

As Delivered

Admiral Thomas H. Collins
National Association of State Boating Law Administrators
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Introduction:

Thank you for that warm welcome. It's really a pleasure to be here with all of you, and I am honored to have the opportunity to speak with you briefly this evening.

It's also great to be here in the city of Cleveland, situated on the shores of Lake Erie. Cleveland is a historic city, renowned for its revitalized city life. This city has many points of interest that I'm sure you're well acquainted with, but perhaps you don't know this little bit of trivia:

Life Savers candy was invented here.

Back in 1912, a chocolate candy maker by the name of Clarence Crane was looking for a way to make hard candy that could be shipped easily without melting. He designed a new candy with an original shape. It was round with a hole in the middle.

Now, you'll easily recall that 1912 was the same year of the sinking of the *Titanic*.

That terrible disaster at sea had just happened, and it was very fresh in everyone's mind. The shape of this new candy reminded Mr. Crane of a ship's life preservers.

And that's how the candy got its name. So, Cleveland is the home of Life Savers candy...and now you know the rest of the story, as Paul Harvey likes to say.

I'm sure we all would agree that it would be a very good thing if people were reminded of the importance of the safety of life on the water every time they ate one of those little round candies. That would make our jobs a bit easier, wouldn't it?

But it's not that easy, as all of you know. We've all had a very busy year, working to improve the safety and security of the boating public on our waterways.

I know that Steve Hall, your outgoing President, has been extremely diligent in that regard, and I'd like to thank you, Steve, for your outstanding service over the past year.

I'd also like to welcome Alvin Taylor, from South Carolina, as the new President of NASBLA. Alvin, I look forward to a very productive relationship with you, as we go about the very important business of making sure that the Recreational Boating Safety program continues to thrive in coming years.

As Delivered

We have a lot of work to do together. It will take teamwork to get it done.

In one of Charles Schultz's well-known comic strips, the "Peanuts" gang is playing baseball. Lucy yells in from the outfield "Let's win one for a change!"

Charlie Brown throws a mighty pitch. The batter hits it, and the ball sails into the outfield, landing right at Lucy's feet. But, she makes no effort to catch it.

Astonished, Charlie Brown hollers, "If you're so interested in winning, why didn't you catch the ball?"

To which Lucy retorts as only Lucy can, "That is because my role is strictly advisory."

Importance of Partnership:

Unlike the "Peanuts" gang, we've had many wins together during the past year, despite the terrible events of last September. Success has been due in large part to the continuing active teamwork of federal, state, and local governments.

Even this past year, despite the concerns over potential acts of terrorism, more than 70 million Americans—one-fourth of our nation's population—continue to enjoy recreational boating as a means to ease the increasing stress of daily life, as well as to savor the beauty and tranquility that can be found on our nation's waterways.

Since 1971, the number of registered boats has doubled to almost 13 million, yet fatality rates are less than half of what they were then.

This record is largely the result of National Recreational Boating Safety Program, through the cooperative efforts of State and local governments; the Coast Guard Auxiliary; U.S. Power Squadrons; partnerships with the boating industry; and the educated boater.

Last year, Coast Guard Area Commanders began Operation BoatSmart, designed to extend our national recreational boating safety partnerships to the local level. I think that effort helped to rekindle a cooperative spirit among RBS partners.

It has been a very effective effort. Working together as real partners, we can continue to make boating safer for all Americans in the years to come.

Unity of Effort:

Unity of effort has been a constant theme that has played out many times across our country over the past year.

As Delivered

During this coming week, we will pause together to commemorate the horrible events of last September. As we recall the scenes of devastation in New York and Washington, DC, scenes which remain indelible in our memories, there is one thought that comes shining through.

In the midst of it all, we stood united as a nation.

We understood with deep resolution that we must work together at every level of government to address the complicated issues of homeland security. Pictures of federal, state, and local officials and first-responders standing side by side in fierce determination flooded the media.

We must work together at every level. That fact is always clear in the wake of a disaster. It should be just as clear to us as we go about our everyday tasks, as well.

As we reflect this week on events of the past year, I want to extend the sincere thanks of the entire Coast Guard for the enormous contributions of the State Boating Law Administrators to do whatever possible to fill the ranks. Bravo Zulu!

Partnerships developed between the Coast Guard and every state over the past 30 years in RBS Program were critical in making some very quick changes in roles to fulfill our HLS missions.

The fifty states continue to provide immeasurable contributions to what we call the “new normalcy.”

Each day, we are working together to provide better security for ports and critical infrastructure such as bridges, dams, and nuclear facilities.

Each day, you are stepping forward to fill the voids where the Coast Guard and other Federal agencies have been diverted to other duties related to homeland security.

The Challenge of Security:

Some of you may be very concerned about how those growing responsibilities will affect the other missions of the Coast Guard, especially Search and Rescue and Recreational Boating Safety.

First, I must say that we have no greater purpose than to protect American citizens from harm, especially the harm that others would do. We pride ourselves on the humanitarian nature of our organization.

