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"The Leadership Spirit of the Coast Guard"

Department of Transportation Senior Leadership Team

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Introduction:

I should begin by confessing that it will require conscious effort to keep my motives pure with these remarks. My assigned purpose is to share some distinctive features of the Coast Guard with the hope that doing so will spark other ideas about how all of us can foster ONE DOT leadership and teamwork within our modal administrations or our corners of OST. However, as I go about this legitimate business, I will be immersed in a moral struggle to resist the temptation to brag about this Coast Guard that I've devoted my life to.

I am very proud of the commitment of the men and women who perform deeds like the ones you watched during the reception or like those you may have heard about from the Coast Guard leaders, young or old, at your tables last evening. And a sense of just that commitment is what the Secretary has asked me to share. But I will try to refrain from outright Coast Guard cheerleading for the next few minutes. Please forgive any parochial lapses.

Getting Beyond Military-Civilian Distinctions:

There is a great danger in having a military officer speak about leadership and teamwork to a civilian audience. It is the same danger that occurs when a successful football coach is asked to give a motivational talk to business executives. It's not that the audience can't understand the framework; rather the danger is that the audience is very likely to be smart enough to see exactly where the METAphors break down and understand exactly why some principles that work in one activity do not necessarily apply to other fields of endeavor. Leadership is an art, not a science.

Nevertheless, I am going to tell you a war story, but I promise that it's not the kind of war story you're accustomed to hearing.

I could tell plenty of traditional war stories because the Coast Guard has more than its fair share of traditional war heroes. I could tell how Douglas Munro died leading a daring evacuation of a besieged Marine detachment at Guadalcanal. Or I could tell how Jack Rittichier performed such amazing combat search and rescue missions in Vietnam that he

was cited for heroism six times in the two months before dying when his Jolly Green Giant helicopter was shot down.

However, if the purpose of our Senior Leadership Team conference is to strengthen our ONE DOT teamwork, traditional war stories aren't likely to accomplish our objective. After all, stories of sacrificial heroism may not be the best mechanism for inspiring action within a department that is dedicated to safety. We honor our Coast Guard heroes without reservation—and I offer that they are the department's heroes as well—but we're not exactly looking for DOT employees to make the same kind of sacrifices. We would not, for example, encourage departmental workers to protect the nation's highways by hurling their bodies in front of speeding, overloaded trucks. Now if we could get the OMB guys to do that . . .

I'd like to tell about one moment in Coast Guard history when one Coast Guard officer demonstrated four essential elements of what I will call the "Leadership Spirit of the Coast Guard." This spirit animates our service, and its four elements are as applicable to civilian federal servants every bit as much as they are to the military.

The Story of Quentin Walsh at Cherbourg:

The setting for our story is northern France in June of 1944.

Before the D-Day invasion of Normandy, the Allied planners were reasonably confident they could establish a foothold on the continent, but they were far less confident they would be able to keep it. Doing so depended on many factors, not the least of which was establishing functional deep water ports in northern France very quickly after the Normandy invasion. Without dependable ports, there would be no way to land the supplies needed to sustain the forward momentum.

The Germans understood this logistics requirement and were determined to defend the ports as long as possible and to render them unusable if they had to abandon them.

They were particularly effective in Cherbourg. They destroyed the gates to the two canals that ran from the port through the city. They tore up the railroad yard. They sowed mines in the harbor and blocked the waterway by sinking ships and wrecking derricks. And as if that wasn't enough, they set booby traps in the sunken vessels. It was the worst inter-modal transportation nightmare you could imagine.

Into this mess walked a Coast Guard lieutenant commander named Quentin Walsh. Commander Walsh headed a fifty-man reconnaissance party with the simple job of scouting out the port, squaring it away, and getting it ready to start handling inbound shipments.

Of course his job was slightly complicated by a few inconvenient facts: like the house-to-house street fighting that raged throughout Cherbourg; like the German control over half the city; like the German control of a naval arsenal and a fort that in turn gave them total control, if not total possession, of much of the port.

Lieutenant Commander Walsh joined the street fighting, reached the harbor waterfront, and established temporary naval headquarters. The next day, he took a handful of his men—about a quarter of his mighty force of fifty—fought his way through the streets to the arsenal, blasted his way into some underground bunkers, and took over 400 German soldiers prisoner.

Not a bad day's work for such a small group, but there still remained the small matter of the fort. Walsh immediately got busy about that challenge. Forcing a captured officer to lead his party through a mine field, he crept through the rubble of the port to avoid machine gun fire, and approached the fort, where he had heard that more than fifty American paratroopers were held captive.

As he reached the very portals of the fort and found his party subjected to increasingly intense machine gun fire, a U.S. Navy lieutenant under Walsh's command reflected to Walsh that his own study of military tactics left some uncertainty in his mind as to whether a force of eleven men was entirely adequate to storm a fortified position defended by several hundred soldiers.

Walsh responded first by asking the lieutenant if he had ever played poker and second by raising a white silk handkerchief as a flag of truce. A German officer emerged from the fort with a similar sign and escorted Walsh into the fort, where he was introduced to the German commander.

It was an awkward interview made somewhat more awkward by some initial confusion as to who was surrendering to whom. The German commander assumed that this meager party had shown up on his doorstep to surrender and that they would soon become a small addition to his collection of American prisoners. But Lieutenant Commander Walsh quite earnestly insisted that it was the other way around. He expected the Germans to surrender to him. The German commander's fall back position was to turn over the fort and the American prisoners in exchange for safe passage to the German lines.

