

Blessing of the Fleet
Remarks by the Commandant
United States Navy Memorial
Washington, D.C.
April 12, 2014

Good afternoon, Shipmates!

I like to welcome all of you who have come out today on this beautiful spring afternoon to participate in this Blessing of the Fleet – especially all of the Active Duty, Reserve, Auxiliary, and civilian members of our five armed forces, as well as all of the other friends and members of the extended Coast Guard and Navy family who are here. This is a special ceremony for us, and the presence of so many of you here adds meaning to the blessing we are about to offer.

Admiral Totushek, thank you so much for having us as here today and for all of your work with the Navy Memorial, and also to VADM Johnson, for that introduction and for all you have done as the “Year of the Coast Guard” Chairman.

I also want to thank Chaplain Young – for the invocation you just gave, and for the blessing you will offer here in a few moments to our men and women and the ships they sail in. Your words inspire and sustain us.

I want to give a special thank you to our Coast Guard and Navy Honor Guards for being here today. Of course I love our Coast Guard Honor Guard, but all of our Service Honor Guards have a special place in my heart, because I love what they do and what they stand for: Providing honors for our fallen comrades. Guarding our Nation’s colors. Setting the example for military bearing, discipline, and attention to detail. And for paying special attention to observing the manners of our profession – like we are doing here today – and for representing all that is good about our Service and our country.

And then there is our Coast Guard Band. Aren’t they magnificent?! I encourage everyone to stay around following our ceremony to hear a rare D.C. concert performance by our Coast Guard Band.

Our band – which in my completely unbiased opinion is the best Service band in the Nation – is based out of the United States Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut. I’ve been threatening for years to bring them down here to D.C. permanently – but I’m happy to have them any chance I get! I promise you will be impressed.

I think most of the people gathered here today are probably familiar with that term “Shipmate” I used a minute ago to welcome you here. Certainly my Coast Guardsmen are, and I believe my Navy and Marine Corps Shipmates are as well.

It’s a term of respect, and of genuine 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 our family.

It's also a term of 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.

And it is the potential for those hardships that brings us here today. Or, more accurately, it is our natural desire – and our duty – to do all that we can to protect and safeguard our crews and our ships from the dangers they will face. Our chosen profession is a hazardous one. Our work is both difficult and dangerous. And the sea is unforgiving – it always has been. You can see that in one of the quotes here in the stone by Paul Nitze, former Secretary of the Navy. It says, "*The sea is an unnatural environment for man, and it takes something extra for men to live with it.*" This is especially true in the remote areas our Coast Guardsmen and Sailors and Marines often find themselves – and particularly true when your job is to go out into the very storms – both literal and figurative – that cause others to seek safe harbor.

More than 80 different Coast Guard units from around the world gathered water from the seas and bays and rivers where they work and sent it here today. In a few moments, after Chaplin Young gives the blessing to the fleet, we will use that water to charge these fountains and bring them to life for the season. In the names of those waters, you get a sense of the hazards our men and women face.

The Coast Guard Cutters BARANOF and AQUIDNECK sent water from the Arabian Gulf, where they provide security and support for commercial traffic and partner nation forces. It was ten years ago this month that Damage Controlman Third Class Nathan Bruckenthal was killed by a terrorist bomber while serving his second tour in those waters as a member of a joint Coast Guard/Navy vessel boarding team.

Cutters ROANOKE ISLAND and LONG ISLAND sent water from off the coast of Alaska, where just six months ago, Boatswains Mate Third Class Travis Obendorf was mortally wounded during a Search and Rescue mission.

And Coast Guard Cutter ASPEN sent waters from the Pacific, where just a year ago Senior Chief Terrell Horne was killed while protecting our shores from illegal smuggling.

From the Caribbean and south Atlantic where cutters SPENCER and ESCANABA patrol for traffickers of drugs and migrants, to the stormy north Atlantic where the cutter CAMPBELL protects our fisheries, and Great Lakes where ALDER breaks ice and keeps our nations commerce moving, all of the waters brought here today tell a story of the great work our people do, and the hazard they face.

But despite those hazards, it is on and under the sea that so many of our young patriots – the sons and daughters of our Nation; the very best we have – choose to answer the call to serve. They choose to endure those hardships and put service before self; to live a life of purpose dedicated to something larger than themselves.

And it is in that choice, freely made by all of our Sailors, Marines and Coast Guardsmen, that we see embodied our own Service ethos: I will protect them, I will defend them, I will save them, I am their shield.

The young men and women of our sea services commit themselves to our nation and to each other, and they put themselves in harm's way. They are called to be a part of something bigger than themselves. And they step forward – without hesitation, without reservation – to accept that sacred trust, to place the needs of their country first, and put service before self. They remind us of the commitment we all have to protect our nation and her people from all manner of harm, and that we cannot, and we will not, shrink from this duty.

I have no greater wish than for all those who answer this call to return safely to us. That is why we train so hard. It is why I have made the proficiency of our workforce a central focus of our Service. It is why we work so hard to remain ever-vigilant. And it is why we offer this blessing today.

Because at the end of the day – it is really not our ships, or our aircraft, or even our missions that truly define us or that truly matter. It is the Cuttermen, Sailors and Marines who sail those ships, and the pilots who fly those aircraft, the coxswains and surfmen who drive the small boats, and all of those who conduct our missions that make us who we are. They are here for us, and it is for them *we* are here today.

They are the ones who know what it is to stand the watch; to be cold and wet and tired and yet keep pressing forward. They are the ones who deserve our praise, and our eternal thanks and blessing. Because of them, the world is a safer and far better place for all of us.

Our blessing here today is to safeguard our crews and ships from the dangers and hardships of the sea in hope that they will always return safely to us. And it is also with the prayer that they might know far less of the hardships, and far more of the true *wonder* that comes with service at sea.

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 at a time. And the pride that comes in knowing you are directing your efforts – and your life – towards a truly worthwhile purpose. That is a prayer worth praying, and a blessing worthy of their service.

To our men and women in uniform aboard all of our cutters and ships and submarines and aircraft: I wish you all fair winds, calm seas, and a safe return.

Thank you, and Semper Paratus!