

**BLACKTHORN Memorial Service
Remarks of the Commandant
Tampa, Florida
28 January, 2014**

Good afternoon, Shipmates.

As I stand here today, I am reminded that there are certain names that are indelibly etched in the collective memory of our Service – names we will never forget....

TAMPA
ESCANABA
SERPENS
WHITE ALDER
CUYAHOGA

And then there is BLACKTHORN. Our greatest peacetime loss of life as a Service.

We have constructed memorials, much like the one behind me, to each of these tragic events in our Service's history. To ESCANABA at the waterfront in Grand Haven, Michigan; to WHITE ALDER at both New Orleans and Baton Rouge; to TAMPA and SERPENS at Arlington National Cemetery; to CUYAHOGA at Training Center Yorktown. All are special in their own way, and they all honor those who gave their lives in Service to our country.

But *this* memorial may be the most poignant. Because as you look out from this beautiful spot you can see the place – just a couple of miles south of here – where this tragic event took place. It somehow makes it more real. You can feel the winds off the Bay, and smell the salt in the air, and you can almost imagine what the crew was seeing and feeling when BLACKTHORN started her trip that night, leaving the yards...homeward bound.

And as you do that – as you hear the cry of the gulls; as you feel the sea breeze and smell the salt air; and as you look out and watch the parade of traffic that still passes by offshore, it serves as a reminder to us of the inexorable passing of time.

And just now, as we listened to the list of our Shipmates who are no longer with us, and as we heard the tolling of BLACKTHORN's bell, it provided us all a brief moment to remember those who are no longer with us, to reflect on what those of us who remain have accomplished with the great blessing of time we've all been given, and to think about to what we might do with the precious gift of tomorrow we hope to receive.

It's been said that as we travel life, the relevance of time is perhaps the greatest input in determining our position.

As I look back on the loss of the BLACKTHORN, and the journey our Service has made since then, that is certainly true for me. It's difficult to believe 34 years has passed since we lost our Shipmates that fateful January evening.

On that evening there were 38,000 uniformed Coast Guardsmen. There are now only 46 of us left on active duty who were also on active duty the night BLACKTHORN went down. I am honored to be among you today as one of that number as we honor the crew of BLACKTHORN.

It does my heart good to look across this audience 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 remember our shipmate.

I hope you listened very closely to the lyrics of the song that the Academy chorus just sang. The name of the song is American Anthem. It's long been a favorite song of mine. 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 every time I hear the Coast Guard Band perform it, or the chorus sing it, I fall in love with it all over again. And it's because of those lyrics.

And I hope you paid particular attention to the chorus of the song: *“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.”*

It's a song I think that plays to everybody that's ever served their country. It's certainly a song that resonates with me as I think about our shipmates on BLACKTHORN.

The loss of BLACKTHORN is such a significant event in our Service history, that I confess to you that when I first spoke here six years ago, a part of me felt inadequate and not up to the task. But when I first visited this special place, and as I heard those names called just as we did a few minutes ago, it filled me with the resolve to observe the manners of our profession and properly honor our lost shipmates.

I'm always taken by this memorial. A stone monument with the names of our 23 shipmates. The anchor from the BLACKTHORN. But as I mentioned just a minute ago, what I like best is the setting. It's nestled down here by the shore in a quiet place looking out on the Bay. It's tucked away from the hustle and bustle of the St. Petersburg. It's a place to sit and think. A place to remember. And a place to *listen*.

And *Remembering* is important.

It is one of the reasons we build memorials like this 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 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. To understand them is to know something of who we all are as Coast Guardsmen.

The loss of BLACKTHORN was truly a tragedy. Too many lost their lives – and many more lost sons, and daughters, and fathers, and brothers... We all lost shipmates.

But as terrible as the loss of BLACKTHORN was, the real tragedy would be simply to mourn our Shipmates' passing, and then to continue on as before, failing to listen and to learn the lessons they have to teach us.

For me – I remember it well. In 1980, and I was a young Lieutenant and a Company Officer at the Coast Guard Academy. And I had just come off my tour as the Executive Officer aboard another buoy tender, the Coast Guard Cutter RED WOOD.

The loss of the BLACKTHORN 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.* It was even more powerful, because just 15 months earlier we had lost the Coast Guard Cutter CUYAHOGA, where 11 more of our Shipmates gave their lives.

As I studied the reports of the casualty, and read of the causes that lead 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 BLACKTHORN casualty were not unique to BLACKTHORN. *They were systemic.*

In fact, several months before BLACKTHORN sank, Admiral Hayes, then the Commandant, warned of tired ships, inexperienced crews, and inadequate maintenance. He told our Service Secretary that “many of [our cutters] are not capable of carrying out the mission, and a majority of them, in my estimation, are not up to Coast Guard standards of readiness or professionalism.” And the investigation of BLACKTHORN’s sinking noted many of the same organizational failings we had seen in the CUYAHOGA report.

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

And when BLACKTHORN went down, those same thoughts I had after CUYAHOGA sank 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 and learn the lessons of BLACKTHORN and rededicate myself to professionalism.

I mentioned earlier this memorial, here down by the water, is a good place to come and remember. But it is, more importantly, a good place to listen.... And this time I’m not talking about the cry of the gulls or the waves breaking against the shore. I’m talking about our shipmates.

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 BLACKTHORN. 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. 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 BLACKTHORN.

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 34 years ago when I first *listened to* and began to think about the lessons we learned with the loss of BLACKTHORN. And it is based on my accumulated experience of the last 34 years..., viewed through that lens..., and with their voice in my ears.

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

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 VHF 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 like the one behind me 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. 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*. And we are still listening. I mentioned that there were only 46 of us left on active duty who were also on active duty when BLACKTHORN sank. I think I can speak for all of us when I say it has had an impact for the rest of our careers and on how we do our jobs.

Of those 46, 12 of us are now flag officers. Fourteen more are in Command Cadre positions, and seven of *them* are currently serving as Commanding Officers or Executive Officers aboard Coast Guard cutters.

But most in our Service don't have that personal memory. That is another reason we have this place...this memorial. So that everyone can learn something of our Shipmates who gave their lives in service to their country. So that all can come here and listen to the lessons they have to tell. And most importantly, so that we can take those lessons and make sure they live on in our Service – just like the memory of our Shipmates.

Every name on this memorial has a story to tell. And as I mentioned when I started my remarks – to know them, and understand them, is to know something of who we *all* are as Coast Guardsmen.

Too often, when people ask about the Coast Guard, we talk to them in terms of our missions. Of Prevention and Response. Of Search and Rescue or Aids to Navigation. And that's important. We do a lot of great things. But if you want someone to really understand who we are as Coast Guardsmen, don't tell them *what we do*. Tell them *who* we are and *how* we do those things.

Tell them the stories about people like SA Billy Flores, and ENS Frank Sarna, and all of the crew aboard BLACKTHORN that night.

Tell them *this is our way*, and this is who we are.

I think that is the best memorial of all – the best tribute to their memory.

The crew of the BLACKTHORN 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 are not forgotten. And we can also be sure *the lessons they taught* us will always be remembered.

And while the memorial, and this place, are fitting tributes 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.

You can best honor – we can ALL best honor the crew of the BLACKTHORN 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.

Thank You

And Semper Paratus.