

# Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Bob Papp's Remarks

At the

## William Flores Commissioning

St. Petersburg, Florida  
Saturday, November 3, 2012

Good Morning Shipmates!

Ladies and Gentlemen, Distinguished Guests - thank you for being here.

I hope you are as thrilled and proud as I am to be here today to welcome the Coast Guard's newest Sentinel-Class cutter – the WILLIAM FLORES - into active service.

I am particularly glad to be here – and glad that all of you were able to make it here to join us – given the extremely challenging week so many of you have had.

As Hurricane Sandy ravaged the east coast this week, we were all once again reminded of the raw power of the sea. For all its wonder and beauty, it can be an incredibly dangerous and tragically unforgiving environment.

We were also reminded of the brave, selfless men and women who go into this environment – willingly, eagerly – with no thought other than saving those in peril.

This reality was brought into sharp focus Sunday night with the sad loss of the HMS BOUNTY off the coast of North Carolina. She was on her way here to St. Petersburg.

Through the heroic efforts of our Coast Guard crews, 14 crew members from BOUNTY were plucked from the jaws of the storm. Two others, however, were claimed by the sea they loved.

Claudene Christian – a crewmember and reportedly a descendant of Fletcher Christian, who led the mutiny against Captain William Bligh on the original BOUNTY – was located by our crews from Air Station Elizabeth City, but, sadly, did not survive.

Robin Walbridge, the Captain of the BOUNTY, who resides in St. Petersburg, remains missing. His wife, Claudia McCann, told reporters this week that she is sure he would have been the last to leave the ship, only after everyone else was safely in the liferafts, honoring his role as Captain. I knew Robin personally, and I'm certain that was the case.

Please keep Robin's wife Claudia and all those impacted by the storm in your thoughts and prayers.

Against this current backdrop of both tragic loss and inspiring heroism, it's fitting that we are here to remember the bravery and sacrifice of William Flores and commission the cutter named in his honor.

And isn't this a great looking cutter!?

I tell you what. I have the best job in the world as Commandant of the Coast Guard. But it's awfully hard for me to look at cutters like the WILLIAM FLORES and not wish I was a young Lieutenant Commander ready to take Command.

LCDR Allen – you better keep a tight grip on the keys....!

But, you know, it starts me thinking about the ships I've had the privilege to command. As anyone who has served time aboard a ship knows, each ship has its own feel, its own personality.

Sometimes you sense it as soon as you walk aboard....  
Sometimes you have to sail in her awhile....

For those that haven't served aboard a ship before, don't be fooled by appearances. This cutter behind me is not just an lifeless piece of steel. She is very much alive.

And this personality – this feel I'm talking about?

It's just like it is with people you meet.

With people, there are those you "get" right away. Within 30 seconds of talking with them you know exactly what kind of person they are.

With others it takes a while to get to know them. Only over time do they open up and do you learn who they really are and what they're really like.

We all have our own values, our own way of acting, our own personalities... the things that make us who we are...

...and the things that give us the potential for true greatness.

It's the same way with a ship.

I don't know exactly where this comes from, this feeling you get from a ship, this certainty that she is alive and has a personality, a spirit of her own.

But I think it's a question worth asking. Where does it come from? What gives a ship its "feel"... its spirit?

I believe it's the same as it is with people. Who you are is the sum total of a host of different things.

It's all of the people you've known and who have had a part in your life... Mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, .... And shipmates.

These are all important people in a person's life, and they all make an impression.

And then there's your DNA – the stuff you get from your parents, your parent's parents, and their parents, and on down the line.... It's your biological connection to your past.

And those people who are blessed with great genes, and a nurturing family during their formative years, and people who care about them as they grow and learn and seek their place in the world, these are people who usually turn out well – and who are primed for greatness.

I think the same is true of ships... Every ship has similar influences as it is brought to life.

Instead of parents they have a shipyard and a pre-commissioning crew.

Instead of friends and family, they have a sponsor and a Captain and a crew.

And DNA? They have that, too – and I'll explain in a moment.

But by any of these measures, the WILLIAM FLORES is destined to be a great cutter for our service.

