Admiral John M. Richardson, Chief of Naval Operations
Charleston Sub Ball Remarks
13 April 2019

Admiral Richardson: I’ve got to tell you, it’s an absolute thrill to be with you this evening. It is so much fun to be back in Charleston, South Carolina. I don’t know if you know this, but my dad was a submariner. And he was stationed down here, and we lived on the Naval Weapons Station. I went to Hal Hall, and I went to Goose Creek High School. So I was a Gator for two years. Go Gators.

Also, any day that I can get out of Washington is a fantastic day. So if you come down here and just be in Charleston, and experience the hospitality, it’s just absolutely fantastic. And it’s also just a special treat to be able to spend some time, again, with my friend Admiral Malcolm Fages. If you could stand up and just be recognized, please. [Applause]. These folks are both submarine heroes and mentors of mine, so it’s just amazing to be back in their company.

In fact one of the themes that I want to strike with you all this evening; who is here at a Submarine Birthday Ball for the very first time? Let’s give them a round of applause. I think for those coming in here for the first time, what you will find over your career is that the submarine community, the submarine force is formed and brought close together by a set of very, very strong binding energy, family bonds that bring us together. It is really unique. It’s the family I grew up in. So it’s wonderful to be back amongst the family that raised me.

And especially to be back here in Charleston, as I said, a city that has really deep connections to the submarine force. In many ways, in fact, it can be considered the cradle of the submarine force. We’ve got to appreciate just the meaning of being here in this place on Lockwood Boulevard. Named after Admiral Lockwood who led the submarine force during World War II. He was a luminary. I’ll talk a little bit about him more later on in my speech.

But if you think about just the city of Charleston and the role that it played throughout our submarine force, what I’m going to do is try and describe a little bit of the history of the submarine force in terms of family generations. So well strike this family theme.
I would say that the first generation of submariners were really the generation of pioneers and their job was really to design and build a submarine that could reliably take people, sink them, come back to the surface, reliably. And that was no small feat. It took us a long time to get that right. And as you saw, we lost some submarines as we were going through this experimental pioneer phase. And it was here in Charleston that the very first submarine that sank an enemy ship was here. It was the Confederate state ship Hunley that sank a Union blockade ship Housatonic in 1864. They rammed a torpedo with 135 pounds of explosives into the bottom of that ship, and blew a hole in that ship large enough to sink it. It was super primitive. But it worked.

Unfortunately, it worked so well it sank the Hunley too. A wave came over and the ship was lost. And recently it’s been raised. I think in the year 2000 they raised the Hunley and it’s here on display in Charleston.

But the pioneers continued developing, they continued refining their designs, continued building more and more capable submarines that were more and more reliable. And they kept improving their range, and they kept improving their speed. They kept improving their payload. And it finally all came together in the early 1940s with the dawn of the fleet boat. This was finally a boat that could go forward a long way and carry a number of weapons. It could submerge and surface, it had some real speed, and this was a weapon system. Finally. And just in time. Because just as the pioneer generation was finishing their work, they handed off this fleet boat to the next generation which was our warfighting generation. We have a representative of the warfighting generation here, our World War II submariner, Master Chief stand up and give him a nice round of applause. [Applause].

December 7, 1941 changed everything for the United States. It changed everything for the United States Navy. And we realized that as a Navy and a nation that despite working very hard in the inter-war period to prepare for this conflict, because we could see it coming, we had a lot of lessons still to learn in combat. And after Pearl Harbor the nation and especially the Navy and especially the Pacific Fleet had reeled to recover from the surprise attack in Pearl Harbor.

But I’ll tell you what, there was no time out. You couldn’t stop the clock. We just had to get back at it. We had to continue. Take the fight back to the enemy. And when that happened, the
Submarine force was first. On that day, December 7th, the order came down, that very same day for the submarine force to execute unrestricted submarine warfare against the Empire of Japan. Many radiomen who received that message and submarine CO’s who were reading that message sat around and honestly didn’t know the first thing, what to do. In the interim period we had not prepared ourselves to execute unrestricted submarine warfare. We had trained ourselves to be scouts, we were going to be out there mostly as a reconnaissance force and now this great responsibility fell on the submarine force and we were unprepared. We just have to admit that.

It didn’t matter, though. It didn’t matter how well we prepared because we had to get back into it. And on 11 December, only 4 days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the USS Gudgeon in company with the Plunger sailed from Pearl Harbor on America’s first submarine offensive patrol of World War II. It didn’t matter that they were unprepared. It didn’t matter that they didn’t exactly understand their orders. We had to get going, and they did.

When that submarine returned from that first patrol 51 days later, the Gudgeon had contributed several important first’s in terms of submarine warfare. She was the first American submarine to patrol along the Japanese coast itself, sailing next to Kyushu in the home islands. And on 27 January 1942, the USS Gudgeon became the first U.S. submarine to sink an enemy warship in World War II.

