

## **Veterans Day Wreath Laying Ceremony**

Remarks of the Commandant

November 11, 2013

Arlington National Cemetery

This is always a special time of year for me. November is my favorite month, and this is a special week. And of course Arlington is a special place. You can't stand here for very long without knowing that. You can see it, and you can feel it. And I always feel privileged to be here on Veteran's Day to observe the manners of our profession and remember those who have sacrificed so much. It's one of the reasons I'm called to this place. And of all the times I come here, this week is by far my favorite.

It seems I've been here a lot this year. I've attended funerals of shipmates. I was here in May for Memorial Day. On that visit we rededicated the Coast Guard World War Memorial you see behind me. It commemorates two tragic episodes in Coast Guard history. The first occurred on Sept. 21, 1918. The Coast Guard Cutter SENECA, while escorting a merchant convoy, sent a salvage crew to assist the British steamer, WELLINGTON, which had been torpedoed in the Bay of Biscay. Despite their efforts, the WELLINGTON ultimately sank, and 11 members of SENECA's crew were lost.

And just five days later, the Cutter TAMPA was sunk by an enemy submarine in the British Channel, and all on board were lost.

Over eight decades of weather and exposure had taken their toll on this monument, and our Washington, D.C. Chief Petty Officers Association took it upon themselves to honor those who gave so much by restoring this monument to their service and sacrifice.

And I was here again just last weekend for Flags Across America.

For those who haven't been to one, Flags Across America is a wonderful event. It's organized by our Chief Petty Officers as a way to honor our Coast Guard veterans buried here. We had a crowd very similar to this one that came out to remember our veterans by placing a Coast Guard standard and our National flag beside each grave marker. I especially enjoyed seeing the young children who were here going from gravesite to gravesite placing these flags, and maybe learning a little about the person whose final resting place they had just visited.

That's another reason it's so special for me to be out here, especially during this Veterans Day week. It's because of all the young people learning what it means to pay respect to those who have answered our Nation's call to service.

When I was here last weekend, I probably saw 150 young folks here with their parents. There were Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts here as well. These young children – many of them Coast Guard dependants – got a great lesson in “Manners of Our Profession 101.”

They saw the colors being presented. They saw those in uniform salute smartly. They saw those who were not in uniform remove their hats and place their hands reverently over their hearts.

And I saw all of these young children just watching, taking it all in. Some were obediently copying what they saw the rest of us doing; others were just trying to understand what it was all about, and why they couldn't just run and play in this big, green, beautiful open area.

Then I saw the most important thing of all. I saw parents, leaning down to their children, telling them what it all meant.

Seeing this took me back to my own childhood.

I've told the story before of my father – who was a Marine. I remember being at a parade with him when I was very young and seeing the American flag pass by. He looked down and told me to remove the cap I was wearing and place it over my heart. He explained to me all that the flag stands for – including the memory of those who gave their lives so it could continue to wave.

This was obviously long before I had a profession – and before I put on the cloth of my country – but it gave me the foundation to understand what “*The Manners of our Profession*” really means. It started the learning process.

As I grew older, I had many more moments like this with my father. Sometimes he explained things to me; sometimes I simply learned by watching him.

And that's how it works. We learn from one another and from the actions we take – like this service here today. You won't find these manners written in any publication. They are observed, they are taught, and they are experienced.

And eventually they are felt. They become part of who we are.

And it is part of me now, as I honor my solemn obligation as Commandant to come here, to this sacred place, and remember.

Back in May when we rededicated this monument, I spoke at length about its restoration, and also what it means to have monuments like this. I talked about why we have them – and why they are important.

And as I was leaving here last Saturday, I drove down the hill behind us and another monument caught my eye – the monument to the U.S.S. SERPENS.

The SERPENS monument is away from Coast Guard Hill, so it is not visited quite as often, and sadly, many in our Service don't know the story. SERPENS was a Coast Guard manned Navy ship that served in the Pacific during World War II. While loading depth charges in the Solomon Islands, the SERPENS exploded, killing 198 Coast Guardsmen. It is the largest single loss of life ever suffered by the Coast Guard.

Those killed were originally buried in a mass grave at the Army, Navy and Marine Corps Cemetery on Guadalcanal. Following the war, we wanted to bring them home, to better honor their service and their sacrifice. Their remains were brought here, to Arlington, where these shipmates were laid to rest. The large monument at the bottom of the hill was erected over the grave site and dedicated in their honor 63 years ago this week. The names of all 198 Coast Guardsmen are inscribed on the monument.

That monument reminded me, once again, of all those who have given their lives so that we might continue to realize the promise of our great nation.

And it made me think, once again, of the monuments we have built to them.

True, they are monuments to those we lost. They are a tangible symbol of their sacrifice. But they also serve another purpose. They serve as a source of inspiration – and comfort – for those who still serve today. Because as we gather around them here today; as we observe the manners of our profession; and as we teach our children to remember – we can be sure that those who follow *us* will do the same.

When we first began the efforts to restore our Coast Guard World War Memorial, the theme of that campaign was “Lest We Forget”. And we will not forget. We will tell the story, and will *never* forget.

If you take a close look at the Coast Guard World War memorial behind me, you will see that at the base it reads *not* “World War One” – but simply “World War.” Because when they built this monument, they believed they had fought the war to end all wars.

Unfortunately, the implicit hope that is captured in those two simple words – that there would never be another war – has yet to be realized. Since that day, many more have been called to the service of the nation.

Some gave all in the answering, and returned here – and to countless other sacred plots of hallowed ground, where they rest alongside those who preceded them in service.

Some returned to family and loved ones, yet still live with the physical reminders of their service. And still others returned with scars less visible, but certainly just as painful.

All of our veterans, however, returned deserving our gratitude, our respect, and our remembrance. It is for *all* of them that we are here today.

The meaning of their sacrifice does not abate. In fact, it is more relevant today than ever. 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.”

I mentioned before that I was honored to have our Service Secretary here with us today. Secretary Beers, thank you for being here. Eighty-five years ago, when our Coast Guard memorial was first dedicated, another of our Service Secretaries – Andrew W. Mellon – stood just about where you are now. In speaking of those we are here to remember today, he said “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.”

Today, as we bend down to the children here, and as we begin to teach, that is what we need to tell them.

So if we think about it, in doing so, we become – and our families become – a living monument to their service. We ensure they will never be forgotten. And I can think of no better monument to our veterans.

May God bless our veterans, and the United States of America.

Thank you – and Semper Paratus.