Welcome to our Veterans Day program. I am Charlee Kleve, and it is my privilege to be here with you today. As a United States Army veteran and a former teacher here in Holyoke, this program means a great deal to me.

To my fellow veterans joining us this morning, thank you. I'm honored to share this day with you.

This year, our program carries special significance. In 2026, our nation celebrates 250 years of American independence. That's 250 years of challenges, changes, and defining moments. But behind every one of those moments were ordinary Americans who stepped forward when their country needed them… and that's what I want to focus on today. Not just what happened in American history, but the people who lived it. The young men and women who left their families and answered the call to serve.

As we travel through 250 years of military history, we'll hear stories of ordinary Americans whose service became part of our nation's history. And along the way, we'll discover that some of those stories lead us right back here to Holyoke, because history isn't just about famous people. It's also about people like us.

The history of America's military began even before our nation declared its independence. In 1775, the Continental Congress began establishing the forces that would eventually become today's United States Armed Forces. Those forces have grown and changed to meet challenges our nation's founders could scarcely have imagined. Today, our military consists of six branches, each with its own history, traditions, and responsibilities.

Today we are going to meet ordinary people. Young people leaving home. Families waiting for letters. Veterans returning to their communities… and as we move through history, notice how these stories gradually bring us closer to home; because Holyoke has been part of America's military story, too.

1775: The American Revolutionary War

Imagine you're a young farmer in Massachusetts. It's April 1775.

You've probably never traveled very far from home. Your days are spent working in the fields and helping your family. Then someone arrives with news. British soldiers are marching toward Lexington and Concord.

The American colonies have been arguing with Great Britain over taxes, laws, and their lack of representation in Parliament…and now, on April 19, the fighting has begun. The American Revolutionary War is underway.

Suddenly, you have a decision to make. Do you stay home, where your family needs you? Or do you grab your musket and join your neighbors, knowing you might never return? You don't have a uniform. You haven't attended basic training. And you certainly don't know whether your side will win.

But here's the really interesting part. The country you're about to fight for doesn't even officially exist yet. The Continental Army would be established in June 1775, and the Declaration of Independence wouldn't come until July 1776.

Those first soldiers weren't fighting for a country they already had.

They were fighting for the possibility of one.

1814: The War of 1812

Those first soldiers helped create a new nation, but winning independence was one thing. Keeping it would prove to be another.

Let's jump ahead about forty years.

It's 1814, and believe it or not, America is fighting the British. Again. Apparently, winning our independence wasn't quite the end of our problems with Great Britain. The British have recently burned the White House and the Capitol. And now they're attacking Fort McHenry in Baltimore.

Imagine standing aboard a ship and watching the battle. Cannons are firing. Rockets are exploding. And the bombardment continues throughout the night.

An American lawyer named Francis Scott Key is aboard a vessel with the British fleet. He watches the battle, wondering whether the American fort will survive… and there's one thing he's looking for.

The American flag.

But it's dark. There's smoke everywhere. And he can't tell whether it's still flying… so he waits. Finally, morning comes… and there, above Fort McHenry, is the American flag. Still flying.

Key is so moved by the sight that he writes a poem.

And here's the part I love. You already know that poem.

In fact, you just heard our choir sing it. *The Star-Spangled Banner.*

The next time you hear the words "O say, can you see," remember that Francis Scott Key was asking a very real question. Was the flag still there?

And it was.

1863: The American Civil War

That flag survived the British attack.

But less than fifty years later, Americans would find themselves fighting one another.

It's 1863. Imagine you're fourteen years old. Some of you sitting here are probably that age right now. Instead of worrying about homework or spending time with friends, you're marching alongside an army. Your shoes are worn out. You're hungry. You're exhausted… and you can hear gunfire.

You're caught up in the American Civil War.

Now, you might be thinking, "Fourteen? They let kids go to war?" Believe it or not, they did.Some served as drummer boys, using drums to communicate military orders.

One boy, Johnny Clem, reportedly joined a Union regiment unofficially when he was just nine years old. Nine! Think about the third and fourth graders you know. Now imagine one of them marching with an army.

But what made the Civil War especially terrible was that Americans were fighting Americans.

The nation had been torn apart over slavery and the secession of Southern states. Families were divided. Hundreds of thousands of Americans would die. When the war ended in 1865, slavery had been abolished and the Union preserved.

But remember that fourteen-year-old… Military history isn't always about grown men.

Sometimes, it's about children who weren't much older than you.

1917: World War I

A little more than fifty years later, another generation would travel across an ocean to fight.

Imagine you're eighteen years old. You've grown up in a small town, maybe one a lot like Holyoke. Now you're aboard a ship headed to France. You're going to fight in World War I… and when you arrive, you discover that war looks nothing like you imagined.

You're living in a trench, and I don't mean a nice, clean ditch. I mean a muddy hole in the ground, filled with water, rats, and more bugs than you ever want to see. You're cold. You're hungry. And enemy soldiers are just across a stretch of land called No Man's Land. At any moment, you could be ordered to climb out of that trench and advance under enemy fire.

