

Veterans Day Wreath Laying
Remarks of the Vice Commandant
November 11, 2012
Arlington National Cemetery

Ninety-four years ago, on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, an Armistice was signed between the Allied powers and Germany, ending hostilities on the Western Front. The treaty officially ending World War I would not be signed for another seven months, but this Armistice effectively ended what everyone believed was “the Great War.” The war to end all wars.

You can see that on the World War I Coast Guard memorial behind me At the base it reads simply “World War.”

But that was not to be the case. Our country has called her sons and daughters to service many times since then.....

...To oppose injustice and tyranny....

...To help those in need....

...To fight to preserve all that is good and right in the world.

And those sons and daughters have *always* answered the call.

President Wilson commemorated that first Armistice Day in 1919 – which we now call Veterans’ Day – by saying that this day should be “filled with solemn pride in the heroism of those who died in the country’s service.”

Almost 16 million people died in World War I. Almost 9 million of them were men and women serving in uniform. *Nine Million*. That number is hard to even fathom.

As we stand here today, surrounded by so many who gave so much in the service of their country, it is not hard to feel that solemn pride.

This Memorial behind me commemorates two tragic episodes in that War and in Coast Guard history. The first occurred on Sept. 21, 1918. The Coast Guard Cutter SENECA, while escorting a merchant convoy, sent a salvage crew to assist the British steamer, WELLINGTON, which had been

torpedoed in the Bay of Biscay. Despite their efforts, the WELLINGTON ultimately sank, and 11 members of SENECA's crew were lost.

And just five days later, the Cutter TAMPA was sunk by an enemy submarine in the British Channel, and all on board were lost.

You may notice this memorial looks awfully good to be almost 100 years old. That wasn't the case one year ago. Decades of weather and exposure had taken their toll on this monument....

Answering the call to both honor our profession and honor those who served, our Washington, D.C. Chief Petty Officers Association took it upon themselves to continue to pay respect to the crews of the TAMPA and the SENECA by restoring this monument to their service and sacrifice. Phase I of the project was just completed.

Doesn't it look great? Phase II will start right after Thanksgiving.

There are so many great heroes here in Arlington – and I'd like to ask your indulgence to talk for a second about one of those heroes who has special meaning to me, one of our warriors and lifesavers who typifies what I mean when I talk about answering the call....

LT Jack Ritticher has his final resting place under a tree just on the other side of this hedge. I'm not sure how many of you know that name. LT Ritticher was one of our pilots during the Vietnam War who volunteered to be part of a Rescue and Recovery Squadron operating out of Da Nang.

We teach our Coast Guardsmen to have a bias for action, and LT Ritticher did. Within a month of arriving he earned three Distinguished Flying Crosses for his rescues of downed aviators – all in combat conditions under fire.

But sadly, after only two months of being in Vietnam, he was called for what would be his last rescue mission.

A Marine Corps fighter pilot had ejected from his aircraft near a North Vietnamese camp. He suffered a broken arm and a broken leg during the ejection. He was being used by the North Vietnamese as bait to draw in rescue forces.

The first helicopter on scene made three attempts before being driven off by enemy fire. Despite the extreme hazard Ritticher was asked if he was willing to make an attempt. Ritticher answered in the affirmative.

Heavy anti-aircraft and fire drove him away on the first attempt. As he settled into a hover on his second attempt, enemy rounds hit the helicopter. It caught fire and crashed, killing all four on board.

His remains were only recently recovered and brought home to rest here in Arlington.

Before going to Vietnam, LT Ritticher told his brother "...this is what I do, this is who I am. I'm an air rescue pilot...and I've got an obligation to save them."

That is but one example of the many Coast Guard men and women who have paid the ultimate sacrifice in the service of our Nation.

In our service we often talk of the "long blue line" of Coast Guardsmen. We say ours is blue, but all services have this line, whether it's blue or green or khaki. It describes those who served before us; their accomplishments, their commitment, and their sacrifice.

But it is more than simply looking back in our wake and honoring those who have served..... It is looking at the course we have set before us and the *obligation* we have to our organization, our people, *and our country*.

It is our legacy – and a reminder of the responsibility *we all have* to keep faith with those who came before.

Historically, Armistice Day was observed with two minutes of silence. The first minute was in honor of those who had given their life in service of their country.

The second minute, however, was for the families. Those nine million service members who gave their lives left behind as many husbands and wives and sons and daughters.

Now on Veterans Day we honor all those who have served – past and present – not just those who made the ultimate sacrifice. But it is still appropriate that we honor the families who stand behind them. They sacrifice as well – and we could not do our job without them.

President Wilson said this day should be filled with solemn pride. And I do feel that. Standing here, *how can you not?*

But I feel much more.

I feel a deep sense of *gratitude* for the sacrifices that have been made.... Not just by those who gave their life in service, but for the husbands and wives and sons and daughters left behind.

And I also feel *hope*.

As I look around me here today and see all of those men and women who wear the uniform of their country, who have answered the call to service, who have *acted* on the belief that you put service before self and taken their place in that long blue line – I filled with hope.

Hope that their sacrifice will result in a more peaceful world for our generation.

Thank you – and Semper Paratus.