Boys and girls,

Welcome to today’s Veteran’s Day assembly and thank you for attending. I am honored to be speaking with you on such an important occasion. We’re here today to honor our service members and to remember the sacrifices they have made and the courage it takes to defend honor, duty, and country. It is why I am so excited to share Mr. Murtha’s story with you.

In January of 1943, Mr. Murtha was drafted into the Army. So, he left his small Pennsylvania town and for the next year and a half, trained in ten different camps in the United States where he developed into a knowledgeable, confident Air Force Bombardier.

Mr. Murtha developed more skills as he traveled overseas to continue his military experience in ETO, European Theater of Operation, where he and his crew would perform bombing raids on enemy targets in Germany. His first mission was in February of 1945 – the bombing of Berlin. Everyone was told their target, their approach route, the ‘initial point’ where the bombs were to be dropped, and the route they were to take home. Everyone had to know exactly what their duties were since groups were assigned to low, middle, and high levels simultaneously and formations were expected to be “air tight” for better firepower. There were lots of dangers inherent in every mission. If you didn’t follow orders precisely, the results could mean death to yourself or your comrades.

There were risks involved in every mission. Since the missions sometimes lasted fourteen hours, the planes were loaded to capacity with gas and a full load of bombs. Just getting off the landing strip was frightening. Another danger was the deactivation of bombs. After the planes got into the air, the pins were taken out of the bombs so they were ready for detonation. If the mission was changed, Mr. Murtha had to put the pins back into the bombs to prevent explosion upon landing.

Mr. Murtha flew twelve missions before being shot down on March 2nd during a mission to Minden, Germany. Mr. Murtha’s B-17 was hit by a flak which went through the wing, tearing the aileron, and caused a gas leak. The second burst exploded and the plane caught on fire. The third burst hit the tail and caused a fierce vibration. The plane was at 26,000 feet and the pilot went into a quick dive to try to put out the fire. When the plane got too close to the ground, the pilot had to level off and ordered his crew to bail out. Mr. Murtha had to climb out of his compartment under the plane to get to the main part of the plane. When he got to the door, he saw that everyone had bailed out except the pilot and co-pilot. Since no airman had trained to parachute previously, this was the first time for each of the men to bail out of a plane. Mr. Murtha noticed that the pilot was frozen and didn’t want to jump, so he and the co-pilot worked together to coerce the pilot into jumping.

When Mr. Murtha parachuted, he had to remember the book instructions he had learned about the steps of parachuting since he had never had actual practice in bailing out of a plane. He counted to ten before pulling the ripcord, and when the chute came open, it jarred him so severely that he lost one of his shoes. The landing was so rough that he injured one of his legs, but had to continue on through each step of the procedural manual for parachuting. It took him three tries to collapse the ‘chute’, but he finally got his parachute rolled up and buried before heading into the direction he last saw his co-pilot. They met up and stayed together trying to evade the Germans, but were captured by the auxiliary police. The entire crew was captured and imprisoned together. The crew was stripped and searched and then sent to Frankfurt, Germany for interrogation and put in isolation for three days. On the fourth day, another Air Force person was placed in his cell and acted very friendly. Mr. Murtha surmised that it was a ‘plant’, a German pretending to be an alley, so he only revealed his name, rank, and serial number. During the many interrogations, Mr. Murtha was surprised to hear all the information that the Germans had already known about him, such as his home address, his parents’ and wife’s names, and his religion. He just continued to respond with only the basic information of name, rank, and serial number. Next, he was put on a train and sent to a Nuremberg prison. He was only given one blanket, so all the men buddied up and shared blankets. He was given very little food – broth with beetles and bugs in it that he scraped off before eating. After a while though, he was so hungry that he ate the bugs and all. Mr. Murtha was a prisoner of war for three months and lost forty pounds. All the prisoners were weak and light-headed, but continued to help one another and continued to try to find ways to escape. They were always moving from camp to camp as the allies got closer. Finally, they escaped during one of the marches when planes were shooting and hid in a barn. They were captured by Hungarian troops and transferred to Yugoslavian troops who treated them much better. They were eventually given to British troops and in Mooseburg, Germany liberated by a troop of Americans. Mr. Murtha remembers getting white bread for the first time and thinking it tasted like cake. However, since they hadn’t eaten for so long, several of the men got sick when they ate their first meal. After his liberation, he was flown to France and then sent by boat to Camp Dixon, New Jersey. Mr. Murtha was rushed to a hospital with blood poisoning. He had contracted the infection when he injured his foot during his parachute landing. He was not able to return home until his injury was taken care of. Through his military experience, Mr. Murtha gained confidence in himself and his ability to overcome severe circumstances. He also developed a lasting bond with men whom he trusted with his life.

 It is through the sacrifices of people like Mr. Murtha that I have come to realize that Veteran's Day is not just a day that is celebrated to commemorate those who fought in a war so heroically, but it is also a day for all of us to focus upon what they fought for. Freedom is a thing that many people residing in the United States of America take for granted. I cherish the gift. Every day that I am presented with a decision to make, whether or not I make the right decision, I am thankful that I even possess the choice to make the decision. I am grateful that I live in a country where it is a right granted to the people to make the decisions that will mold their lives. I am forever in debt and thankful to those, like Mr. Murtha, who risked their lives, and to those who lost someone important, someone they held dear, so that I could make the decisions that I now make freely. Thank you.