Now imagine wanting to tell your family what you're experiencing. You can't call. You can't text. You can't FaceTime. So you write a letter. Maybe you tell your mom you're doing fine, even though you're absolutely miserable. Maybe you ask how things are going back home, and then you wait weeks for a reply.

Imagine being that young soldier. Eighteen years old. Thousands of miles from home, just hoping to make it back.

Then, on November 11, 1918, something extraordinary happened. At the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, the guns fell silent. After more than four years of war, the fighting on the Western Front had come to an end.

Silence.

November 11 became known as Armistice Day, a day to remember the end of the fighting. And that's why, more than a century later, we observe Veterans Day on November 11.

In the midst of those devastated battlefields, something else had become a powerful symbol. Bright red poppies. These flowers grew among the graves of fallen soldiers, becoming a reminder of the lives lost during the war.

Later this morning, we'll share the story of how those simple red flowers became a symbol of remembrance… and why they remain part of our Veterans Day traditions today.

1941: Pearl Harbor and Holyoke

When World War I ended, people hoped it would be the last great war. Unfortunately, just over twenty years later, another generation would be called to serve. And this time, our story brings us directly to Holyoke.

It's December 7, 1941. Imagine you're nineteen years old. You've graduated from high school, joined the Navy, and traveled thousands of miles to Hawaii. It's Sunday morning at Pearl Harbor. Some sailors are eating breakfast. Others are getting ready for the day. Then, at approximately 7:55 a.m., everything changes. Japanese aircraft appear overhead. Explosions shake the harbor. Sirens sound. Sailors scramble to their stations. And in the middle of that chaos is a young sailor from right here in Holyoke, Colorado.

His name is John Zeiler. John graduated from Holyoke High School in 1940. By December 1941, he was serving aboard the USS *Arizona*. During the attack, the *Arizona* suffered a catastrophic explosion and sank. John was among the more than 1,100 sailors and Marines aboard the ship who lost their lives. He was just nineteen years old.

And he wasn't the only one from our community. Richard Owens and James Lindsay, two other men with connections to Holyoke, also lost their lives during the attack.

In fact, our local Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 6482 bears their names. The Zeiler-Owens-Lindsay Post. So the next time you hear someone mention our local VFW, remember those three men… because Pearl Harbor wasn't just something that happened thousands of miles away. Three families connected to Holyoke experienced that loss.

History isn't always as far away as we think. Sometimes, it's right here in our own hometown.

1944–1945: World War II

The attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into World War II. Over the next several years, millions of Americans would serve in Europe and the Pacific. On June 6,

1944, American and Allied troops landed on the beaches of Normandy, France, in what became known as D-Day.

Imagine being nineteen years old, standing aboard a landing craft. The water is rough. You're carrying heavy equipment… and you know that when the ramp drops, you'll have to move onto a beach under enemy fire. You don't know whether you'll survive, but the soldiers beside you are counting on you.

Meanwhile, halfway around the world, other American service members were fighting in the Pacific. One of them had grown up right here in Holyoke.

Dewey Lindgren graduated from Phillips County High School in 1943. He served in the United States Army infantry and participated in the invasion of Okinawa, one of the major battles in the Pacific. Think about that. One year you're a student in northeastern Colorado. A short time later, you're serving on an island thousands of miles away. Dewey was fortunate enough to return home. He married, raised a family, and spent his working life farming. He even became a pilot and continued flying until he was seventy years old. World War II was fought by ordinary people from farms, small towns, and communities just like ours. People who had plans for their lives.

And people who, when they returned home, helped build the communities we know today.

1950: The Korean War

World War II ended in 1945, but just five years later, another war began. This time, in Korea. North Korea invaded South Korea, and American service members were sent to help defend the South. Now, when we think about war, we often picture soldiers carrying rifles or tanks moving across battlefields. But how do you keep thousands of soldiers supplied with food, fuel, and equipment when they're halfway around the world? That's where the Navy comes in.

During the Korean War, a young sailor named James Gribben served aboard two Navy supply ships, the USS *Diphda* and USS *Ashtabula*, in the waters off Korea. Now, you might be wondering why I'm telling you about James Gribben. Well, some of you may know him by another name. Mr. Gribben or maybe Coach Gribben. He and his family moved to Holyoke in 1969. He became a principal, a fifth-grade teacher, a coach, and eventually Holyoke's athletic director. He spent decades working with students in our

schools. Some of you may have parents or grandparents who remember him. Jim passed away in 2024 at the age of ninety-two.

The Korean War is sometimes called the Forgotten War. But the people who served in it shouldn't be forgotten. And sometimes those veterans aren't people whose names appear in history books. Sometimes they're the principal who greeted you at school. The teacher who helped you learn or the coach who encouraged you to try a little harder. Jim Gribben served his country in the Navy and then he spent decades serving the students of Holyoke.

That's a life of service worth remembering.

The Vietnam War

Jim Gribben's story reminds us that veterans often continue serving long after they take off their uniforms.

Our next story takes us back to Holyoke's hallways and athletic fields. Now we're moving into the Vietnam War. Imagine growing up in Holyoke and playing football on the same field our students use today. Going to school with your friends and looking forward to graduation… but there's a war happening halfway around the world that could change your plans.

