircraft, we can do a lot more, and yet do it with fewer people.

But those who do enter our Air Force, or other services for that matter, still, have those marvelous **opportunities** which were provided to the men and women of my era.

Today, in the Air Force, all officers start with a minimum of a bachelor's degree. Well over half of all the officers have one or more graduate degrees. Even a third of our very youngest, the Lieutenants and Captains, have a graduate degree. It is a well-educated officer force.

Virtually all [over 99%] enlisted members have a high school diploma. And that number is impressive when you realize that less than 75% of our ninth graders in this country are around for graduation from high school.

We provide some of the best training and educational opportunities in the world. Our programs train thousands upon thousands annually in leadership, oral and written communications, supervision, resource and personnel management. All are attributes that employers search for in the workplace.

The leadership experiences available cannot be overemphasized. We literally take young kids off the streets and in a very short period put them in charge of multi-million dollar equipment . . . and give them supervisory responsibilities.

The crew chief of a multi-million dollar F-15 fighter over at Langley Air Force Base may well be a three striper with four or five years of service. That's an incredible responsibility

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for a young man or woman whose best friend in high school is still in college or working at a fast food counter.

Whether our young men and women leave after their initial hitch, or whether they stay around for retirement, when they leave the service they have a leg up on their peers.

They are loaded with talent,
They are healthy, physically fit, and **drug free**,
They are dedicated to a strong work ethic,
are trained in highly technical disciplines,
and are experienced supervisors, managers, and leaders.

In most every case, they are just what an employer is looking for. OK . . . so you got to be thinking he must know we are a bit beyond recruiting pitch age. And of course, I do know that. But I told you up front there are two things out there in the ether which I wanted to bring home to you. Let me close by doing just that.

First, remember my upbringing . . . my opportunities in a boys home. One might even call it an orphanage. A few years ago, Newt Gingrich, the Speaker of the House raised the level of interest in "orphanages". I am not opposed to the idea of placing young men and women . . . boys and girls . . . in an environment where their **opportunities** may be increased.

I believe in orphanages . . . but not when run by the government. Rather where churches and fraternal groups run them, such as in my case, the Masonic Lodge, they can be positive environments.

Second, remember my career in the Air Force . . . my **opportunities** to learn and grow and mature and serve my nation.

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Although the armed forces, that is, all of the services, are at the lowest numbers in over 45 years, there are still **opportunities**.

We need about 200,000 young men and women each year to join the service. Too many folks believe the services are not "hiring" or "recruiting". Therefore, there are superb jobs going begging.

I tell you this because many of you have children and grandchildren or friends with children of service age. Do you know that each year the USAF has about 6000 AFROTC scholarships at the university level? The other services have as many or more.

But yet as Americans think of base closures, early retirements, etc., they do not see the need for military careers. They do not think of the need for youth in the military. All of the servicemen and women start at the bottom. There is a certain youthfulness required to handle the physical and stressful demands placed on our warriors.

We need fresh faces . . . about 200,000 of them each year . . . and all of them will get more opportunity than they ever dreamed possible.

I'll tell you where there is another marvelous **opportunity**. The opportunity to be associated with the finest, most honest, God-fearing, patriotic members of society. I refer of course to the Masonic Fraternity.

A Fraternity that was home to George Washington, Douglas MacArthur, Harry Truman, Will Rogers and YOU. Pretty good group to be associated with.

But as times have changed in this country, we find fewer folks who are "joiners". How tragic. What a loss of "**opportunities**" to so many good men that do not benefit from the marvelous learning experiences . . . the growth opportunities . . . the fellowship . . . and the privilege of service to the less privileged.

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The **opportunity to provide opportunities** is resident here our Fraternity. The **opportunity to create opportunities** for other little Bobby Springers across the nation... and more importantly, right here in Richmond, Virginia.

Let me leave you with these thoughts:

A home for fatherless boys provided me with an opportunity. In spite of the dramatic draw down of our military forces in this nation, there are about 200,000 marvelous military service **opportunities** awaiting America's youth each year.

The Masons of this nation and world represent all that is good and great about mankind. It is our responsibility to see that our fraternity stays vibrant. We need to provide **opportunities**. Each of us can influence in some appropriate and accepted manner another man who should become a member of this great fraternity.

When I reflect on my life there are three significant persons . . . other than my natural parents . . . who were supremely influential in my life.

First was a gentlemen I never knew. A Mason. Thomas Ranken Patton who left his money to establish a home for fatherless boys.

Second was an individual I met but can't recall his name -- an Air Force recruiter.

And third, my wife of over 44 years, Bonnie Brubaker Springer of Elizabethtown, PA.

These three people . . . and a marvelous nation . . . gave me all the **opportunity** that I could handle. How lucky I am.

Thank you and God Bless.