

Coast Guard Headquarters Building Dedication

Remarks by the Commandant

Washington, D.C.

November 13, 2013

Good Afternoon, Shipmates.

I can't begin to tell you how proud and honored I am to be here this afternoon to formally dedicate this wonderful new building, and in the process, transform it into our home. And we will name it after one of our great Coast Guard heroes – Douglas Munro. And isn't that a terrific looking sculpture!

I'm proud today for many reasons – not the least of which is looking out and seeing so many members of our Coast Guard family, as well as all those who take the time and give of themselves to support our Service and our people.

Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton. Thank you for all that you have done and for advocating and sponsoring the legislation to name this building after Douglas Munro.

Acting Deputy Secretary Rafael Borrás, who has been a long-time supporter of the Coast Guard, both within the Department as the Undersecretary for Management and in his current assignment.

Colonel H.C. "Barney" Barnum. This is not just a one-time event for him. He is a 27-year veteran of the Marine Corps and received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions in Vietnam. He has a long record of public service, and I first met him when he was the deputy Assistant Secretary for Reserve Affairs and I was a brand new flag officer and the Chief of the Coast Guard Reserves. He has maintained that relationship over the years and it is great to see you here, sir.

CDR Doug Sheehan, the nephew of Douglas Munro, great to have you here on the dias.

And to our Coast Guard Band and Coast Guard Honor Guard, without whom these ceremonies would not be quite so special, we're delighted to have you here, too.

So even though there are a lot of reasons for pride, there are two reasons *in particular* I'd like to single out to talk about this morning. First – it's because of this beautiful building. Isn't this incredible?

For the first time in our 223 year history, a headquarters building built just for us. Now any organization would be justifiably excited to have a facility like this – but this one is truly worthy of the men and women of the Coast Guard who come here every day to do the nation's business. But I think it's even more special for us. Because you have to understand, for most of our 223 years, our Coast Guard Headquarters has had a nomadic existence. We've had our Headquarters in no less than 10 locations around the city.

But now we have a new home – a place to call our own. It has been a long time coming, but it is truly good to be home! That alone is reason enough to be pleased this morning, don't you think?

But the second reason I'd like to talk about – and why we're really here this afternoon – is because of the name that is going on this building. One that means so much to our Service.

The Coast Guard is fortunate to have many great heroes. We have a long, rich history of men and women willing to sacrifice everything to protect others. Those willing to lean headlong into the storms – *both literal and figurative* – when others are seeking safe harbor.

Some of those names are well known. Names like **Richard Etheridge**, the Keeper of the Pea Island Lifesaving Station; **LT Jack Ritticher**, who volunteered to go to Vietnam, and who earned three Distinguished Flying Crosses saving others before he gave his own life in the rescue of a downed pilot; and **Senior Chief Terrell Horne III**, who last year gave his life during a pre-dawn pursuit off the California coast.

Countless more names are not quite as well known. We're working to remedy that, in part with the naming of our new cutters, in particular our Fast Response Cutters.

These are all named for Coast Guard enlisted heroes. Now names like **Margaret Norvelle**, **William "Billy" Flores**, **Robert Yered**, **Charles David, Jr.**, and **Richard Patterson** will become part of our everyday Service lexicon.

There will be 58 of these new cutters, and that is still not enough to recognize all of our heroes.

But the name Douglas Munro is a name that *all* Coast Guardsmen know. It was just 71 years ago last month that Douglas Munro, along with another Coast Guard hero, Ray Evans, volunteered to lead a group of landing craft back to the beach on Guadalcanal to evacuate U.S. Marines facing withering enemy fire.

Munro positioned their craft to provide covering fire for the evacuation, and then used the boat as a shield for the departure of the final boat, ensuring that every Marine was taken safely from the beach. In the process, he was mortally wounded by a burst of enemy fire from the shore.

