

Remarks by Donald C. Winter
Secretary of the Navy
233rd Navy Birthday Celebration
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Ladies and gentlemen, I am honored to be here. I am especially pleased because it gives me an opportunity to talk about the subject that is nearest and dearest to my heart—the Sailors in the United States Navy.

As my tenure as Secretary draws to a close, and as I look back on the past three years in the position, I am increasingly moved to reflect on the experience and the lessons that emerge from it.

When this adventure began for me in January 2006, I had already held the Navy and its people in the highest regard, due, in no small part, to my memories of my father and grandfather.

My grandfather served in the Navy in World War I, and my father in World War II, and both of them taught me a certain reverence for the Navy, and for those who serve in uniform, in general.

But since January 2006, I have had the opportunity to learn much more about the people who operate our ships and submarines, who fly our aircraft, and who contribute in countless ways in making the U.S. Navy the greatest navy the world has ever known. I could not have imagined how impressed I would be, time and time again, with the quality of our people.

Let me tell you about some of the things I have seen over the past few years.

I visited the Military Entrance Processing Command in Long Island, New York and met with hundreds of young—and some, not so young—recruits.

I asked the ones entering the Navy why they had chosen to do so, and I was struck by how many had said simply, “I wanted to serve my country.”

I attended a graduation ceremony of Navy recruits from boot camp in Great Lakes, and I saw what their instructors were able to achieve in just nine weeks.

More valuable than the skills they learned was the attitudes and values they acquired—integrity, responsibility, and pride in serving a great Nation.

And, as luck would have it, it would not be the last I saw of some of those graduates, for earlier this month I was on USS NASSAU and the Commanding Officer introduced me to a young Sailor who wanted to speak to me.

It turns out that our paths had already crossed.

He had been one of the graduates at boot camp two years ago, and he just wanted to tell me that he remembered my attendance at his graduation, and he wanted me to know how proud he was to be part of the Navy.

Then his CO proceeded to tell me about how he had just been awarded the Navy Commendation Medal for his outstanding work in providing humanitarian assistance to victims of Hurricane Ike in Galveston.

You cannot imagine the enthusiasm and pride that radiated from the face of that 20-year old Sailor.

Two years ago, I stood on the bridge of USS MASON in the Arabian Gulf as we watched an Iranian patrol ship approach us—or try to—and I talked to our Sailors about why they do what they do. I did not meet a single one who was confused about which side represents freedom in the world.

That same afternoon, I talked to the petty officers on the oil platforms in the North Arabian Gulf, masters at arms whose job it was to protect those platforms, and the world economy.

They were in their early 20's, but what they told me about their understanding of their duties demonstrated wisdom beyond their years.

Last year, I visited a little-known Navy supply center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a facility that rarely makes headlines, but one that our Sailors in harm's way depend on, from Djibouti to Iraq to Afghanistan.

The Sailors at work there took inordinate pride in their jobs—and they told me why.

They knew that those in the Fleet and those on the ground in combat were counting on them.

This was in keeping with other shore installations I visited—from an intelligence center at Whidbey Island to the personnel command in Millington, Tennessee to education and training facilities in Pensacola, Florida and elsewhere around the country.

I saw nothing but the most dedicated, motivated, and professional Sailors working to ensure that the Navy would get the right people, receive the right training, and be provided with the intelligence they needed to accomplish their missions.

Last year, I visited a Provincial Reconstruction Team deep in the Hindu Kush in a remote area of Afghanistan.

That PRT was led by a nuclear power-trained Surface Warfare Officer, and his superb Navy training over the course of his career had given him the tools he needed to succeed brilliantly in this new challenge ashore, helping us win the war against our terrorist enemies.

Last winter, I went out to USS LINCOLN operating off the coast of Southern California and observed flight operations, at night, in gale force winds.

It was simply awesome to watch as the flight team worked together to help a nugget—a rookie pilot—struggle to successfully complete his landings.