During the Vietnam War, young men could be drafted into military service. One young man from Holyoke was Mike Hardy. According to a November 2019 article in *The Holyoke Enterprise*, Mike moved to Holyoke in fourth grade and grew up attending our schools. He eventually made the decision to volunteer for the draft and joined the Army and served in Vietnam. Mike served as the point man on patrols. Now, imagine what that means. You're walking ahead of the other soldiers, watching for danger, knowing you may be the first to encounter it. That's an enormous responsibility for someone who once attended school right here in Holyoke.

The Vietnam War was a difficult and divisive time in American history. Americans disagreed strongly about the war, and many veterans faced challenges when they returned home… but the men and women who served deserved our respect, regardless of how people felt about the war itself.

Mike Hardy's story reminds us that the people who make history aren't always strangers in textbooks. Sometimes, they grew up right here.

September 11 and a New Generation

And decades later, another Holyoke High School graduate would make his own commitment to military service; but first, we need to remember September 11, 2001.

For many adults in this room, it's a day we'll never forget. Terrorists hijacked four passenger airplanes. Two struck the World Trade Center in New York City. One struck the Pentagon. And the fourth crashed in Pennsylvania after passengers fought back. Nearly three thousand people were killed. America was changed.

In the years that followed, American service members served in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other locations around the world in the Global War on Terror.

But here's something interesting.

Many of the young people who eventually served during those years were just children when September 11 happened. One of them was Dustin Carrick. Dustin graduated from Holyoke High School in 2011. In 2012, he began his military service and was deployed to Afghanistan in 2013.

And today, Dustin continues serving veterans here in Holyoke as commander of our local Veterans of Foreign Wars post. Think about that.

We've talked about veterans who served during World War II, Korea, and Vietnam… and now we're talking about someone who graduated from this very school just fifteen years ago.

Military service isn't just something that happened generations ago. It's part of our community today.

2026: The Story Continues

And that brings us to today. November 11, 2026.

We've met young soldiers and sailors, remembered lives lost, and learned about veterans who returned home to serve their communities… but those aren't the only stories. Every veteran sitting in this room has a story. Different generations. Different experiences. Different reasons for serving.

And that brings us back to why we're here. Look around this room… history isn't as far away as we think. It's sitting right here among us, and it's still being written.

Beyond the Battlefield: Service in Times of Peace

We've spent much of this morning talking about wars, but there's something important I don't want us to overlook. Not every veteran served during a war, and not every act of military service happens on a battlefield.

Think about the National Guard members who respond to floods and wildfires. The Coast Guard crews who rescue people in dangerous seas. The military doctors and nurses who care for the injured… and the mechanics, cooks, engineers, communications specialists, and thousands of other service members whose work keeps our military operating.

Some spend their careers preparing for emergencies we hope will never happen… but their service matters, because serving your country isn't measured only by whether you went to war. It's measured by the commitment you made and the responsibilities you accepted. And for many veterans, that commitment to service continues after they leave the military. They become teachers, coaches, farmers, business owners, volunteers, and community leaders. We've heard examples of that right here in Holyoke. Military service may be one chapter of someone's life… but the commitment to helping others often continues long after the uniform comes off.

The Red Poppy: A Symbol of Remembrance

Earlier, when we talked about World War I, I mentioned the red poppies growing across the devastated battlefields of Europe. I'd like to return to that story for a moment. During World War I, a Canadian military doctor named John McCrae witnessed the terrible losses of war. In 1915, he wrote a poem called *In Flanders Fields*. The poem described red poppies growing among the graves of fallen soldiers.

In 1918, an American woman named Moina Michael helped establish the tradition of wearing red poppies in remembrance. The American Legion adopted the poppy as a memorial symbol in 1920… and more than a century later, that tradition continues.

Today, the red poppy reminds us of those who gave their lives and the importance of remembering their sacrifices. In a moment, our National Honor Society students will present poppies to the veterans joining us. It's a small gesture, but one filled with meaning. A reminder that their service is remembered and appreciated.

To all of our veterans, thank you for your service.

Whether you served in the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, Space Force, or Coast Guard, we are grateful for the commitment you made to our country. And to our National Honor Society students, thank you for helping us recognize these special guests today.

As we bring our program to a close, I want to leave our students with one final thought. Today, we've traveled through 250 years of American history. We've imagined young people leaving home, families waiting for news, and service members facing challenges most of us can only begin to understand… and we've discovered that those stories aren't limited to distant places or famous names in history books.

They're part of Holyoke. They're part of our schools, and they're part of the lives of people sitting in this room.

So here's something I'd like you to do.

The next time you meet a veteran, take a moment to thank them. And if they're comfortable sharing, ask them about their service. You might learn something no textbook could ever teach you.

To our veterans, thank you for your service, your sacrifices, and the example you've set for the generations who follow.

And to our students, I hope you leave here today understanding that Veterans Day isn't simply another date on the calendar.

It's an opportunity to honor the people who have served our country.

For 250 years, Americans have answered that call and the story continues.