

CUYAHOGA Memorial Service
Remarks of the Commandant
Coast Guard Training Center Yorktown
Yorktown, Virginia
20 October, 2013

Good Evening, Shipmates.

You know, it struck me this evening as we were just standing there on the parade field that I don't often get a chance to participate in evening colors anymore. It was a part of everyday life when I was aboard ship. Unfortunately, working in an office in D.C. just doesn't often afford me the same opportunity.

It's a wonderful observance and I really miss it. It gives us a chance at the end of the day to pay our respects to the flag of the Nation we love and to recommit ourselves to its service. It is also another reminder of the passing of time; a brief moment to reflect on what we have accomplished with the day we've been given, and to think about to what to do with the precious gift of tomorrow we hope to receive.

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.

As I look back on the loss of the CUYAHOGA, and the journey our Service has made, that is certainly true for me. It's difficult to believe 35 years have passed since we lost our Shipmates that fateful late October evening.

I am privileged to be among you this evening as we honor their service.

As I was originally contemplating coming down here this evening, I confess to you I felt completely inadequate and not up to the task. But as I came on board this afternoon, I went by the memorial to CUYAHOGA here on base, and it filled me with the resolve to observe the manners of our profession and properly honor our lost shipmates. I'm always taken by that memorial. A simple bronze plaque with the names of our lost shipmates. But what I like best is the setting. It's nestled over by the woods in a quiet place. A spot that is away from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the base. It's a place to sit and think. A place to remember. And a place to listen.

Memorials, and memorial services, are important. But remembering is also important.

It is one of the reasons we build memorials like that in the first place. To ensure we remember. To give substance to the memory that many still carry. To bring together the thoughts and feelings of those who knew these 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 and understand the dedication and the sacrifice of those who came before.

This memorial here at Yorktown does a beautiful job of that. This Training Center is home to sixteen separate schools, and when operating at full capacity, as many as 8,000 students a year come through here – they represent our future as a Service. Future generations of our Coast Guard family can not only see this memorial and remember, but can also know a little about who they were as people – as members of our family.

For me – I remember it well. In 1978, I was a young Lieutenant Junior Grade and the Executive Officer aboard the Coast Guard Cutter RED WOOD.

The loss of the CUYAHOGA was a seminal event in my young career, as I believe it was for all cuttermen of that time. And whether they know it or not, the cuttermen of today as well.

As I studied the reports of the casualty, and later read of the causes that led to the loss of so many of our Shipmates - one of the first thoughts I had was “*there, but for the grace of God, go I*”.

That was because the training we provided to our cuttermen then was inconsistent across the fleet. In fact, in many places, it was completely lacking. Our standards were not where they should have been, and as a Service we were not properly preparing our people to safely do their job. The shortcomings identified as a result of the CUYAHOGA casualty were not unique to CUYAHOGA. They were systemic.

To be frank, it gave me pause. It caused me and many others to rethink the career we had chosen.

And fifteen months later, we lost the Cutter BLACKTHORN. We lost 23 shipmates that night – and the investigation of that tragedy noted many of the same organizational failings.

And those same thoughts I had after CUYAHOGA came flooding back. I was a Cutterman at heart – but at that point I could have easily chosen another path.

But I chose instead to hear the lessons of CUYAHOGA and rededicate myself to professionalism.

I mentioned earlier that the memorial here at Yorktown is a good place to remember. But it is, more importantly, a good place to *listen*....

And for those who gave their lives that night, who lost that precious gift of tomorrow, the *listening* is the most important part. To give their sacrifice meaning, we must listen to the lessons they purchased for us with their lives.

So with my personal rededication to proficiency, I took to heart the lessons of the CUYAHOGA. But more importantly, *so did our Service*. We made many changes and improvements to the way we trained our people and equipped and cared for our vessels.

I stand here today a product of many of those changes. As a Lieutenant I appeared before the first junior command afloat screening panel – established as a result of these causalities.

I also attended one of the very first courses designed specifically for those selected to command afloat units – also the result of the lessons learned from CUYAHOGA.

And it is during this period I first thought seriously about how we train and how we prepare – our ships, our service, and ourselves. It began the development of my thought process as a senior officer.

Ever since I became Commandant, I have been passionate in talking about Proficiency. About Proficiency in Craft. About Proficiency in Leadership. And about Disciplined Initiative.

I'm sure many thought this was a new initiative, something created as a slogan when I became Commandant. After all, every Commandant has their own

watchwords; the idea they want to communicate to the fleet which demonstrates their personal philosophy or encapsulates their message. But it's not new. Far from it. It was born 35 years ago when I first listened to and began to think about the lessons we learned with the loss of CUYAHOGA. And it is based on my accumulated experience of the three decades that followed the accident, viewed through that lens, and with their voices in my mind.

It is good that we all gather here today to *remember* the crew of CUYAHOGA.

But for them – and for us – it is more important that we *listened*.