Most people in the Coast Guard are familiar with Douglas Munro's shipmate that day, even if they are not entirely knowledgeable. Ray Evans and Douglas Munro were best friends. They enlisted together, started their careers at Air Station Port Angeles together, and served

aboard the Coast Guard Cutter SPENCER together. They also advanced to Signalman Third Class and transferred to the USS HUNTER LIGGETT together.

And of course, they both served at Guadalcanal.

And on September 27, 1942, Ray Evans learned what hell is like. He made two trips to the beach that day. On his first trip back to the beach that day he had a different coxswain. You may know his name as well – Navy Petty Officer Samuel Roberts. Their Higgins boat was badly shot up during that trip and Roberts was gravely wounded. Evans was able to coax the bullet-riddled craft back to safety, but unfortunately Petty Officer Roberts did not survive. He was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross for his actions, and the Navy has since named three ships in his honor.

It was then that Douglas Munro and Ray Evans – best friends, together again – teamed up for that final, fateful trip to the beach.

I had the great honor to know Ray Evans. I called him every year on his birthday and always enjoyed speaking with him.

He was awarded the Navy Cross and meritoriously promoted to Chief Petty Officer for his actions at Guadalcanal that day. He ultimately retired from the Coast Guard many years later as a Commander.

I missed the call this year, because he passed away in December. But on a recent trip to Seattle, I had a chance to meet with his wife, Dottie, and express my regrets. I hope in the future Coasties will continue to go out and visit Dottie, because what she has out there is literally a shrine to Ray Evans.

While I was there, Dottie showed me a manuscript written by Ray Evans, and she allowed me to read it. In it, he described the events of that day, and his last trip to the beach with his best friend. He was the

only eyewitness to Douglas Munro's death, and the end of his manuscript captured that tragic moment.

I've been thinking about it over the past couple of weeks. And to honor his service, I propose today that we name our Conference Center in this building the Commander Ray Evans Conference Center. I think we can get this done, and reunite these Shipmates

Munro's last words to his best friend were, "did they get off?" With his dying breath he thought not of himself, but of those he had gone to save.

Just four simple words. Yet in his actions, *and with those last words*, Douglas Munro captured perfectly our Service ethos: I will protect them. I will defend them. I will save them. I am their shield.

His name on our Headquarters, our Service's home, is a tribute to his courage and lifesaving spirit, and will serve as an enduring reminder of our obligation to keep faith with his legacy of selfless service.

It will remind us every day, when we walk through those doors, that like Douglas Munro, like Ray Evans, this is our chosen profession, this is our way, and this is what we do.

So we have a beautiful new home, with a historical, inspirational name. But up until a few months ago it was only glass, steel, wood, and stone. But today it's full of Coast Guard men and women who have brought it life. Because here, as in everything we do, it is people, not the hardware, which make a real difference.

It reminds me of an occasion not too long ago when I was privileged to preside at the commissioning of one of our newest Coast Guard Cutters – one of those Fast Response Cutters named for our Coast Guard enlisted heroes.

At the commissioning of a new ship, there comes a point in the ceremony where the ship's sponsor – someone whose spirit and presence is invested in the ship and guides it through its service life – steps forward and asks the officers and crew to lay aboard and bring the cutter to life.

The ship's company then boards the cutter and mans the rails. The Quartermaster of the Watch hoists the flag, the ship's systems are energized, and the engines roar to life. It's at that point the presence of the crew breathes life into the cold steel hull and it becomes a Cutter in the commissioned service of the United States.

And when that crew comes aboard, they don't come aboard alone. They come aboard with the spirit of 223 years of Coast Guardsmen who dedicated themselves to the protection of their fellow man.

It is much the same here this day. But instead of a single sponsor, we have many sponsors whose hard work and dedication made this day a reality. And as *this* crew comes aboard, they do so with the spirit of Douglas Munro.

So, as we stand here today, the crew is now aboard. We've manned the rails, energized the systems, and hoisted the flags of your United States Coast Guard, signifying that the ship, and the crew, are ready to sail.

And with a crew like ours and a namesake like Douglas Munro to guide us – there is no storm we can't weather.

It is truly good to be home!

Stand a taut watch. Semper Paratus!