

**Memorial Service for BM3 Travis Obendorf  
Remarks by the Commandant  
Alameda, California  
January 30, 2014**

Good afternoon, Shipmates.

I am gratified to look out today and see so many members of our Coast Guard family...

Active Duty, Reserve, Auxiliary, and civilian. The extended family of the Coast Guard that is represented by our Department of Homeland Security and the various components; our friends from local, state and federal law enforcement; and all of the others that are gathered here with us today to honor to our fallen shipmate. We are honored that you have joined us this afternoon.

Deputy Secretary Mayorkas, Congressman Garamendi, you honor us with your presence.

My colleagues, Vice Admiral Zukunft, the Pacific Area Commander; Admiral Charlie Ray, the Deputy Pacific Area Commander; Rear Admiral Karl Schultz, the Eleventh District Commander; and Rear Admiral Rick Gromlich, the Thirteenth District Commander.

Also Master Chief Leavitt, and all of the Master Chiefs who serve so well throughout the Pacific Area – thank you for being here today.

I think most of the people in this audience know the meaning of that term “Shipmate” I just used. It’s a term of respect and real affection. For those not familiar with the term, let me tell you simply that when a Coast Guardsman calls you Shipmate, what we’re saying is that you are a member of the Coast Guard family.

And we come together today to honor the life and the service of a member of our family who was tragically taken from us.

Many in our Coast Guard family also use that term as a recognition of shared experiences, of a love for the sea and seafaring, of a life spent serving others, and of the unique bond that's formed between all those who have served in and around ships, and faced the great wonder – *and the great hardships* – that comes with such service.

One look at Boatswain's Mate Third Class Travis Obendorf's too brief career tells us that he was a Coast Guardman who was familiar with both.

Certainly he knew the hardships. Our chosen profession is a hazardous one. Our work is difficult and dangerous. And the sea is unforgiving – it always has been. This is especially true in the remote areas like the Bering Sea our cutters often work. But it was on the sea that Petty Officer Obendorf, like so many other young patriots – the sons and daughters of our Nation; the best we have – chose to answer the call to serve.

That call to service has been on my mind a great deal this week. Primarily, of course, because I've been thinking about Petty Officer Obendorf; what I might say to all of you gathered here; how we might best honor both Petty Officer Obendorf *and* his service to our Nation – and comfort those mourning his loss.

It's also been on my mind because I attended two other memorials this week – each of which drove home to me once again the dangerous work we do – and the amazing men and women, like Petty Officer Obendorf, who dedicate themselves to doing that work.

Both of the memorial events earlier this week were in memory of our shipmates aboard the Coast Guard Cutter BLACKTHORN, which sank 34 years ago this week. We lost 23 shipmates that night.

And as often happens – one thought leads to another and I found myself thinking of yet another memorial service...

Several years ago we dedicated a new memorial at Coast Guard Headquarters to all those who made the ultimate sacrifice while serving aboard Coast Guard cutters. It's a fitting tribute, with each of their names etched on a series of granite panels. At the time we dedicated that memorial, there were 1,242 names inscribed on six large panels.

These were all members of our Service who, like Petty Officer Obendorf, chose to endure hardships and put service before self; to live a life of purpose dedicated to something larger than themselves; and to exemplify our Service ethos: I will protect them, I will defend them, I will save them, I am their shield.

His name will now join those honored souls on that memorial.

What surprised me at the time of the dedication was that those 1,242 names... – those are only the names we *know*.

Before 1917, we didn't record individual names – only the cutters that we lost. It was a different era with a different way of thinking, but I couldn't help but think of all of those brave souls who also served their country, but whose names are lost to history.

Fortunately our Service long ago revised its way of thinking.... Our records began to reflect, and we began to honor, what was *really* lost in those tragedies... those *individuals* who *served*, many with families, all with life left to live, and much left to give....

But that same year we started keeping track of the individual names of those who gave the lives in service – 1917 – the Service also issued a report which said:

***“In a hazardous service such as the Coast Guard, where men must risk their lives to save others who are in perilous positions, it is expected that occasions will arise where the rescuers themselves are lost in their brave attempts to save the unfortunate...”***

Of course today we reject that expectation. It is only with the most grudging reluctance that we recognize the unfortunate reality that, despite our very best efforts, accidents may still happen in the dangerous environment in which we work.

But there is no greater responsibility, and I have no greater wish, than to never build another monument or attend another memorial to a fallen shipmate. This is why we train so hard. It is why we have made the proficiency of our workforce a central focus. And it is why we work so hard to remain ever-vigilant — and keep focused on our most important duty — the safety of our shipmates...

Because at the end of the day – it is not our ships, or our aircraft, or our missions that truly define us. It is the cuttermen who sail those ships, and the pilots who fly those aircraft, the coxswains who drive the small boats, and all of the Coast Guardsmen who conduct those missions that make us who we are. They are the very soul of the Service.

It is also a reminder to each of us that every policy decision our National leaders make, every strategy that is released, every goal that gets set – at the end of the day it is young men and women who have the responsibility to carry out that policy, implement that strategy, or achieve that goal.

They are the ones who know what is to stand the watch; to be cold and wet and tired and yet keep pressing forward. They are the ones who deserve the praise, the accolades, and our eternal thanks. Because men and women like Petty Officer Obendorf answer the call, the world is a safer and far better place for all of us.

Ours is the smallest and perhaps the least understood of our Nation's five armed services. The range of missions we are called upon to perform are as numerous as they are diverse. It's in that diversity of missions that much of our strength lies – but it's that same diversity that often makes it difficult to effectively communicate the full measure of our worth to the Nation or describe precisely who and what we are as a Service.

