

Coast Guard World War Memorial Rededication

Remarks of the Commandant

May 23, 2013

Arlington National Cemetery

I'd like to thank everyone for coming out today, and for all of the hard work that has gone into making this rededication a reality.

A special welcome to Acting Under Secretary Suzanne Spaulding from the Department of Homeland Security and Acting Commissioner Thomas Winkowski from Customs and Border Protection. Thank you for being here as we honor the manners of our profession.

Thanks also to all those here in uniform today – to Coast Guardsmen past and present; to active, reserve, auxiliary and civilian; and all other veterans who served our Nation – as well as the family members of all who have served.

Welcome to the family members of the crew of the Coast Guard Cutter TAMPA honored on this memorial – as well as the Commanding Officer and crew members from our current cutter TAMPA – the fourth in our Service's history to bear that name.

And finally, a tremendous thanks to the D.C. Chapter of the Chief Petty Officers Association. Your hard work – and the contributions of all those donated both their time and their treasure – made this possible.

As I look around today – it is not hard for me to imagine the crowd very similar to this one that gathered on this very spot Eighty-five years ago today. Instead of our terrific Coast Guard Band we have here today, the U.S. Navy Band was set up just over there playing "American Fantasia" as the ceremony began.

In the distance, down the hill, you could see the twin masts of the Coast Guard Cutter APACHE anchored in the Potomac. With her shallow draft, she was able to make it quite away up the river – but just downstream were the Cutters MANNING and SENECA, and a brand *new* Cutter TAMPA, which had been commissioned just a year and a half earlier.

At exactly three o'clock in the afternoon, CAPT William Wheeler – *remember that name* – stepped forward and signaled to the bugler to sound “Attention” to call everyone assembled here to order.

It was a distinguished crowd that afternoon. The invocation was given by the Chief of Chaplains for the U.S. Navy. The Secretary of the Treasury, the Secretary of the Navy, and the Commandant of the Coast Guard all provided remarks from the podium that was set up right over there by the road, facing the memorial. Also present were the Chief of Naval Operations, Marine Corps General John Lejeune, and ambassadors and representatives from 11 different countries,

Crew members from the Cutters anchored in the Potomac, along with Cadets from the Coast Guard Academy, served as the honor guard. They were lined up back there along the road behind the podium.

As the assembled crowd stood at attention and finished singing the Star Spangled Banner, you could *feel* the reverberations from APACHE's guns as she fired a twenty-one gun salute...

And shortly after, Treasury Secretary Mellon stepped to the podium. He began with these words:

“We have come here today to dedicate a memorial to the men of the Coast Guard who died in the World War. It is erected in gratitude to those who gave their lives for their country. In the hour of her great need when danger threatened and when civilization itself seemed in the balance, these men laid down their lives in order that you and I and future generations might find the world a better place to live in.”

It's usually best to view historical events – like the original dedication of this memorial – through the lens of time. Time gives you perspective. It allows you to be objective; to judge and understand events free of the raw emotion that may have attended the actual event. It makes for better and more reasoned decisions about the meaning and significance of what took place....

But sometimes it's good to remember that emotion; to view the events not through the lens of time, but through the perspective of those there in the moment. From that perspective you can better understand those who were there and know something – some measure – of what they were feeling....

I am struck by Secretary Mellon's words that "*civilization itself seemed in balance.*" At the time of the original dedication of this memorial, those gathered here were less than ten years removed from the cease-fire which ended the "Great War". It was more recent to them than the events of 9/11 are for us.

Just imagine. Almost 16 million people had died during the war. Almost 9 million of them were men and women serving in uniform. *Nine Million.* That number is hard to even fathom. And everyone here believed that they had just fought the war to end all wars. You can see that on the memorial behind me At the base it reads simply "World War."

CAPT Wheeler – I mentioned him earlier – who began the ceremony that day, was the Chairman of the Committee to build this memorial. He organized the drive to raise the necessary funds – and shepherded the project from beginning to end. It was a significant effort – I'm sure the Chief's here can attest to that – and he accomplished it in a remarkably short time.

But he was more than just the Committee Chairman. Only ten years earlier, he had been the Commanding Officer of the Coast Guard Cutter SENECA – and as he stood here that day, the names of eleven members of his crew were carved in the marble on the other side of this monument.

SENECA was on convoy escort duty when one of the ships in her convoy, the British Steamer WELLINGTON, was hit by a torpedo.

After engaging the attacking U-Boat and forcing it to submerge, CAPT Wheeler went to WELLINGTON's aide. He sent twenty volunteers from his crew to assist the WELLINGTON. When most of the WELLINGTON's crew refused to stay aboard the damaged ship, his Coast Guard volunteers and one Navy crewman were left to man the pumps and the guns.

