

"One Picture, Many Heroes"
Remarks delivered by
PEO(T), RADM David J. Venlet
Prepared by Desiree Jones
Marine Corps Birthday Ball
11 November 2006

Thank you. I'd like to add my welcome to the Colonel's – especially to our veterans. I can't think of a better way to spend Veterans' Day than by sharing it with servants of America. Thank you for your contributions and your service.

Now, it's a well-known fact that the Marine Corps Ball is one of the major social events in this area, so it's an honor to be here. I realize I'm one of the few Sailors in the room, and that reminds me of a story I'd like to share. Actually it's General Mike Hagee's story. The Commandant told this story at a flag conference that was also attended by our CNO, Admiral Mike Mullen. They go back a long way, those two ... they know each other from boat school.

Anyway, General Hagee told this story about how, on the eve of his service selection, which, you all know is a pretty big deal, he called up his dad to tell him his decision.

Now Hagee's dad was a Navy man, a chief petty officer. So when Hagee said, "Dad, I want to be a Marine," the response on the other end of the phone was dead silence. Finally, Hagee's Dad spoke up.

He said, "Son, don't you know ... all Marines do is guard gates and harass Sailors?"

Hagee argued back, and said, "Dad, that's not true. They don't guard gates anymore."

Now that got a chuckle at the conference because deep down there's some rivalry truth there. And that's okay because we know – even deeper down – that we're all on the same team and I'm proud to be serving alongside the Marines.

I spent some time with many of you Thursday morning on a three-mile run. After the run, the Colonel read the Commandant's birthday message to the Corps.

One statement that really stood out to me was this: All Marines are making a difference.

His words echo what President Reagan once said, that "some people spend their whole lives wondering if they made a difference. The Marines don't have that problem."

There is no mistaking the warrior spirit of Marines.

| It's the hallmark of your service to the Nation in peace and in war.

I recently saw the movie, "Flags of our Fathers."

As you probably know, the film is based on the book written by the son of John Bradley -- one of six men who, in 1945 -- helped raise an American flag on Japanese soil.

We know about that famous flag-raising because a photojournalist was there with the Marines. He saw what they were about to do -- replace a small American flag with a bigger one.

A flag big enough every Marine on that island could see it.

That photographer, Joe Rosenthal, was unable to serve in uniform because of bad eyesight. Still, he hit the beach with the first waves of men he would later refer to as "my Marines."

He described the situation as impossible. "No man who survived the beach can tell you how he did it. It was like walking through rain and not getting wet."

But five days into Iwo, an impossible situation turned. The combat photographer with bad eyes helped a war-weary nation see its own resolve.

In a fraction of a second, Joe clicked a black-and-white image of five Marines and one Sailor raising America's colors. If the picture turned out the way Joe hoped, the image would lift hearts on the homefront.

As we all know, the picture did turn out.

Two days later, it appeared on the front pages of hometown newspapers and Americans got to see what Joe had seen: the real fight for freedom.

Though the battle was far from over, readers drew confidence from the picture and its banner headlines reading, "Marines Reach Summit of Suribachi" and "Stars and Stripes Raised Over Iwo Fortress." Under those bold headlines, in smaller type, they read the precious cost: "Casualties now total ..."

Yet the columns of news copy reporting the strategy and the tragedy somehow supported this one picture -- a picture of patriots reaching the summit of war and raising hope.

That photo became an icon of World War II. It earned Rosenthal a Pulitzer Prize and the men in it a place in history.

But there were other photos taken.

In the days before and after the flag-raising, Rosenthal had snapped pictures of many Marines.

Pictures of them rushing the beach from their boats; still shots showing them as they carried their wounded; silhouettes of battle-weary Marines kneeling on black sand, praying for strength.

It was said that Joe moved all around that island, as best he could, his camera focused on the dead, the wounded and the living.

Each frame captured only a handful of men because Rosenthal knew this:

One picture never holds all the heroes.

We all know that every Marine on that island was a hero. Every Marine made a difference, both individually and as a collective force.

The chain of Corps history testifies:
Belleau Wood and Iwo Jima were different because of the Marines. Marines made the difference at Inchon, Vietnam Nam and Desert Storm. They were the first to fight in Operation Iraqi Freedom and the Global War on Terror.

Impossible situations have a habit of turning when the Marines get involved. Does that mean every Marine is a flag-raiser? No. And it doesn't mean every act of bravery or courage is captured on film for all to see.

But as long as every Marine can see the flag at the top of the hill, and know he has the support of the one in front and the one behind, the message of the Marine Corps will always be heard. The message that says we will fight our country's battles in the air, on land and sea.

In just a few minutes, the party celebrating the Corps' 231st birthday will be underway and I want all of you to enjoy that.

But before the music and the dancing start, I think we should all take one more look through the lens of Joe's camera and see what he saw: the dead, the wounded and the living.

Let us never forget the sacrifice of our Marines. As we read today's headlines and look back on those hallowed places of valor and victory, remember to also read the smaller type – the precious cost – thousands of names neatly etched in granite and in stone.

Let's be diligent to watch over our wounded, to do everything we can to help them recover. I applaud the efforts of First Lieutenant Denis Oliverio and the work he and others are doing through the Adopt-A-Wounded-Marine Program. That is above and beyond the call.

While attending our wounded, we also need to focus on those still living the fight – our young men and women serving the Corps, many in harm's way. We have an obligation to give them the best tools possible to fight our enemies. And as leaders, we have a responsibility to mentor them and to remind them of the faithful fraternity to which they belong.

Every Marine is making a difference and the difference is making America stronger.

Happy Birthday Corps! Semper Fi.