**Navy 241 Birthday Speech**

The U. S. Navy has been the cornerstone of American security and prosperity for almost two and a half centuries. Since our auspicious entrance onto the world stage in 1775, we have served and sacrificed in all the world’s oceans and on each of the seven continents. Our first ships of the Continental Fleet grappled fearlessly with Great Britain’s premier fighting vessels, we relentlessly patrolled the Barbary Coast to protect Mediterranean commerce, our ironclads clashed bitterly at Hampton Roads and our aircraft carriers delivered sweeping victories at Coral Sea and Midway in World War II. Each generation of sailors has answered the call … and many of them now rest for all eternity in the seas where they fought and died. Our tradition is one of selflessness and commitment. It is a rich and proud one … and it continues to this day.

Historians will forever write about the epic battles, the courageous leaders and the grand strategies upon which the fates of nations rise or fall. But the real students of our storied past, and those of us who wear the uniform today, know perfectly well that the centerpiece of our Navy’s success is and has always been the American Sailor … who, across the decades and centuries, has served to the far reaches of the globe … protecting our country, advancing our interests, supporting our allies, delivering aid to peoples in crisis, and vigilantly guarding the sea lanes that are so vital to our national economy.

From the earliest days of our nation’s history, our Sailors have made the U. S. Navy a force to be reckoned with. Their perseverance and fighting spirit have repeatedly enabled us to prevail in the direst of circumstances and against the most daunting of odds. In keeping with that tradition … on this, our 241st birthday as a service, we stand ready to defeat any enemy who challenges our country, our fundamental freedoms … and our way of life.

(Pause)

We can compare and measure advances in naval technology without difficulty — the speed, survivability, and firepower of ships of the different nations. We cannot so easily and precisely compare the hearts and characters of their individual Sailors. But one thing is certain … the American Sailor is an inimitable force of nature. And it’s equally certain that life in America’s seagoing military is not for everyone. The Navy’s unique appeal is limited to those of a certain idealistic and even romantic disposition … a temperament that was most accurately captured in Richard Henry Dana’s classic book “Two Years Before the Mast.” He said:

*“There is a witchery in the sea, its songs and stories, and in the mere sight of a ship, and the sailor’s dress, especially to a young mind, which has done more to man navies, and fill merchantmen, than all the press-gangs of Europe. I have known a young man with such a passion for the sea, that the very creaking of a block stirred up his imagination so that he could hardly keep his feet on dry ground.”*

Dana wrote that passage in 1836, but the spirit of his words remains valid to this day. Our Sailors, our history, and our culture are what I want to talk about this evening.

(Pause)

I’ve often wondered what makes the American Sailor the most successful to ever cruise the oceans of this world. After giving the matter a fair amount of study, I’ve narrowed the answer to three distinct qualities. Throughout history it’s been the US Navy Sailor’s tough, bold, and ready character that has enabled him or her to endure, and ultimately to fight and win. These three traits have served us particularly well in battle. Now it’s paramount that we leverage them in new ways to make our own mark on history in a rapidly changing world. I’d like to offer just a little amplification on these three defining characteristics which have been so fundamental to the quality of our Service.

(Pause)

Life afloat can be unforgiving. Two hundred plus years of arduous operations at sea have produced a culture of toughness that has equipped the American Sailor to succeed in any environment. This culture, combined with the intrinsically American traits of loyalty and selflessness, engenders a spirit that separates us distinctively from the other navies of the world. It is the spirit that animated Gunner’s Mate Paul Carr of the USS SAMUEL B. ROBERTS, who, during the Battle of Leyte Gulf, fired 324 five-inch rounds before being pulled mortally wounded from his mount—clutching the last unfired round from the magazine in his arms.

It is also the spirit that drove a young Lt. j. g. John F. Kennedy to swim 3.5 miles to an uninhabited island while clinging to a severely burned shipmate after his PT boat was rammed by a Japanese destroyer. The future president then swam solo into enemy territory to signal for recovery assistance despite his own severe injuries. The perseverance and raw courage of Paul Carr and Jack Kennedy illustrate the power of American will and determination.

Toughness has been an essential element of our Navy during wartime. That same level of grit and resolve must continue to drive us, to infuse our sailors with the mental stamina to persist and thrive through adversity, to embrace problems as challenges and stimulate creative thinking that includes a willingness to question traditional paradigms. The requirement for physical toughness remains constant, but an elevated level of mental toughness and focus will enable us to manage the unprecedented advancements in technology and information within the framework of modern warfare. Toughness in the most basic sense may be a timeless concept, but its implications and impact have expanded significantly in today’s dynamic global environment.