I'm sure you'll agree that there is nothing more humanitarian than placing our service in harm's way between America and her enemies.

As Delivered

President Bush is leading a major restructuring of government, in which he intends to create a new Department of Homeland Security. His purpose is to strengthen the ability of our nation to prepare our response to a variety of threats to the security of our homeland.

Consequently, the President has proposed to transfer our service from the Department of Transportation, to join a new department with several other agencies, who have the authority and capability to protect and secure our homeland.

The proposal is to transfer the Coast Guard intact. Our maritime, military, multi-mission character must not change—and I will work very diligently to see that it will not.

It is vital that we remain a national and international leader in maritime safety and security. We must continue our excellence of service in every mission.

I fully support the decision of the President, and so does Secretary Mineta. I believe that at the end of the day Congress will support it, too.

Without a doubt, the implementation of this decision will be a tremendous challenge. Every challenge, especially one such as this, is an opportunity to reach an even greater level of achievement. We must take every advantage of this opportunity.

Some people are worried that, as we increase our security posture—especially if we are placed within a new department that is focused primarily on homeland security—we will neglect the public safety aspect of our service.

Let me assure you that we will not neglect a cry for help over the marine radio any more than we would neglect our duty to protect people from a terrorist attack. We must make sure that Americans are both safe and secure on the water.

Can we do both? We must do both. And we are. Every day.

The Importance of Safety:

Let me read just a portion of a letter that was sent to me two weeks ago from a grateful American, whose son was rescued by the Coast Guard from the chilly waters of Nantucket Sound.

“Dear Admiral Collins,

“On behalf of my family, I extend our wholehearted appreciation to the United States Coast Guard personnel who participated in the air and surface search of Nantucket Sound, following the discovery of our son’s unmanned sailboat...

“As my youngest son and I waited through the night [of July 20th], we were comforted and encouraged by the words from the on-scene commander, indicating that

As Delivered

the Coast Guard would be conducting both surface and air rescue efforts through the night, with the objective of bringing our son, Daniel, safely home to us.

“The prompt reporting to us of the sighting by a Coast Guard plane of our son, alive, in the ocean...brought welcomed news and relief to our family...Daniel’s two brothers and his sister, my wife and I, and our relatives will always speak highly of the men and women who wear the uniform of the United States Coast Guard.”

“Sincerely, John J. Griffin, Wrentham, Massachusetts.”

I would simply say that we all share the joy of Mr. Griffin. Nothing gives us more joy than saving a life.

But I would also add that nothing would bring greater sorrow than failing to prevent the deaths of more Americans in another terrorist attack.

The Issue of Capacity:

Let me also say very clearly that our ability to perform every mission that we are called to do will not depend so much on what Department we reside in. It depends more on capacity.

Better capacity to conduct our homeland security mission also means better capacity to help save lives, as well as to perform all our other missions.

Safety and security are inseparable. You really can’t have one without the other. We are investing in both. Increased presence on America’s waterways will allow us to do both well.

Despite some isolated suggestions to the contrary, the Coast Guard will keep the RBS Program with us in the proposed move to the new Department of Homeland Security.

I trust that the President and the Congress will act to give us the capacity we need to remain “Always Ready” in every way, no matter what department we are in.

I also want to assure you of my dedication to the cause of letting them know what capacity we need.

Wallop-Breaux Trust Fund:

I’d like to say just a few words about the Wallop-Breaux Trust Fund. I am well aware of the complexity of funding issues surrounding this Trust.

I realize that the 2003 reauthorization process represents an opportunity to address several issues important to the continued success of the RBS Program. I want to assure

As Delivered

you that these issues are very important to the Coast Guard, just as they are to the state recreational boating programs.

The Coast Guard remains committed to working with you on your effort to secure equitable and stable funding for your programs.

We encourage you in unity to continue to work with the membership of the American League of Anglers & Boaters to reach a consensus for change.

We want you to know that we are your partners, and we'll continue to work the issues as best we can with the Administration to support the RBS Program.

Conclusion:

While we celebrate the many successes of the program, much remains to be done. From 1995 to 2000, the number of registered boats increased by 1 million, representing an estimated 2.4 million additional boaters. We expect this trend to continue escalating.

We estimate that more than 27,000 lives have been saved as a result of the cooperative efforts of all the people involved in the program. Unfortunately, though, recreational boating still remains second only to motor vehicles in transportation-related fatalities each year.

Key to addressing these issues will be our unity of effort.

As long as our partnership remains strong, it provides a firm basis upon which we can continue to succeed in serving the American public.

And, unlike Lucy, our role must be more than advisory.

We know it will take more than enthusiasm and well-meant advice to do get it done. All of us must do our part to act as members of a winning team. We plan to do just that.

Or, as a wise man [G. K. Chesterson] once said very eloquently:

“We are all in the same boat on a stormy sea and we owe each other a terrible loyalty.”

Thank you. Have a very productive conference.

Semper Paratus.