

Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Robert J. Papp's Remarks

At the

CGNR 6535 Memorial Dedication Service

Aviation Training Center Mobile
Mobile, Alabama
Friday, March 1, 2013

Good Morning Shipmates

It's been said that as we travel through this human condition we call life, the relevance of time is perhaps the greatest input in determining our position. It's difficult to believe a year has passed since we last gathered together to remember and honor the crew of the 6535. The night I received the call that 6535 had gone down is seared into my memory. It seems as clear to me as if it was yesterday; I'm sure it does for all of you as well.

As I look out of my office window, to the right I can see Reagan National Airport, where the H-65's that patrol our National Capital Region are based. I see those bright orange helicopters fly by my window almost every day. And every time I do, I can't help thinking – at least for a moment – of the shipmates we lost.

My guess is that is also true for you.

With the loss of our shipmates still so vivid, so indelibly etched in our Service's consciousness, some may ask: "How can any memorial compete with the ones we each build in our minds and in our hearts?" "Why do we need to build memorials like this?"

There are a couple of reasons.

One, of course, is to give substance to the memory we all carry. To bring together the thoughts and feelings of those who knew these brave men and cement it together with the respect and admiration of all who are here today – so all of those who follow in the years and decades to come, can know

and share that memory as well. It is important for those who follow to know the dedication and the sacrifice of those who came before.

This memorial does a beautiful job of that. All future generations of our Coast Guard family – especially those who never had the privilege of knowing LCDR Dale Taylor, LTJG Tom Cameron, Chief Fernando Jorge, and Petty Officer Drew Knight – can not only remember their service, but can also know a little about who they were as people – as members of our family.

That answer alone is reason enough.

Another reason often given for building memorials, like the two we see here today, is because the Manners of our Profession require it. And this is true. We're not simply a job; we're a military service. We commit ourselves to our nation and to each other, and we often find ourselves in harm's way. We are called to be a part of something larger than ourselves.

When one of us gives all in pursuit of that noble endeavor, the manners of our profession demand that we honor that service.

I often talk of the Manners of our Profession. One of my guiding principles for our Service is to Honor Our Profession. Observing the manners of our profession is part of that.

It is less often, however, that we actually take the time to think about what those manners are and why we observe them.

Or where we first started to learn and appreciate them.

For me, it began with my father – who was a Marine. I remember being at a parade with him when I was very young and seeing the American flag pass by. He looked down and told me to remove the cap I was wearing and place it over my heart. He explained to me all that the flag stands for, including the memory of those who gave their lives so it could continue to wave.

This was obviously long before I had a profession, and before I put on the cloth of my country, but it gave me the foundation to understand what "The Manners of our Profession" really means. It started the learning process.

As I grew older, I had many more moments like this with my father. Sometimes he explained things to me; sometimes I simply learned by watching him.

And this is the way it works. We learn from one another and from the actions we take – like this service here today. You won't find these manners written in any publication. They are observed, they are taught, and they are experienced.

And eventually they are felt. They become part of who we are.

I've been thinking about that a lot this week. You see, this is the second memorial dedication I've attended. I was in Cape May on Tuesday for the dedication of Bruckenthal Hall, named in honor of Damage Controlman Third Class Nathan Bruckenthal. Petty Officer Bruckenthal was killed by a terrorist bomber in 2004 while serving his second tour in the Arabian Gulf as a member of a joint Coast Guard/Navy boarding team.

As I was thinking about what I might say at these dedications, I came across a book that helped bring some of my thoughts together. It reminded me of that time with my father, and the reason we build memorials. And it confirmed what I have always intuitively known.

This was not a book about building memorials; it was a book about building a strong family. In one of the chapters, the author discussed a study done several years ago that examined the things a family can do to help children better handle all of the stress that life brings. They wanted to know what would make them the most resilient.

The study looked at all the things you would expect – like eating meals together, playing team sports, and attending regular religious services. Those things we've all been told will make a family strong. And no surprise, the researchers found that those things do indeed matter.

But they also found something totally unexpected – at least to them. They discovered that the more children knew about their family's history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem, the more resilient they were and the more successfully they performed as a family. It turned out to be the single biggest predictor.

They found that this awareness of family history – both the great moments and the tragedies – gave the family members what they called a strong “inter-generational self”. They all knew they belonged to something bigger than themselves. It gave them what they needed, to get through the tough times.

This, too, is why we build memorials.

And we see it in the memorial to the 6535. The monument itself is here because of the tragedy. But in the images of the crewmembers and the inscriptions on each side, we also see something of the great moments, too.

Of course this book was talking about our personal families – our sons and daughters, wives and husbands, mothers and fathers. But the same idea applies to our Coast Guard families – and we are all children of that family.

And speaking of families, when we see these memorials, we must think not only of those brave Coast Guardsmen who made the ultimate sacrifice in service to their nation. We must also remember the family members who stood behind them. They sacrificed as well.

When our country first began to observe Armistice Day following the conclusion of the First World War, it was customary to observe not just one, but two minutes of silence. The first minute was for those who had given their life in service to their country. The second minute, however, was for the families – and the loss they had suffered. And that is as it should be.

The families of our crews are part of our Coast Guard family. We will always remember them, and be there for them.

Earlier, when speaking of the manners of our profession, I said that we chose to commit ourselves to the service of our nation, and in doing so we often find ourselves in harm's way. Some would ask “Why make that choice?” I was reminded of the answer not long ago when I stood before the memorial to another Coast Guard Aviator who gave his life in service to his country.

For many of the reasons I've talked about today, I took a group of new members of our Flag Corps and Senior Executive Service out to Arlington National Cemetery to talk about our service's history and the "long, blue line" of Coast Guardsmen who preceded us – and on whose shoulders we stand.

One of the memorials we visited was the final resting place of LT Jack Ritticher. LT Ritticher was a Coast Guard Aviator during the Vietnam War, and he volunteered to deploy as part of a Rescue and Recovery Squadron operating out of Da Nang. Within a month of arriving, he earned three Distinguished Flying Crosses for his rescues of downed aviators – all in combat conditions under fire. Sadly, after only two months in theater, he was called for what would be his last mission. His helicopter was hit by enemy fire while trying to rescue a downed Marine Corps pilot.

Before he left for Vietnam, LT Ritticher's brother asked him why he had volunteered for service that so many others sought to avoid. LT Ritticher told him "...this is what I am. I'm an air rescue pilot...and I've got an obligation."

I am confident that the same call to service was felt by the members of 6535 – indeed by all of our air and boat crews – past, present, and future.

This memorial also honors that spirit of service.

In our service we talk of our "long blue line" of Coast Guardsmen. It describes those who served before us. It speaks to their accomplishments, their commitment, and their sacrifice.

But it is more than that. It is more than simply looking back to honor those who have served. It is looking ahead at the obligation we all have before us. To our country. To our Service. And to each other.

It is a reminder of the responsibility we all have to keep faith with those who came before.

It is also a source of comfort; because if we set the example, and teach them well, we can be sure that those who follow us will do the same.

The Crew of 6535 – and the crew of the 1427 – are part of our long, blue line of dedicated Coast Guardsmen who have stepped forward to serve their fellow man and put service before self.

They are missed. But as future generations of Coast Guardsmen walk down this path, past these two memorials, we can be sure they will always be remembered.

They will forever be a part of us. And that is the cement that holds this monument – and our Service – together.

Thank You

And Semper Paratus.