We usually talk in terms of the many things we do for our Nation, like Search and Rescue, or Environmental Protection, or Merchant Marine Safety, or Drug Interdiction.... Or speak about foundational concepts like Prevention and Response, or our role as a Maritime Governance force.

And those are all critical things people need to know if they are to understand us as a Service and the real value we provide to the American people.

But if we really want people to understand who we are as a Service...maybe we should just tell them about Travis Obendorf. He provided all of us with an enduring example of what it means to put service before self. He embodied our ethos. He exemplified the sacrifice and devotion to duty we value most.

That is our way, and that is who we are as a Service. It is what defines us as Coast Guardsmen.

Just before I stepped up to the podium today, you heard the Coast Guard Band perform a song that has long been a favorite of mine. The name of the song is American Anthem, and I hope you listened to the words.

The first time I heard it sung was by Nora Jones, and I fell in love with it from the first time I heard it. And I fell in love with it even more when I heard the Coast Guard Band perform it with Petty Officer Weikleenget singing it.

And I hope you paid attention to the words. The first verse ends by posing the question:

***“What shall be our legacy; what will our children say?”***

The chorus answers the question.

***“Let them say of me, I was one who believed in sharing the blessings I received. Let me know in my heart, when my days are through, America, America, I gave my best to you.”***

That’s the legacy of Travis Obendorf. It’s a song I think that plays to everybody that’s ever served their country. And it’s certainly a song that goes out to every American, one that says every *individual* American can contribute. And they can make a difference. Travis Obendorf showed us that was true.

I mentioned when I began today that it was evident from Petty Officer Obendorf’s assignments that he was aware of the hardships that sometimes come with a life at seas. In addition to serving in the Cutter WAESCHE, he also served in Cutter ALERT, which sailed the waters of the Pacific; and with our patrol boats at Patrol Forces Southwest Asia in Bahrain.

But what is equally clear from looking at those assignments, and from talking with those who knew him, is that he also knew very well the *wonder* that comes with such service at sea. I think his shipmates will vouch for that.

The nights on deck beneath perfect, star-filled skies. Brilliant sunrises and quiet sunsets over great expanses of open ocean. The deep and abiding camaraderie born of living with and depending on each other for months and years at a time. And the pride that comes in knowing you are directing your efforts towards a truly worthwhile purpose.

As we seek to find some comfort here today – some solace from the pain of the loss of our Shipmate – I think we can find it there. Because Petty Officer Obendorf lived that life of wonder. He knew that deep and abiding camaraderie with his Shipmates – so many of whom are gathered here today. And he gave his life while rescuing others – secure in the knowledge that the path he had chosen was the path of virtue; the path of service....

Laurie and Chad, Ron and Dawn – I can't begin to fathom the sense of loss you feel now. I can only tell you that because he made the decision to take that path, because he chose to serve his fellow man, we are all better for it.

When I have all too frequently spoken to members of families, whether it's wives or parents, and they ask “why would he chose a profession that took him from a family that he so dearly loved?”

Well, as you know, I didn't know Travis Obendorf directly – but I've know plenty of Travis Obendorfs in my career; plenty of BM3's. And what I can tell you is they are always the life of the ship.

And as much as they look forward to getting underway and spending time with their shipmates – as soon as those lines come in... as soon as you get out to sea....they start thinking about their family and when they are going to get back to them.

So I can assure you that up on the Bering Sea, while he was fully engaged in the activities at hand, he was also thinking about all of you, and when he could get back to you. I can guarantee you that.

I hope there is comfort in knowing that he was a good man, an honorable man, who was loved by all that knew him. You can see that in the faces of his shipmates here today.

The world is a better place – and the Coast Guard is a better Service – because he lived among us.

We are here today to honor his life and his service, because he was a member of our family, just as he was a member of yours. I want to thank you for sharing Travis with us and allowing him to become part of our Coast Guard family. Like Travis, you, too, will always be part of our family. And we will never forget *your* sacrifice.

And make no mistake, we *are* a family. But we are also a military service. *And* a Lifesaving Service. We commit ourselves to our nation and to each other and we put ourselves in harm's way. We are called to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. And when one of us gives all – *sacrifices all* – in pursuit of that noble endeavor, the manners of our profession demand that we pay homage to that selfless service. To do otherwise would break the covenant we have, each to the other.

We often talk of the “*long blue line*” of Coast Guardsmen. It describes all of those dedicated men and women who served before us. It speaks to their accomplishments, their commitment, and their sacrifice.

But it is much more than that. 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 all have. To our country. To our Service. And to our people. People like Petty Officer Travis Obendorf.

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

Petty Officer Obendorf is now a part of our long, blue line. His service and sacrifice will forever be a part of our Service and will stand as a source of inspiration for us and for Coast Guardsmen not yet born.

He reminds us that our commitment to protect our nation and her people from all manner of harm brought by the sea entails dangerous work. But we cannot, and we will not, shrink from our duty to confront these dangers. To do so would be to turn our back on our duty and his memory.

As we grieve for the loss of our shipmate, we remember that for over 223 years others in that long blue line, dedicated Coast Guard men and women like Petty Officer Travis Obendorf, have stepped forward – without hesitation, without reservation – to accept that sacred trust, to place the needs of their country first, and put service before self.

They have done that – and we continue to do that – because we are Coast Guardsmen.

This is our chosen profession.

This is our way.

This is what we do.

Semper Paratus.