Now I mention that we’re gathered here on Lockwood Boulevard, named in honor of the magnificent leader of the submarine force of the Pacific during the heaviest at-sea fighting in World War II. Admiral Lockwood was one of a kind. One of a kind. He was tough, he was very tough. And he was smart. But he was humble. In fact he asked three times, three times he asked Admiral Nimitz to go and be able to ride one of his submarines forward to get a sense of what his CO’s were experiencing. He asked three times and Admiral Nimitz three times said no way in hell are you going out there to ride it. I’ll tell you why. And you only have to visit Admiral Lockwood’s grave. It’s out there in San Francisco at the Golden Gate National Cemetery and it looks out over the Pacific. Has anybody ever seen that cemetery? It’s a national cemetery. It’s remarkable. And you go to Admiral Lockwood’s grave. Here’s the man who led the submarine force through World War II and it’s a simple headstone, undistinguishable from the rest of the sailors there, the thousands of graves that are there at that national cemetery.
Right alongside Admiral Lockwood is Admiral Nimitz, Admiral Spruance, Admiral Turner. They fought together and they wanted to rest together with all of their shipmates who had fought in that war in this national cemetery. Undistinguishable from everybody else who had served.

Admiral Nimitz who led the fleet into World War II and who was also a submarine officer, who had commanded submarines had this to say about Admiral Lockwood. “We have many fine submarine captains, but only one Lockwood.” That’s pretty high praise coming from somebody like Admiral Nimitz.

Back to this generation of warfighters that Admiral Nimitz and Admiral Lockwood led. As you saw from the Tolling of the Boat Ceremony, that success came at a tremendous cost. That cost was because we had been too narrow in our thinking as we prepared the force for war. We didn’t think about commerce rating and surface attack. We didn’t think about driving submarines into harbors and attacking. We didn’t even think to test the weapons out. They weren’t working and we didn’t know that until after the war started. This was massive failure of leadership on the operational and tactical and strategic levels, and it took us almost three years, about two and a half years, to sort all that out; troubleshooting through the system when there were many problems. We had to create an entire new generation of commanding officers who were not too timid to take the fight, close the enemy and shoot. We had to get new weapons, ones that worked. Ones that exploded when they hit their target. We had to define and develop new tactics. We were doing all of this in combat under fire.

But as you heard from the Master Chief, once we got our sea legs it was a tremendous effect. About six percent of the warships sank over half of the Japanese tonnage in the war and brought the war to a close. The enemy stopped fighting.

Third generation picked up right after that. Nuclear power. Just like December 7th changed everything, nuclear power changed everything. Now, for the first time, a submarine could literally stay underwater essentially forever. Limited only by food. We were true denizens of the deep at that point. We were underwater and we were staying underwater.

This gave rise to an entire new generation of science and research, oceanography and acoustics because if we were going to live in the ocean we better understand it. And we do everything by sound, so we better understand that. Inertial navigation. You
can’t take a fix when you’re submerged. Satellite navigation because there are no navigation aids to do a visual fix out in the middle of the ocean. Global communications. And then for our SSBNs, our missile submarines, missile technology, missile navigation, missile kinetics. The whole nine yards came together. It gave rise to a brand new set of tactics. Tactics that in many ways we still use today. Founded on remaining submerged undetected, stealthy, and exploiting detectable aspects of the enemy. Homing long-range torpedoes. Then of course the ballistic missiles that continue to guarantee that we will never come under nuclear attack by comprising in the most reliable and survivable way of the strategic deterrent.

By doing all of these things we brought the Cold War to an end. The enemy stopped. We brought the Soviet Union to its knees. And advances like the Los Angeles Class submarines which many of you will go and serve on, the Sea Wolf Class submarines which some of you will go and serve on, were key elements to bringing that war to a relatively peaceful end. This is the submarine force that Admiral Rickover built from the ground up.

And the Cold War came to an end, and it gave rise to the fourth generation. Fourth generation, look to your left and look to your right. That is you. Fourth generation, a generation of innovators.

I spoke yesterday at the graduation of the Nuclear Power School. One hundred officers or so, about 200 or so enlisted. And it was clear, the energy in that group. They are fueled by new technologies changing ever faster, riding that exponential curve to defined by Moore’s Law. And innovation is a critical characteristic. It’s been a hallmark of our submarine family since the very beginning, since the pioneers had to innovate and build a ship that could go down and come back up; since the warriors had to innovate and design new tactics; and since the Cold War generation had to innovate to stay submerged and bring that war to an end without a shot.

Learning every day. But I’ll tell you what, while technology may define many parts of our success, at the end of the day this is a family of people. Warfare is a human contest. This is minds against minds, teams against teams.