From the most junior personnel on the flight deck to the Air Boss, there was a single-minded focus on a common objective, with a spirit of teamwork that was obvious to all.

On his fifth and potentially final attempt, you could feel the tension as everyone on deck was silently pulling for him with all of their hearts.

They all wanted him to succeed, and qualify so that he could stay with the air wing and deploy with the squadron.

He did. An extraordinary moment?

No, just another routine day of extraordinary achievement for these incredible performers.

And most recently, I went aboard USS GEORGE WASHINGTON for her arrival ceremony in Yokosuka, Japan, where she began service as the flagship of the 7th Fleet.

I saw a crew of 3,500 and an air wing of 1,500 of the most enthusiastic, most dedicated Sailors you could ever meet.

They understood their role in deterring aggression, preserving the peace, and engaging with maritime partners across the region—and they considered it a privilege that they would be serving in such a prominent role in our forward-deployed Fleet.

It was also clear that they fully understood and welcomed their role as American

ambassadors to Japan, with old-timers eager to show those serving in Asia for the first time, the things they had learned.

It was another wonderful example of Sailor helping Sailor, one team together on a great adventure overseas.

I have also visited our wounded Sailors and Marines at Bethesda Naval Hospital and elsewhere around the world.

One might think that this would be a somber experience.

Instead, I have found it to be profoundly inspirational, and I have been overwhelmed by the dedication and commitment of both the wounded and the many health care professionals assigned to them.

Where our wounded heroes recover and undergo physical therapy is not what you would expect.

It is a place of many challenging moments, but it is also a place where the encouragement and support from staff, from family members—and from one's fellow patients—is so powerful that you leave feeling nothing but positive energy and admiration for our Nation's best.

There are reminders all around them that they are not alone in their struggles.

From the quilts on the walls to the letters from strangers to the constant stream of visitors, they live in an environment surrounded by love and support.

You will leave with them having inspired you.

And you will walk away with lessons in life about courage and a positive attitude that you will never forget.

Lessons in the importance of community support were also brought home to me in ceremonies honoring fallen heroes—Navy SEALs who had laid down their lives in combat so that their teammates might live.

At one ceremony, held in Cupertino—a quiet community just outside San Francisco—event organizers planned for a crowd of 200.

Over 1000 people showed up.

Veterans and Navy supporters from all over the region came—with many of the veterans proudly wearing Navy ball caps from the ships they served on.

Their explanation was that they were simply grateful for the opportunity to show

their support for those who serve, and that they felt they owed that Navy SEAL and his family their respects.

And they wanted to tell the world that, as Americans, they honor heroism, and that they felt honored to participate.

Lastly, I have also seen first-hand the role that Navy families play in proudly supporting our Sailors.

It is remarkable how quickly Navy families come together and demonstrate strong solidarity at home for their loved ones, especially in times of crisis.

That spirit of solidarity is particularly evident among families supporting those who are routinely put in harm's way, such as the special operations and Explosive Ordnance Disposal communities.

They all fear the same phone call in the middle of the night, and they all share in the indescribable joy that attends those homecomings—with families united once again, immense pride in celebrating the completion of another challenging mission, and deep gratitude towards those who were with them in spirit during many lonely days.

Such scenes reveal to all that the strength of the Navy lies not only in the Sailors, but in the love and support of their families as well.

All this and more is what I have seen of our Navy these past three years, and now you will better understand why I have been saying that the real secret of our Navy is not the weapons or the technology at our disposal, but the highly trained, motivated, and professional Sailors who make our Navy the envy of the world.

For 233 years, the U.S. Navy has witnessed many changes—in missions, in geopolitics, and in technology.

But in all that time, the one thing that has not changed is the importance of quality people, for it is the Sailors who make it all happen, and who make the real difference in a Navy's effectiveness.

It should go without saying that the same could be said for our Corps of Marines.

I salute them all, and I wish every one of them, and all of you, best wishes for continued success.

Thank you, and may God continue to bless America and the United States Navy.