

Remarks by the Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
U.S. Marine Corps Passage of Command Ceremony
Marine Corps Barracks Washington, Washington, D.C.
Date: Thursday, September 24, 2015

Good morning, and welcome to Marine Barracks Washington.

This is my third passage of command for the Commandant of the Marine Corps. Normally, it's a bittersweet occasion – a day to honor the contributions of one commandant whose service in uniform comes to an end, while welcoming a successor eager to carry the torch and lead the Corps into the future. Today, though, is unique and purely celebratory in that we won't be saying goodbye to General Dunford. Instead, he moves from the highest uniformed Marine Corps office to the nation's highest military post as our next chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

Although his tenure as the 36th Commandant was brief, it was only brief in time. It was, and it will remain, wide-reaching, significant and enduring. Our nation continues to face new tests emerging constantly, and from day one General Joe Dunford moved to meet these tests as set forth in his planning guidance: innovate, adapt, win.

He guided the Marine Corps during its final drawdown in Afghanistan. He maintained the Marine Corps as the most formidable expeditionary fighting force that has ever existed. And he kept it ready to respond to any crisis throughout the globe. All this in spite of budgets under pressure and in flux, with the threat of sequestration and the impact of continuing resolutions.

He advanced our partnerships in the Pacific by increasing the Marine Rotational Force in Australia, and directing the force laydown requirements in Guam and Japan. Under General Dunford's leadership, special-purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Forces assisted the State Department in the Central African Republic, Sudan and Yemen; responded to the Ebola crisis in West Africa; and provided critical support to combat operations against ISIS in the Levant. Marine Expeditionary Units conducted humanitarian assistance after the devastating effects of the earthquake in Nepal. And a Marine aviation community brought to initial operating capability the F-35 Bravo, the world's premier strike fighter.

Finally, the commandant worked jointly with his fellow sea services – the Navy and the Coast Guard. He led the warfighter talks and helped produce a cooperative strategy for 21st-Century Seapower. And he ensured the Marine Corps played its role in providing that most critical pillar of our nation's defense, the one that the Navy and Marine Corps uniquely provide: presence around the globe, around the clock.

As he assumes the role of chairman tomorrow, Fighting Joe – as he is affectionately known by Marines, not so affectionately by our adversaries – he takes with him an extraordinary

record as a United States Marine. The words “combat” and “command” reverberate throughout his resume. But two other words spring out. One is “scholar” – Master’s degree from Georgetown, Tufts and Webster distinguish him. This rare combination of thought and action combine in the word he is most known for: “leader.”

These characteristics have defined him throughout his career. As a superior described then-Colonel Dunford, “No individual commanded more respect, displayed better judgment, demonstrated more valor in a command billet, or impacted our operations more than Joe Dunford.”

It is these attributes that have made Joe Dunford such a valued Commandant and such a valued partner to me. But more, it’s the person, it’s the character of Joe Dunford that I have found so compelling. It is the knowledge that I would receive absolutely candid and straightforward advice, and the certainty that, whatever the decision, its execution would be flawless and fast.

Secretary Carter, I know you and the President saw these same things that I have been witness – as privileged to witness so closely, and that they will serve you and our country so well during his term as chairman.

Now, on a far more serious note, he’s also a Red Sox fan.

Among the many things that I share with Generals Dunford and Neller is our eagerness to spend time visiting Marines and Sailors anywhere, everywhere around the globe. And both those generals, in every visit, always remind Marines to thank their families for all that they do and all that is asked of them. So today, General Dunford and General Neller, I want to do now what you have asked so many Marines to do: I want to thank Ellyn Dunford and Darcy Neller for all they have done and all that has been asked of them during decades of service to America.

Ellyn, your contributions were just read out: the involvement in the Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society, Blue and Gold Families, Wounded Warriors, and a myriad of others. And those are testament to the fact that keeping faith with Marines is an enduring commitment. You have stressed mentorship, volunteerism, and leadership while visiting Marine families around the world. And you’ve hosted so many families here in Washington at the home of the Commandant. Your family is about to grow. It’s going to encompass the entire joint force, and every Sailor, Soldier, Airman and Marine will benefit from your knowledge and your kindness.

Darcy, I know that you will put your own very personal touch in maintaining the continuity of support for our Marines and their families.

And I want to do what Secretary Carter did and thank your children: Joseph, Patrick, Kathleen Dunford; Kurt, Brett, Claire Neller. You have lent our nation your fathers, and that nation is grateful. We’re so thankful that you have said to them: continue to serve. It won’t be easy. It never has been. But with your support, they will make our armed forces and our nation better.

Your fathers are an example of all that is great about this country, a place that values the talents and the efforts of every individual. So to each of you – and to Claire’s son, Connor, who I understand, as Secretary Carter said, is the real center of General Neller’s universe – share the pride in them that we all have, you in a much more profound way.

As I said at the beginning, we are fortunate today to celebrate the advancement of not just one, but two great Marine Corps generals. General Neller, you are assuming one of the most storied posts in this or any military. I have said that the order of precedence is Secretary of the Navy, Secretary of Defense, President, God, Commandant. (Laughter.) That’s for Marines. (Laughter.)

And everything in your 40-year exemplary career as a Marine has prepared you for today and for the next years that come. A career infantry officer, earned reputation for being no-nonsense and direct. And like his predecessor, a career defined by command and by combat. Whether he was commanding a Marine Security Force company or the 3rd Marine Division, he has led with conviction and has earned the respect of every Marine under his charge.

And also like his predecessor, General Neller is a thinker. Despite being a diehard Michigan State fan, he earned his Bachelor’s at the University of Virginia to please his mom, or so the story goes. He has a Master’s degree from Pepperdine, and he served as president of Marine Corps University.

With the security situation around the globe, with the situation here in Washington, Commandant Neller will have his hands full. But, like Commandant Dunford, I am absolutely certain that he will rise to the challenges, see them as opportunities, and seize his time to assure that the Marine Corps remains the most effective expeditionary fighting force the world has ever known.

General Neller said recently in a document that “We must rapidly analyze the mission, develop courses of action, and implement them. Time and money will always be in short supply. Therefore, we cannot afford to go anywhere or do anything without adequately considering the options. If we want to win, we can’t just show up.” The Marines have never just shown up, and they’re not going to start now. Today, as ever, when the going is the toughest, we will say, as we have always said, send in the Marines.

So two Marines, both forged in the searing crucible of combat; both devoted to their country, their Corps, their families, their Marines. Both have risen to the ultimate post in the United States Marine Corps. To one, Bob and Darcy Neller and your family, we say welcome aboard. To the other, Joe and Ellen Dunford and your family, we say great good fortune in your new incredibly crucial role.

And to both, we say you have remained steadfastly true to the Marine motto: Semper Fidelis.