The reason I like that Tolling of the Boats video so much is that if you notice, it showed people. You go back to the ’20s and ’30s and ’40s and ’50s and the thing that strikes me is that those people look a lot like us. They’re young. They had their
whole lives ahead of them. And what were they doing? In many of those photos they were at Submarine Birthday Balls. They were cutting cakes. They were commissioning ships. They were giving awards. They looked like us. It’s people that gets this done. Nowhere more than in undersea warfare. We do everything, we fight and we win in teams. So we need to build our teammates up. We need to have our teammates’ backs. Nobody will beat us and we will never quit, and we will all be accountable for our team’s performance.

But you will all go forward, and before you know it, if you’re not leading already you’ll be leading very soon, and you’ll be leaders that know your business. You’ll be experts. You’ll be leaders of strong character, of integrity and initiative, and toughness and accountability. And you will be leaders who are tightly connected like a good, healthy family is connected. You’ll be connected professionally, sharing lessons learned, and you’ll be connected personally so that when one of you has a tough day, you’ll reach out to one another and make sure you support that person as much as possible.

So we should celebrate our history tonight for sure, and be mindful of what we learned from our history. I’ve got to say as I look forward, I’m a little bit nervous. We should all be nervous as we execute this inter-war period. What can we learn from the last one?

My wife Dana and I have been in this business for a long time. My first Sub Ball was back in 1984, it was out at Mare Island, California. When you were out in California at that time, in 1984, it was not uncommon that Admiral O’Kane would show up at your sub ball. Our Medal of Honor winner, sank more tonnage than anybody else in World War II. He retired out at Petaluma, California, just up the road from Mare Island. He would show up. I wonder if he was here today what Admiral O’Kane would think of this generation and this submarine force, if he were here?

Let me ask, if I could, all of the active duty dolphin wearing sailors to stand, and I’d ask their spouses to stand along with them. Please stand. I’ll tell you what. I think that if Admiral O’Kane were here to take a look at this crowd he wouldn’t take anything for granted. When I was in command of USS Honolulu we had a chance to bring submarine vets just like the Master Chief from World War II, and we thought we were doing things pretty good on Honolulu. My XO, Dennis White, he was running a pretty tight ship. He’s here tonight. Dennis and Mara. But I’ll tell you, this crusty old guy from World War II came down and he said
hey, if you just walk through, and it was like nothing had passed and he almost transported himself back in time. He said, you know what? That would burn. That would come loose. That would fly away. That would burn. He hadn’t lost a step. He was walking that ship like the submarine warrior that he was.

So I think Admiral O’Kane would be the same. He wouldn’t take anything for granted, and I’m not taking anything for granted either, and neither should any of you.

I would recommend to you a couple of books. One is called The Bravest Man. It’s a biography of Admiral O’Kane, but it’s really a story of the submarine force in World War II. The second one is written by a fellow submarine officer. It’s called Execute Against Japan, and it talks about how we prepared for the 2nd World War and the goods and the bads of that preparation.

I think Admiral O’Kane would be confident, he would be guardedly confident that this team you see standing right now would do what they needed to do. I’m confident in you. I know that you will do what you need to do.

We won’t know when the call comes, but I do know that just like the USS Gudgeon, commissioned in 1941, who had no idea what they would be called to do on December 11th, I can assure you that when that call comes this team that is standing before us now will be sent first into that fight. And I’ll tell you what, we will send you fast and we will send you deep and you will have to do your job because if you don’t, we lose. And this time we don’t have two and a half to three years to learn how to do it. We don’t have time to do it on the fly. But we’ll rely on our training, we’ll rely on our grit, our determination, and our toughness. And most importantly, we’ll rely on each other and you’ll go into the fight with full torpedo rooms and you will come back with empty torpedo rooms. And in your wake you will leave devastation, fire and fear. You will haunt the worst nightmares of our enemy. And in doing so, like every time before, that enemy will stop fighting and you will bring your teams back to their families, to our families, stronger and better than when you left them because that is our family tradition. And this is who we are. [Applause].

So as I wrap up this talk I just have one last favor to ask of you. It’s a night for celebration. We’re going to have a great dinner. I know I’m the only one standing between you and a meal. I only have about 20 or 30 more minutes to go. [Laughter]. But I’ll tell you what, and then we’re going to do some dancing, I
hope. Is that in the cards? Absolutely. But at some point the evening will come to an end and we’ll safely go back to our rooms, our homes, and we’ll lie down and I’d ask you that before your head hits the pillow, tonight especially, take a moment. Take a moment to say a good prayer for all of those submariners who gave everything that you saw in that Tolling of the Boats. Say a quick prayer for all the submariners and indeed all the Sailors and Soldiers and Airmen and Marines and Coast Guardsmen who are deployed around the world as we celebrate tonight. Some of them in very dangerous places. Say a prayer for all of them, that as we celebrate we can continue to guard this very fragile thing that we call freedom.

Thank you all very much.

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