

**ENS Frank Sarna III Patrol Boat Building and Fitness Center
Building Dedication Service
Remarks of the Commandant
Coast Guard Sector St. Petersburg
St. Petersburg, Florida
27 January, 2014**

Good Morning, Shipmates.

It's hard to believe it has been thirty-four years since the tragic loss of ENS Frank Sarna and his 22 shipmates aboard the Coast Guard Cutter BLACKTHORN. I realize that thirty-four years is more than a lifetime to many of you gathered here, but it seems barely the blink of an eye to me. That loss is still indelibly etched in my mind, and in our Service's collective consciousness.

I am especially mindful of BLACKTHORN when I visit here in the Tampa/St. Petersburg area. And of course every year we gather here as a Service at the BLACKTHORN memorial to remember those we lost. I will attend that ceremony tomorrow.

I've also visited the small memorial to BLACKTHORN at our Command and Operations school. There is a picture there that reminds every student who comes through that training ground for future Commanding Officers and Officers-in-Charge how important it is to learn and remember the lessons of BLACKTHORN. I have talked with the students and instructors there about the impact the loss of BLACKTHORN had on our Service.

Of course most of those I speak with never actually met ENS Sarna. Of the over 38,000 Coast Guardsmen who were serving in 1980, there are only 46 of us left on active duty who were on also active duty at the time of the accident. But they all know his story, and they all honor and respect his service and his sacrifice.

Given that fact, some may ask: "Why do we need this building dedication? What purpose does it really serve?"

There are many answers to this question.

One, of course, is to give substance to the memory of ENS Sarna – the person he was and the sacrifice he made. To coalesce the thoughts and feelings of those who knew him and cement it together with the respect and admiration of all who are here today.

By doing this, all of those who pass the doors of the Frank Sarna Building in the years and decades to come can know and share that memory as well.

They can learn about a young Ensign, less than a year out of the Academy when he found himself on the bridge of the BLACKTHORN during her transit home from the yards.

And who, after that terrible collision that doomed his ship, thought not of himself, but of others. Who, instead of swimming away from the ship and seeking safety for himself, he returned to the overturned hull to help ensure the safety of his Shipmates.

I remember Frank Sarna; he was a first class cadet when I returned to the Coast Guard Academy as a new lieutenant in 1979. I recall going to a memorial service at the Academy chapel after the incident. But I never had the honor of really knowing him personally. But I think that moment in time – that defining moment where he could either swim away to safety or return to the cutter – tells me exactly what type of person he was.

It is moments like that when character is revealed. The character of a person... the character of a unit... the character of a Service.

We all face those moments and those decisions. They are usually not the life and death moments ENS Sarna faced – although, in our Service, many do. They are often much more mundane; as simple as the decision to bend down and pick up a piece of trash on the floor...or correct a mistake instead of just walking by....

But when ENS Sarna faced his moment – on a scale most of us will never face – his decision revealed his character... and his *way*. His way of honoring his commitment to his country, to his Service, *and to his Shipmates*.

If you've been watching television much lately, you know its budget time in D.C. And like all government agencies, we find ourselves in a struggle for those scarce budget dollars. And because many are not completely familiar with all of the things the Coast Guard does and our broad portfolio of missions, I often find myself educating people on just who we are as a Service.

I usually talk in terms of our 11 statutory missions, like Search and Rescue, or Disaster Response, or Aids to Navigation, or Drug Interdiction.... Or speak about things like Prevention and Response or Maritime Governance. And those are all critical things people need to know if they are to understand us as a Service and the real value we provide to the American people.

But if I really want them to understand who we are as a Service...maybe I should just tell them about Frank Sarna....

It is important for those who follow to know the dedication and the sacrifice of ENS Sarna and all those who came before. And that alone is reason enough to dedicate this building in his honor.

Another reason often given is because the *Manners of our Profession* require it.