She was born in Bollinger Shipyard. And I know from talking with Chris Bollinger and seeing how these cutters are built that it's more than just a shipbuilding contract to them.

Don't get me wrong, they don't do this for free – or would you Chris...?

But there is more to it than just business for them. We have a long relationship with them. They care about these ships and, more importantly, they care about the people who sail in them.

Giving life to the cold steel that eventually became the cutter behind me is a great privilege and solemn responsibility, because she will carry our nation's sons and daughters through uncertain and stormy seas ... and back again.

A cutter also has a sponsor. For those not familiar with the tradition – a ship's sponsor is traditionally a woman whose spirit and presence is invested in the ship and guides it through its service life.

Mrs. Carolyn Flores Ahlstrom has accepted the sacred trust of serving as sponsor for this cutter. She is the oldest sister of Seaman Apprentice Flores. She is here today with all six of his brothers and sisters and eight nephews and nieces. Just as Seaman Apprentice Flores was her family, this cutter and this first crew – as well as all the crews that follow - will become her family....

She has spoken with great pride about what a special privilege it is for her to be the sponsor, and how this cutter is a living memorial for her brother; how his story will be told again and again, how this crew will have children and grandchildren who will know the story of her brother.

I can think of no better sponsor and no better family for this ship and her crew to be a part of.

Of course, the WILLIAM FLORES also has her crew. I know from LCDR Allen that this crew has tremendous pride in their new ship.

LCDR Allen and his crew worked hard to complete their ready for sea preparations and were able to get underway several weeks before schedule – rapidly accelerating the “getting-to-know-you” phase with their new cutter....no small task!

Things must have gone well – I understand that one of the crew members, BM1 Joseph Lovell, now has the hull numbers tattooed on his arm! I’m sure *he* knows what I mean when I talk about the personality of a cutter....

Although Boats...you better be careful... that tattoo may be hard to explain to your next ship!

And then there is DNA.

As I mentioned, our DNA is what we inherit from parents – our *biological* legacy. We don’t get any choice – it’s just what we are born with.

Our Service has DNA as well. When we talk of our service’s DNA, we often talk of a “long blue line”. It describes those who served before us. Their accomplishments, their commitment, and their sacrifice.

And it doesn’t just refer to the path behind us. It also encompasses the obligation set before us. It is our reminder of the responsibility we bear to keep faith with those who came before.

Seaman Apprentice William Flores is part of our service’s “long blue line.”

But our cutters have their own DNA ... their own “long blue line” - or maybe it’s a long white line...

From our very first Revenue Service cutter to the WILLIAM FLORES behind me – and all of the cutters we’ve sailed in the 222 years in between. And I can tell you, when it comes to WILLIAM FLORES, you couldn’t hope for better genes.

This is the third Fast Response Cutter we have commissioned. Her two sister ships are already on patrol.

The First was the BERNARD WEBBER.

Earlier this year I used that commissioning to speak about a concept that is very important to me – *and to our service*; a concept I shared with you in my first *State of the Coast Guard* address in 2011, and that is proficiency.

When I talk about proficiency – I break it down into three essential parts. Each is critically important: Proficiency in Craft, Proficiency in Leadership, and Disciplined Initiative.

In fighting through a perfect storm in 1952 to save the lives of the M/V PENDELTON crew, BM1 Bernie Webber and his motor-lifeboat showed us the perfect example of Proficiency in Craft.

And a couple of months ago I had the honor to commission our second Fast Response Cutter, the RICHARD ETHERIDGE, where I again spoke of Proficiency – this time focusing on Proficiency of Leadership.

He got the job as the first African-American Station Keeper in 1879 by being the very best surfman around. But not only was he the best surfman; he was a terrific leader who instilled excellence in his crew as well.

Just as he understood the necessity for Proficiency of Craft, he also understood the requirement for Proficiency of Leadership.

The Coast Guard still relies on – and requires – this type of leadership. It inspires us. It motivates our crews. It allows us to achieve that which was thought unachievable.

Richard Etheridge and his crew would go on to rescue hundreds of souls.

