

# **Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Bob Papp's Annual Leadership Address**

to the

## **Coast Guard Academy Corps of Cadets**

January 5, 2012

Good evening Shipmates!

Good evening to the Academy classes of 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015...

Greetings to the new OCS class...

As you may recall, I spoke last year about taking your oath – and receiving your commission – and everyone here, with the exception of the class of 2015, is quite a bit further down their trackline toward obtaining this goal. You must remain focused because our Coast Guard needs you out there!

And, as I told you last year, if you ever get overwhelmed with the challenges that lay ahead, just glance back along your trackline, and look how far you have come –the former members of the Class of 2011 are now out there performing our challenging maritime missions – and the Class of 2014 who I started my term as Commandant with – is now one year closer to graduation!

I could not be more proud of all of you! And Linda and I – and Master Chief Leavitt enjoy nothing more than visiting this beautiful Academy – where we are surrounded by great shipmates like yourselves...

Tonight, I want to tell you 3 short stories...

The First Story is about Commitment...

This last year we celebrated the centennial of Naval Aviation. The Coast Guard played an important part in the history of aviation...

Everyone knows about Wilber and Orville Wright – and the history they made on December 17, 1903, in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

But, what is lesser known is that Kitty Hawk was also the home of the Kill Devil Hills Life Saving Station – part of the U.S. Life Saving Service—a Service that merged into the Coast Guard.

Life Saving Service crews—referred to as Surfmen—were a tough breed. The story is told that one night a schooner grounded offshore in a howling storm – the Surfmen knew attempting a rescue in their small pulling boat would take all they had...and perhaps, even their lives. The Station Keeper, sensing their fear, reached beneath his cork life preserver, into the pocket of his oil skin rain slicker and withdrew a thin book...holding it up for all to see, he yelled above the wind and surf:

“Boys, these here are the Regulations. It says here you have to go out, but you don’t have to come back.”

The men launched. Those words of commitment quickly became the Surfmen’s motto...and Service legend.

What has been largely forgotten by history is how these Surfmen applied this same legendary commitment for saving lives to assist with the birth of aviation itself. You see, even in 1903, not many people visited the Outer Banks in December. The Kill Devil Hills Surfmen and their families were some of the very few year-round residents. When two bicycle mechanics from Ohio showed up and said they were building a flying machine, they were scoffed at...but then they built a glider that actually flew...

Immediately, with the Station Keeper’s blessing, the Kill Devil Hills Surfmen became the Wright’s willing assistants. When the Wrights needed an extra hand, they would hang a red flag from their workshop to alert any off-duty Surfmen.

Soon, Surfmen were assisting the Wrights with everything from delivering their mail to sewing the fabric onto the wings of the Wright flyer.

On December 17, 1903, it was the Kill Devil Hills Surfmen who carried the fragile Wright Flyer up the sand dune and placed it on the monorail. And the most famous picture in all of aviation history...the one of Orville lying prone as the Wright flyer first powered man into the air...was taken by Surfman John T. Daniels.

This picture was critically important not just historically, but to the future of aviation, because without it, no one would have believed such a remarkable feat had actually been accomplished!

Indeed, while I’m not trying to re-write history, it is my firm belief that the Kill Devil Hills Surfmen were the first ones to put naval into, and in front of, aviation!

Later, Coast Guard Naval Aviators and Air crews would go on to pioneer innovations like the first lifesaving helicopter flight, the first rescue hoist, and Coast Guard Aviator #1 Elmer Stone piloting the first trans-Atlantic fixed wing crossing...

Their contributions to naval aviation have saved countless lives...

But we must never forget that it was a few Surfmen from Life Saving Station Kill Devil Hills, that first helped to give us wings...

Wings that make what we know today as Naval Aviation possible...

Possible, because of commitment, a commitment in the Surfmen's motto, "You have to go out, but you don't have to come back." Today, we disavow this motto – we like all our aviators and shipmates to return after every mission!

But, the Surfmen's spirit and commitment lives on in our heroic rescue swimmers, and their motto – "So Others May Live."

This is the story of how "Naval" was first put in front of aviation. Now you know the rest of the story.

The Second Story is about Courage...

This past year we also observed the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Pearl Harbor ... Just a little more than Seventy years ago today, at 0755 on December 7, 1941, Coast Guard Cutter TANEY was moored at pier 6 in Honolulu Harbor. It was a Sunday, so many of the members of TANEY's crew were resting in their racks when they were blasted out of their holiday routine by an initial attack wave of over 180 Japanese aircraft.

The report of TANEY's Commanding Officer, CDR Louis B. Olson, reads as follows:

"When the anti-aircraft fire was first observed...general quarters [was] sounded and all officers not on board ordered to return. The anti-aircraft battery as well as all other guns were ready to fire with their full crew and three officers at their stations in four minutes. The remaining officers with one exception were aboard less than ten minutes later. Steam was ordered and the vessel was ready to get underway. Without having received orders from any source, between 0915 and 0918 TANEY's gun crews opened fire on scattering formations of enemy aircraft at high altitude passing over the harbor from west to east, using #4 and #5 3 inch guns..."

CDR Olson goes on to describe several more volleys of fire put up by TANEY's crew ... though most aircraft were out of range, TANEY's gunfire is credited with saving the Honolulu Power Plant from destruction.

He concludes that "the officers and crew bore themselves well, although most members of the crew had had no training except drill and had never seen anything above a 50 caliber fired." That quickly changed, as TANEY headed for sea the following morning, to chase enemy submarines, and on to an illustrious wartime career where she earned four battle stars for service both in the Pacific and Atlantic.

But after reading CDR Olson's report, I wondered, who was that one missing officer? That "one exception" as the CO termed it. Whatever became of him?