Quentin Walsh must have been a pretty fair poker player because he soon negotiated—possibly with some minor stretching of the truth with respect to the exact size of his force—the release of the American paratroopers and the unconditional surrender of both the fort and its 350 German defenders. (Sort of reminds me of Jack negotiating for us on the Hill!)

And so, having taken two installations and captured forces seventy times larger than his own, Walsh immediately re-directed his attention to other tasks: establishing a more permanent headquarters, conducting an exhaustive survey of the mines in the harbor, and removing all the impediments to a functional port.

The ending of the story doesn't have much suspense—just a lot of old-fashioned hard work. We got the ports open, the Allies held their ground, and Patton's Third Army got the gas it needed to sweep across Northern Europe faster than any invading force in history.

So instead of telling the rest of Quentin Walsh's story, I'd like to distill the four attributes of his leadership spirit and offer them as qualities we can recognize and develop throughout DOT to accomplish our work for the American people.

Nobility of Purpose:

The first characteristic is the unshakable conviction that we are organized to undertake noble work.

Notice that I said "noble work" and that I did not say "noted work." You could read a lot of histories about World War II and the Normandy invasion without ever encountering more than the most superficial reference to the enormous work that was required to clear and open the port of Cherbourg—and the ports of Roscoff, Morlaix, Brest, and Le Havre—where Quentin Walsh also labored.

The glory of D Day will always go—as it properly should—to the men who scaled the cliffs of Pointe du Hoc and to the others who advanced in the face of withering defensive fire at the beaches.

But that is the nature of life when you work in the infrastructure business. All of us in this room know that without the infrastructure—a safe and efficient system of surface, air, and marine transportation—this country would cease to function. Quentin Walsh knew that the Allies would be driven back into the sea if he and others like him didn't do their jobs. The importance of one's work is more important than any recognition others might bestow upon that work. It is enough that we know that we are engaged in important work.

All of us in DOT can have—should have—the same unshakable conviction that we are undertaking noble work of inestimable value to the American public and the world economy. Secretary Slater speaks often about the human dimension of transportation, and that positive effect is why everybody in DOT has a noble purpose. Some of us get the enormous privilege to save lives, and all of us improve lives. That indeed is noble work.

Humility:

The second characteristic is an honest humility that encourages us to attach ourselves to larger purposes.

In World War II, the Coast Guard served under the Navy. Quentin Walsh held a Navy command, which was part of a much larger unified command. His own unit contained a mix of Coast Guard and Navy personnel. He initiated substantial cooperative interactions with units from all the other services operating in his area. He knew that the key to mission success was the blurring of the lines and barriers that can keep distinctive entities from acting as one.

His was the same humility that allows the Coast Guard and MARAD to work together on the Secretary's Marine Transportation System initiative; the same humility that allows us all to build on Ric's Buckle Up America leadership or join Kelly's mission to market

Garrett Morgan throughout the land; and the same humility that will allow all of the other benefits of ONE DOT to manifest themselves.

Noble work. Subordinating self in favor of the larger good.

Adaptation:

The third element of the leadership spirit is adaptation.

Adaptation is the willingness to disrupt the status quo even when things are going pretty well. Quentin Walsh made deliberate transitions from street fighting to direct frontal assault to a high stakes poker game. At each step of the way, he changed his organization and his tactics in order to meet the next challenge. He made repeated conscious decisions to abandon safe positions and successful methods. It takes nerve to adapt like that when outside forces aren't forcing you to do so. George Steinbrenner displayed that kind of nerve when he broke up the pitching staff of the most successful team in history in order to bring Roger Clemens aboard.

It's the same kind of challenge that Secretary Slater offers us with his push for a decision making architecture for the 21st century.

I'm proud to have been an employee of the Department of Transportation since the day the Department was established. It does matter—it is vitally and personally important to me—that our present organization and practices have served the country well for the past thirty years. But what matters more and what will continue to matter most is whether we are working together to meet the next set of challenges.

Noble work. Subordinating self in favor of the larger good. Adaptability.

Optimism:

The fourth element of the Coast Guard leadership spirit is optimism.

I can never completely suppress a chuckle when I think of Quentin Walsh strolling into that fort with less than a dozen men—no artillery, no reinforcements, no naval gunfire support—and demanding the surrender of such a numerically overwhelming force. It's something you'd expect in a *Hogan's Heroes* rerun, but the real-life Quentin Walsh was so confident that he flatly refused the German commander's offer to surrender the fort and the American captives in exchange for safe passage for the Germans back to the front lines. How did Walsh pull that stunt off? He believed it would work, and he acted upon that belief. It was certainly positive! It was certainly optimistic!

That same optimism is a resource we can draw on today. When we believe that our work is noble . . . when our humility allows us to join together in larger enterprises . . . when we adapt to the next set of challenges . . . when we believe our efforts will make a difference for America . . . and when we act accordingly . . . then we demonstrate the leadership spirit of Quentin Walsh, the leadership spirit of the Coast Guard, and the leadership spirit of the Department of Transportation.

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Conclusion:

The military traditions of the Coast Guard are a source of inspiration upon which the entire Department can draw. We're enormously proud to bring them to you.

Take a moment to look inside those traditions. The Coast Guard leadership spirit inspired Quentin Walsh; it inspired the Munro and Jarvis Award winners you dined with last night. At our core, we believe in Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty. In our hearts we know our work is noble; our great joy is in team success, not individual success; we look forward with optimism and confidence to tomorrow's challenges because adaptability is the essence of a multi-mission, military, maritime service.

We're honored to offer anything we have or anything we are to any who would use it to further positive aims. And by the way, we look forward to learning from all of you every day. Semper Paratus.