As the only escort, SENECA had to continue steaming to protect the other ships in the convoy. CAPT Wheeler could only hope his small party of volunteers would be able to save the WELLINGTON. Unfortunately her damage was too severe. It was four days later that CAPT Wheeler learned that despite a valiant effort to save WELLINGTON and her cargo, she eventually sank, taking eleven of his twenty volunteers with her.

It is said the loss of his men affected CAPT Wheeler deeply – as it would any Captain. I had the privilege to visit our National Archives earlier this month, and I had the opportunity to see the original deck logs of the SENECA – with CAPT Wheeler’s name at the top – and to read the details of this event. Even in the dry language of the log book, I could *feel* the sense of loss.

And just five days later, the Cutter TAMPA was sunk by an enemy submarine in the British Channel, and all on board that ship were lost – including 111 Coast Guardsmen and a number of our British allies.

At the time of her sinking, she had just finished escorting a convoy out of Gibraltar, and was returning to port in Milford Haven, her homeport. During the war she had escorted 18 convoys comprising 350 ships – and lost only two to enemy action.

She went down quickly. Search and Rescue efforts over the course of three days turned up only a single body.

One of the Coast Guardsmen lost aboard TAMPA was Quartermaster Clement Miner Lawrence. I had the honor of posthumously presenting his Purple Heart to his niece, Mrs. Lavinia Ruth Abel, in a ceremony at Coast Guard Headquarters earlier this morning. Mrs. Abel and several other relatives of Clement Lawrence are here with us today for this rededication.

At the same ceremony, I had the privilege of honoring another Coast Guardsman – Seaman 1st Class William John Miller. Seaman Miller served aboard another ship, in another convoy, and in another war, some 30 years later. He was aboard the LEOPOLD, which was sunk by a torpedo in 1944. We lost 177 Coast Guardsmen that day. Seaman Miller was among the 28 who survived. All were awarded the Purple Heart, and those awards have been presented as family members have been identified. I was privileged today to present his to his daughter, Mrs. Pam Miller, who is also here today.

It is appropriate that the families of both Clement Lawrence and William Miller are here today. The Memorial behind me honors those members of our service who gave their lives during the first World War, but as we gather this week before Memorial Day, we honor all of those who put service before self and answered the call of their country.

In his remarks that day, CAPT Wheeler said that this memorial typifies the simplicity and stability of a sea Service, portrays its ideal and characteristics, and “fittingly honors both those who sleep beneath the seas...and those who repose in the sacred soil of America.”

You will notice this memorial looks awfully good to be 85 years old. That certainly wasn't the case just over a 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 those who gave so much by restoring this monument to their service and sacrifice.

The Chiefs sent out the call to raise the necessary funds to do this work, and the results were amazing.

Doesn't it look great?

Senior Chief Petty Officer Jon Ostrowski was the President of the D.C. Chapter who initiated this work. Senior Chief John Grimes took over the leadership of the restoration committee, kept the momentum going, and brought the project home. They received donations large and small from all over our Coast Guard. Thanks also go to Joe Battaglia, Kevin McSweeney, J.D. Power, the Navy Memorial, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and so many others who helped us preserve this great memorial to those who served.

In fact, the Chiefs did so well they exceeded their goal by almost 50 percent. Those extra funds have gone into a trust administered by the Coast Guard Foundation to provide for the future maintenance of this memorial – and to ensure it always looks as good as it does today.

With every memorial we build, we pray that it will be the last. I'm sure that was the prayer here that day 85 years. 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.

Time may have faded the *surface* of this memorial, but time has no similar effect on what this memorial *stands for*. The meaning of the sacrifice of those it honors does not abate; in fact, it continues to grow. This memorial is more relevant and meaningful today, viewed through the lens of history, than it was the day it was built.

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 what President Wilson once called "that solemn pride in the heroism of those who died in the country's service."

There are so many great Coast Guard heroes here in Arlington Since we last gathered here as a Service, too many brave patriots and servants to their nation have joined their shipmates here in this hallowed ground.

In our service we often talk of the "*long blue line*" of Coast Guardsmen. We say ours is blue, but all who serve 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 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. Secretary Mellon recognized this eighty-five years ago when he said of those honored here: “*their work has been accomplished, but ours is yet to be done. We must be ready to live, as they were ready to die, for the things that America believes in and for the principles for which she stands.*”

As I stand here today, I feel in my core that pride President Wilson spoke of. Standing *here*, how can you not?

But I feel much more.

I also feel a 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 as I look out here today, 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’m filled with hope.

And as long as that spirit lives – that hope – then we have then truly honored those who have served and given so much – and they can rest knowing that we will never stop working to fulfill Secretary Mellon’s wish that “future generations might find the world a better place to live in.”

Thank you – and Semper Paratus.