(Pause)

John Paul Jones defined boldness within the Naval context through these words:

*“I wish to have no connection with any ship that does not sail fast, for I intend to go in harm’s way.”*

This was from a man who practiced what he preached. An old idiom tells us that fortune favors the bold, and fortune certainly favored John Paul Jones. The engagement of his beloved *Bon Homme Richard* with *HMS Serapis* off Flamborough Head is the stuff of which legends are made. Now considered the father of our Navy, Jones holds a permanent, well-deserved seat of honor in our pantheon of heroes. John Paul Jones’ boldness was born of the heart. But there are times when it is the product of necessity.

In late May of 1942 a severely damaged USS Yorktown limped into Pearl Harbor after a grueling engagement at the Battle of Coral Sea. The Fleet Commander, Admiral Chester Nimitz, was forced to take an unprecedented action. Despite estimates of weeks to make the ship seaworthy, he gave the maintenance community just 48 hours to effect repairs. He then sent the still crippled Yorktown back to sea to intercept a rapidly approaching Japanese force near Midway Island. Nimitz’s bold decision was ultimately the deciding factor in the outcome of the battle. Four enemy carriers were sunk, making Midway the most decisive victory in our Navy’s history. But we did lose one of our own … and that was USS Yorktown.

That same spirit of boldness must continue to inspire us. As our heavily armed and well-equipped geopolitical rivals expand their reach into new oceans, it is incumbent on sailors of all ranks to exhibit the courage that drove the decisions of John Paul Jones and Chester Nimitz. Our sailors must not only be ready to confront our enemies, they must be willing to challenge the status quo and adopt new approaches to learning and problem resolution. And Naval leadership must be sufficiently bold to trust, encourage and empower them as they do so.

(Pause)

Readiness. From the earliest days of sail to the rescue of MV Maersk Alabama, this Navy has been organizationally ready to do its job … effectively delivering combat power on minimal notice. But the American sailor must be individually ready as well. Training will forever be the lynchpin to readiness … it is how we occupy the majority of our time, and we excel at it. Sailors report to our ships armed with the requisite knowledge to operate complex gear and process large volumes of information. Intensive on the job training further enhances their skills. But training alone will not carry us all the way to victory. The warrior spirit is the attribute that inspires us – mentally and temperamentally – to make the hard fight in defense of this nation … regardless of the odds against us. The American sailor must be ready … ready to fight.

Onboard USS West Virginia on the morning of December 7, 1941, after the death of the gun crew, Petty Officer Dorie Miller manned a .50 caliber mount despite having no training whatsoever on that weapon. But as a warrior, he was ready to fight back … and he did so effectively, shooting down at least four attacking aircraft before abandoning ship. The first African-American to be awarded the Navy Cross, he was still ready to fight when he was killed in action in the Battle of Makin Island less than two years later.

In 2005, in the mountains of Afghanistan Lt. Mike Murphy and his highly trained team of Navy Seals engaged an overwhelming contingent of Taliban fighters. At the most desperate stage of the battle, Lt. Murphy moved away from cover and into the open to call for help on his satellite phone. In so doing, he sacrificed himself in the hopes of saving his team. His training sustained him, but it was his warrior ethic that sent him into that clearing in the final minutes of his life.

These examples show us a variant of readiness that cannot be calculated in a mathematical equation … they illustrate the power of the human spirit and the noblest qualities of the human heart. Petty Officer Miller and Lt. Murphy were focused on the mission and the defense of their units above and beyond any consideration for their own well-being. Their training was important, but it was the strength of their convictions and willingness to make the great sacrifice that motivated them to perform acts of unparalleled heroism.

(Pause)

Ours is a nation of innovators, never satisfied with the status quo. Consistent with this premise, American Sailor initiative has made the U.S. Navy the greatest maritime power ever, always pushing physical and mental boundaries to their limits and beyond. We have created warfighting advantages in nuclear, carrier aviation, and cyber warfare – areas and disciplines undreamed of not so long ago. Those advances must and will be augmented by an institutionalized culture of ingenuity that fosters innovation, creativity and unfettered feedback. This resourcefulness, this ability to innovate on the fly in the face of adversity … these are the common threads that pervade our triad of defining characteristics.

Despite the expanding geopolitical challenges, we face the future with confidence. That’s because it is the American Sailor – Tough, Bold and Ready – who remains the heart of our current success and eternally stands tall as the key to maintaining our competitive maritime advantage.