

**Coast Guard Holiday Ball**  
**Washington, DC**  
**8 December 2006**

I thank you all for gathering together this evening to share each other's company and celebrate this joyous Season.

Just as the Coast Guard is a multi-mission service whose duties cross a broad spectrum of activities that protect, defend, and serve humanity, all of the traditions of this season

Christmas, Hanaka, Kwanza

And recently concluded Ramadan, serve to bring us to together as families.

The combination of spiritual and customary rituals, family reunions, and traditional meals remind us that we are one people and there is more that binds us than separates us.

Next week in Mexico, virtually the entire population commemorates Our Lady of Guadalupe Day. The event marks the moment 450 years ago when Juan Diego had a vision of the Holy Mary of Guadalupe, the protector of the Indians.

In Australia and New Zealand, Boxing Day follows Christmas. It dates all the way back to the Middle Ages – when the royalty of England presented gifts in boxes to their servants, and when the priests opened the alms boxes for the poor. Boxing Day is a time to give to charity and help those less fortunate.

In the Middle East, two months of fasting for Ramadan is over. The great festival of Id al-Fitr is celebrated by millions of Muslims around the globe.

The most important and most celebrated holiday in Japan is New Year's Day, known as O-Shogatsu. Like Christmas in America, the children get gifts from friends and family.

In China and India, the New Year is also a marked by parties and age old traditions.

Underlying every one of these occasions – whether you are Christian, Jewish, Muslim or Buddhist –

It is the belief that our lives are part of something bigger, that there is a deeper meaning to our existence.

**Folks, that's what military service is all about. That is what the Coast Guard is about.**

Coast Guard men and women (Active, Reserve, Civilian, Auxiliary and are retirees) serve this Nation to take their lives to the next step – be a part of a greater good.

**The holidays are a reminder of Coast Guard values – honor, respect and devotion to duty.**

They are a reminder of the character of our service, and the humble, talented team players of the Coast Guard family

- Selfless
- Courageous and
- Risking their own lives ... so others might live.

We are fortunate to have this opportunity to celebrate our service and the holidays together.

In a way, this Ball has come to symbolize our chance to break from the hectic pace of Washington and break the chains of the tyranny of the present.

It is our time to reaffirm our military traditions, celebrate together, and remember those who are standing the watch.

And we are standing the watch ...

In the Bering Sea, in the Straits of Florida, and off the oil platforms in the Persian Gulf.

We are also standing with our DHS partners in Mona Pass, in Joint Harbor Operations Centers protecting San Diego and Puget Sound. We are honored

to have Deputy Secretary Jackson with us this evening. Thank you, Sir, for honoring us with your presence.

The convergence of military service and the emotion and passion of this season create a unique holiday culture for those who serve and their families.

We carry the heritage from those who endured that terrible Christmas at Valley Forge and then won a war of independence.

It surfaced in 1914 when British and German troops refused to fight on Christmas and declared an unauthorized truce along a 500 mile line in France. After caroling, exchanging tobacco and beer, and a soccer game they returned to their lines chastised by superiors to begin the war again. This act of humanity involved over one million soldiers.

In London during the Christmas firebombings of 1940 reporter Ernie Pyle who gave his telling America about GI Joe, reported

"Some day when peace has returned to this odd world I want to come to London again and stand on a certain balcony on a moonlit night and look down upon the peaceful silver curve of the Thames with its dark bridges. And standing there, I want to tell somebody who has never seen it how London looked on a certain night in the holiday season of the year 1940.

Nothing is more gut wrenching than Christmas for a family who has lost a loved one serving their country. One mother of a Vietnam soldier killed in the line of duty leaves a letter every year at the Vietnam Memorial.

One said, "They tell me the letters I write to you and leave here at this memorial are waking others up to the fact that there is still much pain left from the Vietnam War. But this I know; I would rather to have had you for twenty-one years and all the pain that goes with losing you, than never to have had you at all. –Mom"

Last year Coast Guard men and women from Key West to Sabine Pass Texas spent Christmas recovering from hurricanes. They celebrated in trailers, RVs, temporary mess halls, and others stood the watch in temporary buildings at Gulfport, Venice, and Grand Isle, or the make shift operations center at Air Station New Orleans. Families lived in single room efficiency apartments or hotel rooms in Key West and Marathon.

Last month in Miami I was privileged to bestow the Spirit of Hope Award on the Coast Guard Foundation who with Coast Guard Mutual Assistance became the angels that rescued the rescuers. Bob Hope probably best epitomizes that unique combination of military duty and Christmas although he never served in the Armed Forces. If he had, he should have been a Coastie.

Every single Coastie in this room has a story to share about being underway, deployed, or standing duty in some place they wished they had never stepped foot on Christmas.

These sea stories always involve inventing your own entertainment – often at the expense of your shipmates.

Am I right? You're probably all conjuring up these memories now! From skit nights in extremely poor taste to rambling mid-watch log entries to practical jokes gone awry.

My CG holiday memories go way back – well before I joined the Coast Guard – back to when I was a Coast Guard brat!

As most of you know, my father enlisted in the Coast Guard when he was only 16 – lied about his age.

He took our family all over the world – and my mother endured those adventures with a great spirit about her.

When we were stationed in Alaska I first learned the conflicted emotions that arise when duty, family, and holidays converge.

I was six years old, we lived in Alaska and my Dad was underway in the Bering Sea until 4 or 5 days after Christmas. My mother is an extraordinary individual and she succeeded in convincing us that Santa understood he was deployed and had sent a message he would visit our house on the night after my father returned.

By the time I was admitted to the Coast Guard Academy, I was used to Dad serving on the holidays.

Well, as it turned out, more often than not – since I've been in the service, I have been underway, or on duty, over Thanksgiving or Christmas, or both.

I spent Christmas 1974 in the remote village of Lampang Thailand, 500 miles of Bangkok at a LORAN Station with 35 of my closest friends. We celebrated together as a family, even as we wondered whether the spring offensive by North Vietnam would be the last without US troops in the South. In those times, I made some of my closest friends and experienced life like I never had before. I'm sure many of you feel that way too. It's almost too complicated to explain and so simple it breaks your heart

So what does all this mean?

Simply put, the holidays remind us what it means to serve -

- Camaraderie ... being part of a team, a unit ... being together
- the contribution to something bigger than ourselves, and
- maybe, most importantly – fodder for a sea stories for occasions like this!

So as we break bread tonight and toast our Coast Guard family and friends, let's remember what brought us together – whether we're home for the holidays – out on patrol – or on duty in far reaches of the globe! It is to serve our country and humanity.

Semper Paratus!