In addition the establishment of our Command and Operations School, we renewed and increased our focus on Rules of the Road training; we examined our bridge-to-bridge communications procedures and set-up; we established guidance on qualifications for all navigation watch positions; we reviewed and established criteria for the appropriate manning of vessels; we established criteria for the training and experience level of those assigned to vessels, and we began to develop and build what we now call bridge resource management. In short, we focused on building and demanding ever greater professionalism and proficiency. And we finally gave our people the tools and the support they needed to do the job we asked of them.

The next generation of cuttermen who served in the 378's and 210's we had then – as well as the 270's we were building – benefited from those lessons. We made sure that their ships were up to the task and that they worked together with a renewed emphasis on professionalism. They became the product of all the things we did to ensure that we would *never* have to build another memorial to the crew of another Coast Guard cutter.

And fifteen years later, the officers and crews who learned those lessons were engaged in operations off of Haiti and Cuba. (Then Vice) Admiral Loy was leading us as the Atlantic Area Commander. We were operating in a high-risk, fast-paced environment, 24-hours a day and seven days a week. I commanded a task force during Operation ABLE MANNER and UPHOLD DEMOCRACY. At the height of operations we had as many as 17 cutters and 5 Navy vessels operating in the same area. We interdicted over 25,000 migrants, including as many as 3,000 in a single day. And right after that, during Operation ABLE VIGIL, we interdicted over 30,000 Cuban migrants, and at the height of operations we had over 38 Coast Guard Cutters which operated in the area.

And we did so flawlessly, with no mishaps. We did so because we had committed ourselves and our Service to professionalism.

We were successful because we had *listened*. I think that is the best memorial of all – the best tribute to their memory. And we have enshrined that need to listen where our people need it most....

Here at Training Center Yorktown.

And at our Command and Operations School, where all those headed to Command study. They have a plaque there, lit from above, where all can see it, dedicated to the crew of the CUYAHOGA.

And at our Officer Candidate School. We have reassembled the bridge from the CUYAHOGA on the Quarterdeck there. Every Officer Candidate who passes by is required to stop and face that bridge, and to pause for a moment to remember the lessons and the service of their Shipmates from a generation earlier.

In case you've ever wondered, *that* is why we build memorials like these.

But in truth there are other reasons we build memorials and have ceremonies like this. It's because the *Manners of our Profession* require it. In becoming a member of the United States Coast Guard, 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. And as I was doing so, I remembered a book I came across some time ago 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 for me, this book confirmed what I have always intuitively known.

This was not a book about building memorials; it was a book was 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.

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.

Just a few weekends from now, many of us will once again gather for Veteran’s Day. When our country first began to observe what was then 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 the crew of the CUYAHOGA are part of our Coast Guard family. We will always remember them, and they will always be part of us.

Every time we lose a Coast Guardsman, every time we have a casualty – I live with that. I speak to the families. I provide guidance to the Service. But nothing I say could speak louder than the families of those who were lost.

I’d like to share with you part of a letter from the mother of one of those lost in CUYAHOGA– Laura Wood. Her son, Bruce, was an Officer Candidate aboard CUYAHOGA.

To all Officers, Crewmen, and especially the Survivors of the CUYAHOGA tragedy:

I have put off writing until now, hoping I could find the words, the unemotional moment, and the wisdom necessary to handle the task at hand... Time hasn’t been any help, the heart hasn’t healed, and the shock and loss is permanent. However, I must not think of my feelings

and loss, rather the men who were there and through God's grace were selected to carry on what our son died for....

Here is a mother who had lost so much, yet her concern was still for those left behind and the desire that they carry on. But there is more. She continued with a challenge:

... I can't let you feel sorry for yourselves or for us, and let this interfere with your aims and goals - - I must ask each and every one, from the bottom of my heart to continue with your ambitions for me, with added strength and resolution. This was Bruce's dream, this is what he would want for his buddies, and I would be so happy and proud to know you carried his dreams to success. If yours was but a desire in the past, it now should be a dedication.

And dedication is what we must have. A dedication to Bruce, to his family, to his classmates, and to all those who follow.

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. And to listen to what they have to teach us.

The crew of CUYAHOGA remains part of that 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 come to this memorial, we can be sure they will always be remembered. And we can also be sure *the lessons they taught* us will always be remembered.

And while the memorial here is a beautiful and fitting tribute to their service, I charge each of YOU to be a living memorial to their life. Read about them. Come to know them. Take to heart the lessons they have to teach you.

Especially for those of you here in school – because in the level of your dedication to proficiency lies both the life and the safety of yourself and your crew.

Memorials are nice, but you can best honor – we can *all* best honor the crew of the CUYAHOGA by being the very best we are capable of being – as individuals and as a Service. It is only then that we will truly have honored their service and given meaning to their sacrifice as Coast Guardsmen.

Because we are Coast Guardsmen. This is our chosen profession. This is our way. This is what we do.

Thank You.

Stand a taut watch.

Semper Paratus.