We are a military service. A profession of arms. We commit ourselves to our nation and to each other, and we often find ourselves in harm's way. We are called to be a part of something larger than ourselves.

When one of us gives all in pursuit of that noble endeavor, the manners of our profession demand that we pay homage to that service.

We often talk of the *Manners of our Profession*. It is right that we do so. One of my guiding principles for our Service is to *Honor Our Profession*. Observing the manners of our profession is part of that.

It is less often, however, that we actually take the time to think about what those manners are – and why we observe them.

Or where we first started to learn and appreciate them.

For me, it began with 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 our Nation – but it gave me the foundation to understand what “*The Manners of our Profession*” really means.

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 this is the way it works. We learn from one another and the actions we take – like this service here today, and so many of the things we do in New London and Cape May. You won’t find these manners written in any publication, or in the books we give our cadets and recruits. They are observed, they are taught, and they are experienced.

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

I’ve been thinking about that a lot this week. And not only because of this dedication today. As you look back at our history, this is a significant week for our Service.

Of course it was 34 years ago tomorrow that we lost ENS Sarna and his shipmates aboard the BLACKTHORN, the largest peacetime loss of life in our Service’s history.

It was 69 years ago this week that we lost the USS SERPENS. The 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.

This is also the week we lost the Coast Guard Cutter ALEXANDER HAMILTOIN and 28 of her crew to a German U-Boat during World War II.

And it was 28 years ago this week that eight of our cutters conducted the initial search and rescue operations following the loss of the Space Shuttle Challenger, and later assisted in the recovery of the wreckage. I was a young Lieutenant Commander then, and like everyone who saw it, the images are indelibly etched in my mind.

So with all of that as a backdrop, and as I was thinking about what I might say at today's dedication ceremony, I was reminded once again of a book that I find particularly appropriate on occasions like this. It's a book that reminds me of that time with my father, and the reason we name buildings after our heroes like Frank Sarna, and have dedications like this. It's a book that confirmed for me what I have always intuitively known.

The book wasn't about building dedications; it was about building a strong family. In one of the chapters, the author discussed a study done several years ago that examined the things a family can do to help children better handle all of the stress that life brings. They wanted to know what would make them the most resilient – what would allow them the best opportunity to cope with all of the trials and hardships life inevitably brings.

The study looked at all the things you would expect – like eating meals together, playing sports together, and attending regular religious services... Many of the same things we all do in our daily lives, and many of the things that go on here at the Sector. Those things we've all been told will make a family strong. And no surprise, the researchers found that those things do indeed matter.

But they also found something totally unexpected – *at least to them*.... They discovered that the more children knew about their family's history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem, the more resilient they were and *the more successfully they performed as a family*. It turned out to be the single biggest predictor.

They found that this awareness of family history – both the great moments and the tragedies – gave the family members what they called a strong “inter-generational self”.

They all knew they belonged to something bigger than themselves. It gave them what they needed to get through the tough times.

And that is another reason we have dedications like this.

Of course this book was talking about our personal families – our sons and daughters, wives and husbands, mothers and fathers. But the same idea applies to our Coast Guard families – and we are *all* children of that family.

In our service we talk of our “*long blue line*” of Coast Guardsmen. It describes those who served before us. It speaks to their accomplishments, their commitment, and their sacrifice.

But it is more than that. It is more than simply looking back to honor those who have served. It is looking *ahead* at the obligation we all have before us. To our country. To our Service. And to each other.

It is a reminder of the responsibility *we all have* to keep faith with those who came before.

It is also a source of comfort; because we can be sure that those who follow *us* will do the same.

ENS Sarna is part of our long, blue line of dedicated Coast Guardsmen who have stepped forward to serve their fellow man and put service before self.

He is missed. But as future generations of Coast Guardsmen walk through these doors and into this building, we can be sure he will always be remembered.

And that is the real mortar that holds this building – and our Service – together. Semper Paratus.

And Thank You.