

Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Bob Papp's Veterans Day Remarks

at the

Coast Guard Memorial in Arlington National Cemetery

November 11, 2011

Shipmates,

I have here a letter written a long time ago...to a Mr. James Frost in Brooklyn, New York...So bear with me...

“Dear Sir: This office is deeply grieved to announce the loss of the Coast Guard Cutter Tampa with all hands in Bristol Channel, England, at about 8:45 p.m., September 18, 1918. The dispatches show that your son, First Lieutenant James A. Frost, Jr., was on board the *Tampa* at the time and that hope has been abandoned of finding any survivors of the catastrophe.”

“In the sinking of the *Tampa* the naval force has suffered its greatest individual loss during the war. The officers and men of the Coast Guard are inured to danger and there is no room for doubt that those on the *Tampa* met their fate with heroic fortitude. Their names head the list upon the roll of honor of the Coast Guard in our united effort to establish personal liberty and the freedom of the seas throughout the world.

The precise circumstances that caused this disaster will probably never be known, but it is a matter of record that the officers and men who went down with the *Tampa* met their fate in the performance of their duty. No greater tribute could be paid to the memory of any man.”

Signed, Ellsworth P. Bertholf, Captain Commandant U.S. Coast Guard.
October 18, 1918.

This reminds me of the Bixby letter written by Abraham Lincoln – featured in the movie Saving Private Ryan – to the mother of five sons who died in the Civil War. Lincoln wrote, “How weak and fruitless any words of his could beguile her from a loss so overwhelming ... but he could not refrain from tendering the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the republic they died to save.”

And, in many ways that's what Veterans Day is about – it's the Nation pausing to collectively say thank you to our Veterans for their Service.

Every parent, spouse, son or daughter or loved one fears receiving such a condolence letter. But, we know that service in the armed forces brings with it this possibility. That's why what we do is called service, not work. Indeed, some 6,274 letters have been sent to families of the fallen who served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

And today, that's why we are all gathered here – to thank our veterans, past and present. All of us share in this obligation to observe and practice what I call, "the manners of our profession." You will not find these manners recorded in any book, any document, or any publication. Rather, these manners are observed, taught and experienced. They are felt in the heart. And, by practicing them, we prepare other generations to carry on our traditions.

By your presence here today – you are attending to the manners of our profession. And, you are passing these manners on. For that, I cannot thank you enough.

First Lieutenant Frost's name is etched on the Coast Guard World War Memorial behind me, along with the names of 114 of his shipmates. So too, are the names of the 11 crewman of the Cutter Seneca, who were lost while endeavoring to salvage the British Steamer Wellington, just 15 days earlier.

These unsung heroes are part of our esteemed long blue line of Coast Guardsmen that have come before us.

As the original dedication program stated, their names are, "Imperishably inscribed on the monument as a symbol of the enduring remembrance in which they are held by their country." But, today, I don't want you to merely read their names, I want you to see them as Coast Guardsmen, Coast Guardsmen like you and me – that is how they are best remembered.

Some were brothers, in fact (at least) three sets were aboard Tampa including...
(Water Tender) Algy Bevins and his brother, (Fireman) Arthur Bevins...
(Fireman) Frederick and (Boy, First Class) Percy Mansfield...and,
(Seaman) Homer Bryan and (Acting Ship's Writer) Wamboldt Sumner...

Others tried to hide their names...perhaps in an attempt to conceal their identity or ethnicity...

(Boy, First Class) Vincenzo Guerriero enlisted as, "Jimmie Ross."
(Oiler, First Class) Edward William Kelleher enlisted as, "Edward Kelly."
(Coxswain) Peter Skelte enlisted as, "John Smith."

Many, like the last surviving WWI veteran Frank Buckles who passed away earlier this year at 110 years of age, apparently even lied about their age to gain the opportunity to serve.

Seaman John Riving Richards was just 14...
Seaman Irving Alexander Slicklen was 15...
Jimmie Ross (a.k.a. Vincenzo Guerriero) was 16...
And there are more...

But they all had one thing in common...their willingness to step forward and serve. During *Tampa's* nine consecutive months of ocean escort duty in the frigid U-boat infested waters, these Coast Guardsmen ensured *Tampa* was never disabled. These Coast Guardsmen performed 18 convoy missions, totaling 350 ships – with only two ships lost. These Coast Guardsmen ensured *Tampa* was Always Ready – they personified our core values of honor, respect and devotion to duty, even before we began speaking of core values.

But not all were Coast Guardsmen. Also aboard, from the United States Navy were Surgeon LT Howard Teter, Ensign Edward Reavely, Ensign David Hoffman, and Pharmacist's Mate 2nd Class Carl Dalton. The names of these Navy members are also forever inscribed on our Coast Guard World War Memorial because, though they were not Coast Guardsmen, they shared a much stronger bond – they were shipmates.

It is telling that this monument – though it is today commonly referred to as the Tampa Memorial – was originally named the Coast Guard World War Memorial. Not the World War I Memorial. And not the World War II Memorial. Just the World War Memorial.

You see, in 1928 when this memorial was dedicated, our forbearers simply assumed that the one and only, "World War," was fought, won, and done. No sequel was envisioned. Like us, they could only know their history – not their future.

But what they did know, what our nation has always had absolute confidence in, is that our citizens will step forward during our greatest hour of need, to selflessly defend our freedoms, and when necessary, to lay their lives on the altar of patriotism. This willingness embodies the essence of service...and what it truly means to be called a Veteran.

The Coast Guard was extremely proud when this memorial was dedicated – it was called a memorial, "To the Coast Guard, of the Coast Guard, by the Coast Guard – a Memorial by our own to our own." This was because in 1927 it was individual Coast Guardsmen that reached into their own pockets to subscribe \$35 thousand dollars to build this memorial and ensure their shipmates were never forgotten...this would be about \$433 thousand in today's dollars – an extraordinary sum. These Coast Guardsmen were keenly aware of the importance of observing the manners of our profession...they set the bar high.

But, as you can see, over 8 decades of weather have taken their toll on our World War Memorial. The names that were, "Imperishably inscribed," are showing their age and the monument is in need of loving care. This provides us with an opportunity. An opportunity to restore our memorial to ensure it remains a fitting tribute to our service

and shipmates. So, today, I am announcing the, "Lest we forget," campaign – it's the same name as the original campaign launched in 1925. Further detail will follow – but it's now our turn to respond to the call...to honor our profession.

So on this Veterans Day, we thank all those in uniform – past and present. Those who served – and those who, though they no longer wear the uniform, continue to work to make our nation strong.

This is our chosen profession. This is our way. This is what we do. We are privileged to be members of a very unique service.

Whenever I am asked who we are, or what we do, I always reply with pride, "We are Coast Guardsmen!" We are the men and women of the United States Coast Guard, past and present! No one else can do what we do!

So to all of you, and all veterans and their families, especially those currently in harm's way, I salute you from the bottom of my heart.

God Bless our service and our country.

Semper Paratus!