By Jan Rahn
Managing Editor

Veterans, spouses, friends, neighbors, students and school personnel occupied bleacher seats at Perkins County High School on Monday morning to honor those who have served and fought for our country's freedom.

"I am a patriot—a patriot is defined as one who loves and zealously supports one's own country," said the program speaker, John Long of Grant, to an audience that included several solemn, and at times teary, veterans.

"Some people are veterans, some people are patriots, some people are both—sadly some people are neither," said Long.

His speech began midway into the morning's 56th annual observance of Veterans Day hosted by American Legion Post 270 of Venango.

The advancement and posting of colors, invocation by Rev. Wayne Pick and reciting of the Pledge of Allegiance set the tone for patriotism, which increased as the program got underway.

Members of the high school band under the direction of Sheila Johnson played the National Anthem. Perkins County American Legion Commander Kurt Hatteberg's welcome and introductions followed. Auxiliary president Betsy Marquardt introduced the Boys and Girls Staters.

Sharing a patriotic essay as last year's Perkins County Schools' Voice of Democracy winner was Kaleb Gaar on the theme, "Pride in Serving in Our Military."

Following one minute of silence for deceased veterans, Long delivered an important message about Americans living their lives the best way they can because they've been awarded life and freedom by those who sacrificed theirs.

Long, who is of the Vietnam War era, is not himself a vet, but comes from a lineage of veterans who served their country.

Long spoke of what it was like in the late 60s when young people were drafted into the military through a lottery drawing. Long was in college, his number was not drawn, but he felt sorry for those who were unlucky enough to have to enter the military and fight in Vietnam.

When Long returned to Grant in 1974 there were 29 World War I veterans still living. He said in 1990 he, as funeral director, buried the last of that era, Charlie Moser. He estimated there were over 90 World War II veterans still alive at that time.

"Today, I believe there are around 10—what a great generation of American men and women produced during that period, both the World War vets and their wives," said Long.

Long recapped the plot from the movie, "Saving Private Ryan," released near the time of his father's death over 15 years ago. His father, Bill Long, was a veteran and a patriot.

In the movie, as in real life both today and in every war scene in America's history, military personnel have laid down their lives so that others can live a life of freedom.

"It's truly an emotional sentiment that tells the story of a man who lived because others were willing to lay down their life for him," said Long. "We should truly value the sacrifice that has brought us our freedom—the tears were streaming down my face during that last scene as I realized that each one of us should ask that same. Maybe then, just maybe then we will truly value life and our freedom.

Long asked the veterans to stand so the audience could recognize and thank them.

Musical selections by the high school band under the direction of Sheila Johnson were followed

by a roll call of deceased veterans over the past year and “Taps” was played by a bugler from the band, Brady Mailand.

The benediction and retirement of colors ended the program, with everyone in attendance being invited to a free ham and bean feed at the Grant Legion Hall with beans furnished by Trinidad Bean Co.

The lunch was hosted by the county’s Legion Posts of Venango, Elsie, Madrid and Grant.