

Prepared Remarks by the Honorable Richard V. Spencer
Secretary of the Navy
242nd USMC Birthday Ball
Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center, National Harbor, MD
04 November 2017

Thank you for the introduction Commandant.

I appreciate the opportunity to join all of you here tonight. It was 37 years ago in 1980 that I celebrated my last Marine Corps birthday as an active duty Marine –it’s an honor to celebrate with Marines once again. In those 37 years, I have learned a great deal in the world of business and about life in general. But in that time, nothing – absolutely nothing – has replaced or surpassed what I learned in the Corps.

The most frequently asked question that follows a review of my biography is who or what had the greatest impact on my business career. I can say without a doubt – the United States Marine Corps.

One lesson the Marine Corps taught me – and I have always carried with me – is that the right solution is usually the hardest to accomplish, whether that be: physically – emotionally – or ethically. But Marines don’t shrink from the trial – they get after the hard solutions. We do this because of the character of the Corps – and because of our core values: Honor – Courage – Commitment. Aligned together these three values have been my compass as I navigated to where I stand today.

Honor – Courage – Commitment. These are integral traits of every true Marine which enables them to tackle any situation and come out the other side stronger; physically – emotionally – ethically.

Situations like the ones Marines faced on Iwo Jima. In 1945 – one-hundred and seventy years after the Corps was founded – the Secretary of the Navy at the time, James Forrestal said:

“The raising of that flag on Suribachi means a Marine Corps for the next 500 years.”

At the risk of doing math in public, that means we’ve got another 428 years to go. But if we’re going to ensure that the Marine Corps remains the finest group of warfighters the world has ever known for that long – we need to be constantly assessing our strategy in order to ascertain our relevance. We must continually improve our operational contribution to National security in order to prove our value to the Nation.

We can’t simply be satisfied with basking in the successes of our past – instead, we must measure ourselves against them and honor the legacy given to us.

It’s Marines like Miguel Keith that built that legacy. Keith was born in San Antonio, Texas but ended up in Omaha, Nebraska before enlisting in the Marine Corps at age 17. After completing recruit training at MCRD San Diego he would go on to Camp Pendleton for individual combat training. He deployed with his platoon to the Far East in November of 1969. In May of 1970 at the age of just 18, Lance Corporal Keith sacrificed his life in Vietnam.

Faced with a heavy ground attack – and his platoon greatly outnumbered – he demonstrated the epitome of courage and warrior spirit. When five enemy soldiers approached his platoon’s command post he rushed the enemy – he advanced. After thwarting the attack a grenade detonated next to the young Marine. He fought pain and weakness from loss of blood, and braved concentrated hostile fire – charging against 25 enemy soldiers.

His charge and well-placed fire eliminated four of the enemy soldiers and caused the rest to flee. It was during this valiant effort that he was mortally wounded. For his conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity, Lance Corporal Keith was posthumously presented with the Medal of Honor.

It’s Marines of incredible character like Miguel Keith that we must measure ourselves against every day. It certainly is a tall order, but Lance Corporal Keith’s courage and valor should inspire us – to aspire to be worthy of the legacy he, and many like him, created for our beloved Corps.

And to help us remember – and to honor – Marines of exceptional character, I am honored that the first ship I name as Secretary of the Navy is going to be USNS Miguel Keith.

Our next Expeditionary Mobile Base will carry his name and be a tangible reminder to every American that Marines honor their legacy – that Marines carry the warrior spirit – and that the United States Marine Corps will not back down in the face of any adversity. Our Corps advances forward with Honor – with Courage – and with Commitment.

I challenge everyone here tonight to continue to carry those qualities out into the Corps and ingrain them into every Marine.

We must ensure that the equity value of the Corps remains strong on our watch. It is our responsibility – our most demanding responsibility.

From what I can tell the spirit, honor and tradition of the Marine Corps is alive and well here tonight – and that’s what will carry our beloved Corps well beyond Secretary Forrestal’s prediction.

Tonight let me close with: Happy Birthday Marines. Here’s to our 242nd birthday– and here’s to bringing the fight tonight to any clime or place. Marines and guests please raise a toast and think about your response. God Bless the United States of America and tonight Lord, pause in your conversations with Mattis, Dunford and Kelly – and please God bless the United States Marine Corps. Semper Fi.