

Remarks of
The Commandant of the Marine Corps
Armed Services YMCA Gala
Honoring
“Angels on the Battlefield”

March 7, 2007
Ronald Reagan Building
Washington, D.C.

Distinguished guests, that’s really all of you, especially my boss, the Secretary of the Navy, and ladies and gentlemen, it’s great to be with you this evening, it really is. I am keenly aware that I am basically what stands between you and dinner. So, as she’s wont to do, my wife said, “hurry along through your remarks.” And I’ll do that.

But I first have to salute what obviously we both consider is just a tremendous organization, and that is the Armed Services YMCA. I look on you folks as linebackers and I think you’ve got that kind of mentality. You fill a hole if it’s within the system, and you are able to go outside if you have to get on it yourselves. And we have seen that time and again out West, and really all over the country in your armed services. I think I speak for all; we’re very appreciative of that.

I will confide in you that “Angels of the Battlefield” means something just a little different to me. In Iraq, those Marines and Sailors who went forward and gave the ultimate sacrifice, who were killed in action, we called “angels.” It was in our formal traffic: “angels times one,” “angels times two” on a bad day. And we call those helicopters that came in, normally about 2300 at night in Fallujah and in other places, the “angel flights,” because they were starting that long trip home for those great young men, and in some cases women, to be rejoined with their families. I continue to think of them as angels, and I think you’ll understand if I tell you that.

My belief is that what we’re talking about is more along the lines of “Gunga Dins” — both literally and figuratively speaking, because they’re where the fire is hottest. They are there with the bullets dancing around them, they’re there to give a smile or hold a hand, maybe a cup of water and to patch people up and get them headed off. I think that the old Kipling poem pays tremendous tribute to our corpsmen, our medics, our air force crash and rescue medics as well, and the job that they do.

So, if you look at the citations, down through history really of those people, there are a couple of constants, a couple of things that leap out at you. First, of course, are aggressive Marines or soldiers, duty bound in the accomplishment of a mission, focused on an objective. But somewhere just off to their flank is a corpsmen or a medic. His mission is to take care of those Marines and soldiers in front of him. His objective is not a hilltop or a crossroads, it’s to take care of that next Marine that goes down, or that next soldier some distance away. And those citations will tell you that they do it marvelously, they do it courageously; sometimes their legs get knocked off from under them, and they crawl to that next Marine and start to patch him up. There are instances where these people have literally covered the bodies of the Marine or the soldier and lost their own lives in the process. So, the old poem in the last line of Kipling’s

Gunga Din is appropriate, “By the living God that made you, you are a better man than I am, Gunga Din.”

Marines have an expression. They say you should never bring a knife to a gun fight, and it’s true. But in fact, the corpsmen bring a pair of scissors, and Marines just shake their head in awe at some of the things that they see with these great young men and women that support us.

You saw portions of the film [*CNN Presents Wounded Warriors*]. I would add for you just a couple of insights, perhaps, in terms of what is at the root of what Alex presented. First of all, there is a statistic out there that says that for every eleven Marines or soldiers hit, one will die and of the remaining ten, 75% will be returned to duty. Now ladies and gentlemen, that’s a figure that has never been heard of before in warfare. And it’s just an absolutely incredible tribute to that whole chain, that whole process that you saw.

Another thing that is somewhat transparent to us is that when a Marine or a soldier is not going to make it, and medical care on the battlefield and elsewhere has done all that they can, there are people who sit with that Marine, hold his hand and make sure he is comfortable, and see him through his last minutes. We have dentists who are supporting the doctors who serve that role — who voluntarily serve that role. We have medical administrative personnel who sign up for that very difficult, but in some ways very rewarding task. It’s a tough duty, and they are to be saluted for their special brand of courage.

It didn’t say so, but that place they call “Balad” that you saw on the film, is probably the biggest mortar and rocket magnet in the whole of the country. And yet, that’s the place we take them last from Baghdad, Kirkuk, Asad, Taqqadum. That’s where we take them last before our casualties are evacuated out of the theatre. And they get a lot of fire there; there is a “red alarm” that goes, but you know what, if the doctors are working on a patient, they ignore it. They just keep doing what they are trained to do. And if you ask them about it, they will simply say, “that’s who we are, it goes with the job.” Again, just a tremendous form of heroism that contributes in its entirety to this whole idea of the golden hour and those percentages that I talked to you about.

To extend it just one step further, there’s a great story out there. There’s a great young corporal, a twenty year old named Pitcher from Oswego, New York. He is currently in his bed I’m sure in Bethesda. Corporal Pitcher was a member of the First Battalion, Sixth Marines in Ramadi in an overwatch position, when he took a grenade close by. Shrapnel all up and down his right side, and pieces of shrapnel and bone fragment into his brain. He was evacuated through that same process that you saw, through the facility at Ramadi. They assessed after a short time that they had done pretty much all they could do for him, and thought he had to go to Balad, so he was evacuated to there.

The Army neurosurgeons there took a look at his condition and said, “you know it’s deteriorating, it’s getting worse. There’s at least a 35% mortality rate here if we don’t do something dramatic.” So there was a teleconference held between Balad, Bethesda, and the medical en route evacuation team; and they decided, “the best thing we can do is get him to the States just as soon as we possibly can.” Well, that’s kind of where the United States Air Force

and Transportation Command took over, and an aircraft that was landing in Balad was diverted. They had no idea they were going to the United States. Within about four hours, they did the weather plan; they assessed that that aircraft could not get above 4,000 feet cabin altitude pressure because of the nature of the injuries of young Corporal Pitcher; they filed a flight plan that took them over a fairly low level over Europe and over the UK; and they recognized that they needed two refuelings en route. All of that was arranged in a four hour period.

The flight took fourteen hours. There were four additional patients that were brought aboard along with the en route Critical Care Team that embarked the aircraft. Cpl Pitcher landed at Andrews, met by two ambulances from Bethesda, 18 hours after the decision was made in Iraq.

So, ladies and gentlemen, if you have any doubt in your mind about the dedication of this great country to take care of our wounded, it should not be severe doubt, because the determination, the ability, and the willingness to go to any expense is there. And Corporal Pitcher is now the living example of that. They quote his progress as excellent. He still has a way to go, frankly, but he is a lucky man to be alive and where he is today, thanks to all that joint effort that I just described to you.

Where do we go from here? Well, I don't know, I'm not sure anybody knows. I can say with certainty that there will be brave young corpsmen and medics and crash rescue medics wherever that situation might take us. They don't ask for much, what they ask for is your continuing support, and your willingness to let them stay in the fight. They feel like, and I think I can safely speak for them, it would be a terrible thing if at some point downrange, all that we've seen in terms of the blood and the sweat and the tears that they and their fellow servicemen have experienced would somehow be in vain.

God bless you all ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much.

Transcribed by:
Valbin Corporation
1320 19th Street, NW, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: 202-626-0026
Fax: 202-626-0025
valbin@valbin.org