

## AMERICA: A NATION OF HEROES

by Dr. James E. Vann

Congratulations, America! How you have grown, and how many accomplishments you have made through the years! In just 234 years our beloved America has become the greatest nation on earth. And she has done this primarily by being a nation of heroes.

What makes an American hero? Every civilized nation on earth has had its own heroes. Rome praised and exulted her war heroes. The Greeks worshipped their athletes. England lauded her bards and poets. But what of America? What makes an American hero?

There is no other nation on earth like America, nor has there been in the history of the world. No nation has ever enjoyed the freedoms that Americans enjoy. Then again, America is not simply one nation of people. She is made up of many nations; many nationalities, religions, cultures, and traditions, all melted together to create the unique blend and harmony that is America. That is why the songwriter wrote the words, "America! America! God shed His grace on thee; and crown thy good with *brotherhood*, from sea to shining sea." It is that very "brotherhood", and the diversity within it that makes American heroes unique.

They do not come from aristocracy or royalty; we have no aristocracy in America. They do not come from one nationality; people of every race are named and praised in our history books as heroes. They do not come from the battlefield alone, even though we honor and hold in the utmost esteem our soldiers, sailors, and Marines as heroes.

So how do we define an American hero? We must understand the country herself, if we are to understand her heroes. Simply put, Americans look on heroes as ordinary people doing extraordinary things: everyday people, working hard, committing to a task, a dream, an ambition, a calling, and seeing that dream to fruition. The word "hero" has been redefined, literally, by America. She is a nation of heroes. Sacagawea's faithful help to Lewis and Clark; Clara Barton and her tireless work to build the Red Cross; Thomas Edison and his incredible inventions we still use today; George Washington Carver and his scientific discoveries; the Wright Brothers giving birth to flight on the sand dunes of Kitty Hawk, NC; Henry Ford's automobile and assembly line; John Glen orbiting the earth for the first time; Neil Armstrong taking man's first steps on the moon. Tenacity, determination, vision, commitment... these are some of the qualities of an American hero.

Heroism did not die with the first generation of Americans. This great heritage was passed on from generation to generation. It is seen in small acts of kindness and sacrifice each day. Heroism is woven throughout the tapestry of our history and into the hearts of our people.

From the moment the astronauts of the Shuttle Columbia launched into space, long before it exploded upon re-entry, they were American heroes. They were reaching beyond

themselves, to discover new and better things for mankind. They had counted the cost; they were willing to sacrifice for a greater cause.

When the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center fell, we saw the heroism of thousands of Americans. We saw it in the firefighters who ran into the burning buildings as everyone else was running out. We saw it in the man who could have escaped, but refused to leave his disabled friend in the stair tower, and died by his side. We saw it in the man who helped a woman in a wheelchair, whom he did not know, down 100 flights of stairs to safety.

We saw American heroism in the crew and passengers of Flight 93, as they tried to take back control of the airplane even in the face of death, rather than allow the hijackers to accomplish their deadly mission.

We see it in the eyes of the young Marine who was married three days before he shipped out for Iraq, and voluntarily re-enlisted to defend his family he hopes to have one day.

Ordinary people doing extraordinary things!

We see heroism every day in America. Heroes are all around us. A mother, a teacher, a truck driver, a doctor, a blue lodge Mason!

We are truly a nation of Heroes. God Bless America!

And so, this remaining time together is dedicated to the theme of Masonic heroes, which reminds us every person in this room can accomplish significant deeds for ourselves and for others.

*“The lives of great men all remind us,  
we can make our lives sublime;  
and, in parting, leave behind us  
footprints in the sands of time.”*

There are few lines in poetry better known than these. They capture a great truth, for the lives of great men do remind us of what is possible. They remind us that we, too, can accomplish important, significant things.

We don't always recognize heroes when we see them. The great military leader, the renowned champion of human rights, the outstanding artist... each is easy to spot. But, also consider the Masonic heroes that are more easily overlooked.

There is a brother who, for thirty years, has been the first one at the lodge, making sure it is warm enough in winter and cool enough in the summer, making a pot of coffee... just making sure that everything runs comfortably and conveniently for others. He leaves footprints.

Then there is the Mason who is always there when work is to be done. He may not attend Masonic meetings regularly, but he is there when the lodge needs to be painted, or when a brother needs a lift to the hospital.

There is the brother who gives hours of his time, week after week, to the Masonic youth orders, he accepts the terrific responsibility of youth leadership, the Saturdays spent making trips to state meetings and events... with a car full of young people in their early teens... when he could be at home watching the game on television. He leaves footprints on the sands of the future.

There is the brother York Riter who quietly visits every member of his lodge when they are hospitalized and who remembers to call the widows of brethren regularly, just to check on them. He leaves footprints, which often point the way out of despair.

These men, and many like them, do not think of themselves as heroes... they would scoff at the idea. Heroism is for other people, they would say, for people who face danger and overcome impossible odds. Yes, heroes do those things.

But the other brothers are heroes, too. Heroes also fight the small battles, which make all the difference. Heroes work.

Almost every active Mason is a hero to someone. You may never know the person who regards you as a hero. He probably will never tell you. But something you have done or something you have stood for... touches him, and that makes all the difference.

It is awesome to discover that we are someone's Masonic hero... that someone looks up to us and respects us for what we know or do in Masonry. We may not think of our actions as important. To most of us, it is merely a matter of doing what needs to be done. Then, suddenly, we find that someone thinks what we do or how we act is important... and looks up to us. The responsibility that accompanies that discovery can crash over us like a tidal wave.

But even a tidal wave cannot wash away those footprints on the sands of time. What we do makes a difference... a difference we will never know. Every action we take... or fail to take, has consequences, which run like the ripples of water into the future.

Heroes? What of the man who introduced George Washington to Masonry? What of the man who first interested the young brother Fleming into biology, and who later discovered penicillin? What of the man who inspired our brother Borglum to sculpt Mt. Rushmore? We never know the consequences of what we do.

And so, today, I salute every person who is a hero, whether they know it or not, for in doing so I salute all of us.

Let their examples remind us that we can make our lives sublime. We can see their footprints in the sands of time... we do not know who will see ours! God Bless you all and God Bless America!