So I think you’ll agree the WILLIAM FLORES has some pretty terrific DNA in her lineage....

And finally, there is her namesake. William Ray “Billy” Flores.

Most of you know the story. SA Flores reported to the BLACKTHORN right after graduating from Recruit Training in 1979.

And just a few months after reporting, BLACKTHORN was involved in the terrible collision with the tanker CAPRICORN.

And when BLACKTHORN began to keel over, and the realization quickly spread that the ship was going to sink, the word began to circulate to abandon ship. Many of the crew began to fight to find a way to depart the sinking vessel.

But Seaman Apprentice Flores remained at his station.

He went to the locker where the ship's lifejackets were stored, opened the door, took off his belt, and used it to secure that door open. He did that so more lifejackets would float to the surface as the vessel sank and be available to the rest of the crew.

It's that third trait I talked about – disciplined initiative. He *intuitively* recognized that he needed to exercise on-scene initiative if he was to help his shipmates.

But his heroism didn't stop with the life jackets. He also stayed and helped other members of the crew – even after he had to climb up on the overturned hull when BLACKTHORN capsized.

SA Flores was posthumously awarded the Coast Guard Medal – our highest non-combat award for heroism. In presenting this award to his parents, the Eighth District Commander said “Seaman Apprentice Flores’ exceptional fortitude, remarkable initiative, and courage...were instrumental in saving many lives.... He set the standard for us all and embodies the true spirit of what we stand for.”

But this recognition for SA Flores did not come immediately. Because he was brand new to the ship, because of the confusion following the accident, because we did not immediately know or appreciate just where all of those lifejackets floating around came from, people were not fully aware of the magnitude of the contribution he made that night.

It wasn't until years later when his old shipmates and a few others fought for the recognition he deserved that the full story of his heroism finally came to light.

The statements of his shipmates tell of his lifesaving acts.

One shipmate who was on the overturned hull with SA Flores that night wrote:

*“I never saw SA Flores again that night after we were on the keel of the ship and he swam off into the darkness to help others....”*

*There is no doubt in my mind that that SA Flores made a major difference in people's lives that night. What he did kept many people alive that had the opportunity to come home to their families.*

*These families have no idea who SA Bill Flores is, and may never know.*

*These are people that have no idea how lucky they are that SA Flores was there to help.”*

Well now they know.

The loss of the BLACKTHORN was a tragedy, but less so because of the disciplined initiative and sacrifice of SA Flores. Because of his sacrifice that night, others continued to live and to serve – both their nations and their communities.

There are children and grandchildren in the world today because of his selfless actions, and those actions remind us that we serve in a dangerous profession, one in which we give all ... so that others might live.

That’s why I talk about Honoring our Profession, why it is so very important to me, and why I made it one of my guiding principles as the Commandant.

Billy Flores teaches us another important lesson – just like Bernie Webber and Richard Etheridge.

We work together as a team to accomplish our mission.

But each Coast Guard man or woman is an individual who is capable – and expected – to make a difference.

I started out by talking about the personality – the spirit – of a ship, and about where that comes from.

With a heritage like this, can there be any doubt about WILLIAM FLORES....and what a great cutter she will be?

Today she takes her rightful place at the head of our service’s long, proud line of cutters, serving at sea.

She will face many challenges out there. I call them “uncertain and stormy seas.” The continued flow of drugs and migrants towards our shores. Threats to our fisheries. Increased activity in the Arctic. Our mandate to protect the safe and secure approaches to American ports. And sometimes, to protect even the sea itself.

I’m sure the time will come when WILLIAM FLORES will be tested in these uncertain and stormy seas... But with a lineage like this – with a sponsor, and a crew, and DNA like this – she will certainly prevail.

And WILLIAM FLORES will always answer the call.

Because, you see...

We don't fear uncertain and stormy seas.

That's when we go to work.

That's when our country needs us the most. And that's when we are at our best.

We are Coast Guardsmen.

This is our chosen profession.

This is our way.

This is what we do.

To the crew...Stand a taut watch.

To the rest of you... Thank you.

And Semper Paratus.