



# JERRY L. O'CONNOR

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 60<sup>TH</sup> ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

## **2025 Memorial Day Speech Veterans Memorial Park, Fond du Lac, WI “Focus on Wisconsin”**

Throughout its history, Wisconsin has consistently answered the nation's call, standing on the front lines in times of conflict and crisis. From the valor of the Iron Brigade during the Civil War, to the storied service of Wisconsinites in both World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam, to modern-day deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, Wisconsin's service members have exemplified courage, sacrifice, and unwavering dedication to duty.

During the Civil War, the Iron Brigade was primarily composed of Wisconsin regiments. It earned its name when General McClellan, impressed by their fierce fighting in Maryland, declared, “They must be made of iron.”

This iron will of Wisconsinites was especially evident on the first day of the Battle of Gettysburg, where Wisconsin soldiers held the line against intense Confederate attacks, suffering over 60% casualties.

Wisconsin's bravery and sacrifice bought the Union Army precious time to secure the high ground outside Gettysburg—an advantage that proved critical in one of the most decisive battles in our nation's history.

One of Wisconsin's other most famous military moments occurred during the Battle of Missionary Ridge near Chattanooga, Tennessee. Lieutenant Arthur MacArthur Jr. of the 24th Wisconsin Infantry Regiment rallied his faltering troops by seizing the regimental colors and charging forward, crying out: “On Wisconsin!”

His heroic act inspired his fellow Wisconsinites to advance, helping secure a pivotal Union victory. For his bravery, Lieutenant MacArthur received the Medal of Honor and his words—“On Wisconsin!”—would later become the University of Wisconsin's fight song and our official state song.

Wisconsin is proud to claim 64 Medal of Honor recipients—individuals whose gallantry in combat earned our nation's highest military decoration. Among them is Captain Franklin Van Valkenburgh, the final commanding officer of the USS *Arizona*.

On the morning of December 7, 1941, as Japanese aircraft launched their surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, Captain Van Valkenburgh rushed to the navigation bridge to lead the defense of his ship. When urged to retreat to a safer position, he refused, choosing instead to remain exposed, directing the fight to the very end.

He was among the 1,177 brave sailors lost aboard the *Arizona* that day. His sacrifice stands as a testament to leadership, honor, and resolve.

This was followed by the Korean War, where Wisconsin had 801 soldiers stand, fight and die for freedom in a far-off land where they stood up to the threat communism presented to all of Southeast Asia.

Of the more than 57,000 Wisconsinites who served during the Vietnam War, 1,239 gave their all. Eighteen of those brave souls came from Fond du lac. The average age of soldiers in this battle was 19 years old.

More recently, 168 Wisconsin soldiers gave their all during Desert Storm, the Iraq and Afghanistan War. For a state with a smaller population than many others, Wisconsin has always pulled more than their weight. For such valor we are forever grateful.

In total, 27,316 Wisconsinites have given, in President Lincoln's immortal words, "the last full measure of devotion" throughout American history. Each one laid down his or her life so that others might live in freedom—so that the ideals of democracy, liberty, and justice might endure.

Today, on Memorial Day, we pause to remember the fallen—not as distant figures in history books, but as our fellow citizens, family members, and heroes. Their stories, their courage, their service, and their sacrifice are written into the very fabric of Wisconsin's identity.

Let us honor them not only with our words, but with our actions. Let us "take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion."

May we never forget.

Thank you and God bless America.