

Robert Edsel's remarks at the Monuments Men Ceremony

June 6, 2007

Senators, Representatives, Ambassadors and other foreign dignitaries, members of the media, honored guests all, **Thank You** for being present to pay tribute to these unsung heroes, the “Monuments Men”.

President John F. Kennedy once said: “a nation reveals itself not only by the men it produces, but also the men it honors, the men it remembers.” Today we remember that tenuous moment, 63 years ago, when millions of troops desperately struggled to gain a foothold on a tiny sliver of beach in Normandy, France. We honor the sacrifice of more than 9,000 brave Americans who gave their lives in that epic battle – by remembering.

That we are gathered on this date to celebrate and honor an overlooked group of heroes – men and women of these 13 nations, numbering around 350 or so, who together comprised the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives section – is fitting.

During World War II Adolf Hitler's determination to build the world's greatest museum set up a premeditated theft of unparalleled proportion. The fate of paintings by Leonardo da Vinci, Rembrandt and Vermeer, sculpture by Michelangelo, and millions of books and documents, church bells, and religious objects hung in the balance.

This small group, known as “Monuments Men” by their fellow soldiers, was comprised of museum directors, curators, artists, art historians, and average soldiers. Together they not only protected works of art from the destruction of World War II, but located and returned millions of the greatest cultural and artistic examples of man's creative genius. It was the greatest treasure hunt in history.

Even while writing my book, *Rescuing Da Vinci*, and co-producing the documentary film, *The Rape of Europa*, I dreamed of a day when these unsung heroes would, as a group, finally receive the recognition from the United States.

A chance encounter last summer with Congresswoman Kay Granger at a dinner event in Fort Worth led to that dream becoming a reality. Congresswoman Granger, like so many others – including me – asked: “who are these “Monuments Men”? Why haven't I heard of them?” More importantly, she said, “I want to help.”

In the months that followed, Congresswoman Granger, and her colleagues – Congresswoman Louise Slaughter and Congressman Rodney Frelinghuysen – co-sponsored a Resolution in the House that for the first time honored the men and women of the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives section. That resolution passed on May 17th.

With a profound sense of appreciation and gratitude, it is my pleasure to introduce the Honorable Kay Granger.

My dream to recognize the Monuments Men was not limited to the House of Representatives. As our efforts in the House progressed, my focus shifted towards finding two sponsors for a similar resolution in the senate. We struggled a bit at the outset, but one day received phone calls – first from Senator Inhofe, and then Senator Kennedy – expressing a desire to help.

This was fitting: Senator Inhofe's state of Oklahoma was the only state which produced a Monuments Man who was killed during battle trying to protect art treasures: Captain Walter Huchthausen. Senator Kennedy's state of Massachusetts produced the greatest concentration of Monuments Men including such iconic figures as S. Lane Faison, Jr., George Stout, and Paul Sachs.

Senators Hutchison and Boxer subsequently joined with them as co-sponsors of the Senate Resolution that was introduced yesterday and will be passed, quite appropriately, today, on this 63rd anniversary of D-Day.

It is my privilege to introduce the honorable Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison.

The Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives program made history: it was the first time that an army fought a war while attempting to mitigate damage to cultural treasures. It marked a sea-change in western civilization when, at the end of the war, the victorious allies, returned more than 5 million cultural item to the countries from which these treasures had been stolen. Men and women from 13 nations – such as Sir Geoffrey Web from Great Britain, Rose Valland from France, Alphonse Vorenkamp from Holland, Paul Coremans from Belgium, Karol Estreicher from Poland, Malcolm Ross from Canada, Andre Kormendi from Hungary, Gilbert Archey from New Zealand, T.J. Dunbabin from Australia, Guthorm Kavli from Norway, Frant Vrecko from the Czech Republic, and Victor Lazareff from Russia joined more than 209 Americans to save the patrimony of not just Europe, but the world. They were heroes of not one country, but of civilization.

Our ongoing research into the Monuments Men advances pioneering work by others, most notably Lynn Nicholas and Michael Kurtz. It has resulted in us finding 15 living Monuments Men. I've interviewed them all. In the past seven months, three have died. There are now 12. We are in a race against time to find others while gathering all the information possible from those who are living and others who worked with these heroes. Of the twelve who are living, eight were too ill to travel to Washington. Four are with us today. One Monuments Man speaks on their behalf: Sergeant Harry Ettliger.

At the dedication ceremony of the National Gallery of Art in 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said: "to accept this work today is to assert the purpose of the people of America, that the freedom of the human spirit and human mind, which has produced the world's great art and all its science – shall not be utterly destroyed." The vision and leadership of western allied leaders, in particular General Eisenhower, made the protection of artistic and cultural treasures a priority and the return of stolen property inviolate.

The Monuments Men were the people who implemented and affected that policy. Their legacy is rich and filled with incredible examples of how to protect cultural treasures from armed conflict. But their legacy has been all but lost. We, as a nation, have paid a high price for not having preserved and utilized that legacy. Time is running out.

For that reason, I am announcing today the creation of the *Monuments Men Foundation for the Preservation of Art*. It's mission is to preserve the legacy of the unprecedented and heroic work of the Monuments Men during World War II by raising public awareness of the importance of protecting and

Safeguarding civilization's most important artistic and cultural treasures from armed conflict.

In addition to completing our research on these men and women, the foundation will promote and support educational programs in schools and universities. It will also identify, honor, and bestow, the annual "Monuments Men" award to individuals and institutions that represent and uphold the principals and ideals of the monuments men by making an extraordinary contribution to the protection of civilization's greatest treasures. We appeal to people of good will everywhere to join us in celebrating these great heroes in the most appropriate manner possible: preserve and utilize their legacy.