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Medal of Honor Memorial ceremony at heart of Fourth of July celebrations

By DAN FELDNER, Staff Writer

Amid the hot dogs, fireworks and laughter of an Independence Day celebration, a ceremony reminding the public of freedom's cost and honoring the men and women who paid that price, some with their lives, was held.

The centerpiece event for the Festival of the Parks at Roosevelt Park Wednesday was the dedication ceremony for the Medal of Honor Memorial. A number of special guests and dignitaries attended the ceremony, including Gov. John Hoeven, Rear Admiral Michael H. Miller, a Minot native, and Michael John Fitzmaurice, the only living recipient of the Medal of Honor from North Dakota.

While much was said of the courage and dedication of the men and women in the military, there were a few light-hearted moments during the ceremony as well. Bill Kolb, chairman of the Medal of Honor Memorial committee, noted that the memorial wasn't the only thing he was responsible for.

"What a great day this is for Minot and the great state of North Dakota, for this beautiful, beautiful memorial that we have here. I might also tell you that in addition to being chairman of the Medal of Honor Memorial committee, I was chairman of the weather committee



Dan Feldner/MDN

The Presentation of the Colors is carried out by the Minot Air Force Base Honor Guard during the Medal of Honor dedication ceremony on Wednesday. Among the special guests in attendance was **Michael John Fitzmaurice**, second from rear left, the only living Medal of Honor recipient from North Dakota. He currently resides in South Dakota.

also," Kolb said to laughter and applause as the sun shone down on the crowd through a gleaming blue sky.

Kolb went on to give some public recognition to many of the people who were responsible for making the memorial a reality, including Bill Reynolds, a member of the memorial committee, who designed the memorial.

After Kolb's remarks, Gov. Hoeven spoke. He said that the 19 pillars around the main column each represent a Medal of Honor recipient from North Dakota while noting that a plaque for the 19th recipient, Woodrow Wilson Keeble, who was recently awarded the Medal of

Honor, is on the way. Hoeven also reminded the crowd that North Dakota has more Medal of Honor recipients per capita and any other state in the Union.

Hoeven then shared part of a passage from the Medal of Honor awards ceremony for Michael John Fitzmaurice, who is the only living Medal of Honor recipient from North Dakota, though he currently resides in South Dakota.

“So, right up front, what does it take to win the Medal of Honor? ... This is what it takes to be a Medal of Honor recipient,” Hoeven said.

He went on to tell how Fitzmaurice went above and beyond the call of duty during the Vietnam War on March 23, 1971, in Khe Sanh, Republic of Vietnam.

Fitzmaurice and three fellow soldiers were occupying a bunker when a company of North Vietnamese sappers infiltrated the area. Three explosive charges were thrown into the bunker, and after throwing two back out, Fitzmaurice covered the third with his flak vest and himself.

Even after suffering multiple wounds and partial loss of sight from the explosion, Fitzmaurice charged out of the bunker and engaged the enemy, inflicting even more casualties among their ranks. After the battle was over, Fitzmaurice refused to be medically evacuated, preferring to remain at his post.

“That’s a Medal of Honor recipient, Mr. Michael Fitzmaurice,” Hoeven said to a prolonged round of applause.

Hoeven then read a list of wars and conflicts the United States has been

involved in and had veterans and current members of the military from those conflicts stand and be acknowledged by the crowd. After Hoeven finished reading the list, the crowd gave another hearty round of applause to all the men and women who have served or are serving their country.

“That’s what this memorial is really all about, that’s what this July 4th is really all about,” Hoeven said.

It was then time for the 26th President of the United States, Teddy Roosevelt, to take the stage with a little help from actor and historian Arch Ellwein. Dressed in clothes typical of Roosevelt’s day, Ellwein sported the same trademark mustache and spectacles, which he often adjusted, as the former president did.

While other speakers reminded the crowd of the courage the members of the military showed in doing their duty in areas of conflict, Ellwein reminded the crowd that duty isn’t limited to those who enlist.

“All of us know of our rights and benefits as citizens of the United States. I wish to speak to you about duties. Duties as Americans here today. ... Some people say the vote is a right. But my friends, it is also a duty. ... It is then our responsibility to govern ourselves. And that is the price we pay to be free people,” Ellwein said to whistles and applause.

Rear Admiral Michael H. Miller of the Navy, a Minot native, then took the podium. Miller said he had few words to say, and that the sacrifices of those who came before him spoke far more eloquently than he could.

“This memorial brings us back to the truth, that there is indeed gallantry and grit in the heart of the human soul,” Miller said. “And that even under the greatest duress possible, mankind still has the propensity to rise above all the fear and tumult in the pursuit of a more noble cause.”

After Miller spoke, a list of all 19 of North Dakota’s Medal of Honor recipients was read with a bell toll after each name. Fitzmaurice then placed a wreath on the memorial with the help of Senior Airman Dan Sutton from Minot Air Force Base.

From heroes of the past to soldiers of the present, the Fourth of July was a day to celebrate not only a nation’s freedom, but the men and women who fight for it every day. This sentiment was summed up by Miller at the end of his speech.

“Emboldened by their sacrifice, humbled by their commitment and inspired by their courage, may this Medal of Honor Memorial remind us of all that this nation has stood for in the past, and all that it must continue to represent for generations to come,” Miller said.