



**Brigadier General Kurt J. Ryan's Remarks  
for  
President James Monroe Wreath Laying Ceremony  
28 April 2016  
Hollywood Cemetery, Richmond, VA**

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**First, may I say it is an absolute spectacular day to gather here at the Hollywood Cemetery, the resting place of so many who have blazed paths of our Nation's history.**

**To all of our distinguished guests, thank you for gracing us with your presence today, and for taking time from your busy schedules to remember and celebrate the life of a very special man, on this 258th anniversary of the birth of James Monroe - a giant in American history.**

**It is my distinct honor today to represent the President of the United States by laying a wreath at the tomb of a remarkable Patriot who devoted his life to the early development of our Nation, and helped us, in immeasurable ways, to secure the blessings of liberty that we all hold dear today.**

**For those who may not know of President Monroe's life achievements, let me share a few of the many:**

- He was a native Virginian serving twice as the Commonwealth's Governor.**
- He served in both chambers of Congress.**
- He simultaneously performed the duties of Secretary of State and Secretary of War.**
- He was the last of the "Revolutionary Generation" to have occupied the White House, when elected as our 5<sup>th</sup> President. in the year 1816.**

**So I stand here today, a humbled military officer, with the awesome task of memorializing a great President. If you will indulge me, I would like to tell a small but**

powerful piece of James Monroe's story - a timeless American story. I will tell it through the lens of a defining historical event - the famous crossing of the Continental Army at the Delaware River, followed by the attack by General Washington on Trenton, New Jersey.

The date was December 25<sup>th</sup>, 1776. To put this date in context, it had been less than six months since Thomas Jefferson drafted, and brave Patriots signed, the Declaration of Independence - severing their loyalties with the King of England.

Lieutenant James Monroe, now 18 years old, was approaching his one year anniversary in service with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Virginia Regiment as they marched that blistering cold and snowy eve from temporary camps along the river - carrying arms he helped seize from the Governor's palace in Williamsburg - arms that provisioned his Virginians marching with the militia.

That Army, by December 1776, was rapidly disintegrating as a fighting force. Whole militia companies were leaving the ranks at the end of their enlistments, all this on the heels of disastrous defeats in New York.

General Washington knew he had to strike fast if he was to have any success at winning a battle before the end of the Soldier's contracts. So, he ordered a surprise march of the Army across the river separating Pennsylvania from New Jersey. His objective was Trenton and the Hessian Soldiers garrisoned in the small village. If he failed to win, it would likely be the end of the Revolution.

Lieutenant Monroe was among the first of Washington's troops to cross the ice-choked River at McConkey's Ferry on that Christmas evening. I've stood at this crossing and peered across that water obstacle and envisioned an Army trying to cross it... at night... under those conditions. The weather was deplorable. Freezing temperatures and sleet pounded the troops as they struggled to assemble on the other side, moving weary militia, horse and cannon on boats and ferries across the half-frozen river.

Those familiar with Emanuel Leutze's famous painting of Washington crossing the Delaware, visualize him standing erect in a Durham boat, looking to the far side of the riverbank. You may not notice another figure, also standing in that same boat, peering over the General's shoulder, intent and determined, scanning the opposite bank, clasping the colors – the Stars and Strips representing the 13 colonies.

This is a depiction of Lieutenant James Monroe.

On that night, the Army was falling behind in their timeline to attack. Lieutenant Monroe and the 2,400 men who crossed had to march 10 more miles to the objective at Trenton. Some of the troops marched without boots, their cracked and bleeding feet leaving a blood-red trail in the snow. Some men froze to death on the march. At one point during the march, General John Sullivan, commanding a Division, warned General Washington that the men's gunpowder was getting wet and their guns may not fire, to which Washington responded, "Then prepare to use the bayonet, for I am resolved to take Trenton!" No doubt those powerful words resonated with Lieutenant Monroe as he led his men to battle.

Washington knew that the success of the battle depended largely on stopping two brass 3-pounder enemy cannons before the Hessian's could fire them. As the 7<sup>th</sup> Company of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Virginia Regiment rushed the cannons, their commanding officer fell wounded. The young Lieutenant Monroe took charge of the company and led the assault with rifles, hatchets and long knives - using the bayonet to accomplish their grizzly work.

Lieutenant Monroe fought heroically, until he was gravely wounded. He was struck in the left shoulder by a musket ball, severing an artery. Lieutenant Monroe's company accomplished its mission early that morning, and took possession of the enemy's cannon. He is immortalized in another famous painting by John Trumbull, titled "The Capture of the Hessians at Trenton," where he lies wounded in the painting grasping his left shoulder.

The attack was a resounding success for the ragged Continental Army. The men, and Lieutenant Monroe, did their duty. The victory at Trenton played a pivotal role in saving the Continental Army, contributing to the eventual success of the American Revolution, and the birth of a free Nation – the United States of America.

So, I close with some simple questions for all of us to ponder.

- What if the 17 year old James Monroe, student-turned-Soldier, had instead chosen to sit and watch the revolution from the comfort of William and Mary?
- How did Lieutenant Monroe's experience at Trenton shape his thoughts about democracy? ...about common defense? ...about the securing of liberties for all Americans?

These are but a few of many questions that we should contemplate, knowing that James Monroe truly changed the fabric of a fledgling democracy for the good of this world.

He bled for liberty as a teenager on that cold December day, 240 years ago – and lived to continue to serve as a Senior Army Officer, War Secretary and eventually as Commander in Chief - our 5<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America.

May he forever rest in peace, and may the American people not rest, but build on the blessings of the liberties he fought to secure for all future generations.

Delivered on April 28, 2016 by:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'KJ Ryan', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Kurt J. Ryan

Brigadier General, US Army

Chief of Ordnance