Well, TANEY was designed to carry an aircraft – a Grumman JF2 Duck. Well that aircraft, and its pilot had been assigned on December 6 to Naval Air Station Pearl Harbor. The pilot – and some of you might recognize the name – was LT Frank Erickson. Leave it to the aviator to go AWOL.

When LT Erickson reported to the Naval Air Station on a Saturday morning, the Navy officers were so pleased to have a Coast Guard junior officer aboard, that they stuck him with duty that very evening! No qualification required!

Early on the morning of Dec. 7, 1941, LT Erickson was preparing to oversee morning colors, when the base was rocked by two heavy explosions...the Marine color detail did not wait for 0800 to hoist colors. The flag went up, but the tune was General Quarters.

LT Erickson then looked up just in time to see a torpedo bomber launch its weapon at the USS California.

As the explosions continued, the phone rang – on the other end of the line was the Air Station Commanding Officer U.S. Navy Captain James Shoemaker, demanding to know “What the hell kind of drills [his Coast Guard duty officer] was pulling down there?!”

With shrapnel raining down, a message was soon dispatched from the Air Station Duty Officer – “AIR RAID PEARL HARBOR – THIS IS NOT A DRILL.”

LT Erickson then took station in the airport control tower. He had a commanding view of the attack. From his position he observed oil covered men, who had abandoned bombed out ships, struggling to make their way ashore, in Pearl Harbor’s burning waters. This image was indelibly seared into his mind. But from this chaos, a vision was also born.

A vision of an aircraft capable of hovering, hoisting and ferrying survivors to safety. At that moment his passion was cemented. His mission was clear. His calling was to bring this vision to reality. And, that’s just what he did.

Working with Sikorski aviation, LT Erickson pioneered the use of helicopters for search and rescue. He would go on to become designated as Coast Guard helicopter pilot No. 1 – and his vision of helicopters would go on to save countless lives – on the sea and on the ground.

So, now you know the rest of the story about Cutter Taney’s “one exception” – the missing officer -- who went on to be an exceptional officer – and dedicate his talents “so that others may live.”

The Third Story is about Sacrifice...

Almost 32 years ago, on January 28, 1980 the Cutter Blackthorn – a 180-foot buoy

tender – set sail from Tampa Bay. Blackthorn had been in a Tampa shipyard for nearly 3 months. She was bound for Mobile, Alabama to pick up buoys enroute to her homeport in Galveston, Texas. The crew was anxious to be heading home. It was a clear night, and the sea was calm.

BLACKTHORN was winding westward through the Tampa Bay channel, towards the Sunshine Skyway Bridge, when an alarm suddenly sounded...Stand by for Collision, Collision Port Side. Stand by for Collision, This is Not a Drill.

The ship lurched. A screeching sound was heard. Power was lost. The crew struggled to understand what had occurred, and respond.

Blackthorn had collided with the inbound freighter Capricorn. Capricorn was 605 feet long – more than 3 times Blackthorn's size. She was barely damaged. But it was what would occur after the collision that had the most impact.

One of Capricorn's 13,500 pound anchors snagged into Blackthorn's hull. Blackthorn began to be dragged sideways through the water by Capricorn...the flukes of the anchor ripped open her port side, while her anchor chain wrapped around Blackthorn, eventually pulling the cutter over.

As Blackthorn rolled onto her side, the world for her crew literally turned upside down. Those attempted to exit the ship became disoriented, and were literally walking on what were seconds ago bulkheads.

LCDR John Ryan, a member of Blackthorn's crew described the incident in the following words:

"I was on the bridge and when the ship rolled onto beams end...I knew we were past the point of no return and would surely capsize. I went into the water from the bridge wing and by the time I surfaced the ship had capsized over me. I was injured with a sprained back and injured shoulder. As I struggled, suddenly a lifejacket from the locker that was on the main deck came floating up to me."

LCDR Ryan was one of the lucky ones. Nearly half of BLACKTHORN's 50 crewmembers, 23 in total went down with the ship in what became our largest peacetime casualty.

The investigation found both vessels were too close to the center of the channel. In the wake of the BLACKTHORN tragedy, our Service intensely focused on increasing the proficiency of our cutter crews. The Command and Operations school that is in Yeaton Hall is a direct result of the BLACKTHORN tragedy – every prospective Commanding Officer and Executive Officer must attend that course before assuming their watch – even if they have been through it before. I am sure many of you will get the opportunity to attend it in the not too distant future.

But, back to that lifejacket that LCDR Ryan reported popping up in front of him. Many of the surviving crewmembers told a similar story. Of a newly reported in crewmember – most could not remember his name – who as others abandoned ship, stayed aboard and continued passing out lifejackets.

And, as BLACKTHORN began to turn on her side, removed his belt, and used it to strap open the life jacket locker door to ensure lifejackets would float to the surface when the cutter capsized. His name was Seaman Apprentice Willam Ray Flores – or “Billy” to those who knew him best. He was just 19 years old. Seaman Apprentice Flores was one of the 23 crewmembers that never escaped. But due to his extraordinary bravery and sacrifice, many others did.

A few of the officers never forget about his actions. They conducted their own campaign to ensure Seaman Flores’ heroism would not be overlooked – or forgotten. His shipmates poured through investigations, transcripts, and even newspaper clippings to ensure his story was not lost. Twenty-years later, the Coast Guard formally recognized Flores’ heroism (Sept. 16, 2000) by posthumously awarding him Coast Guard Medal – our Service’s highest award for heroism not involving combat.

The medal was presented to his parents.

To further honor his heroism, our third fast response cutter – which was just launched -- will proudly bear his name.

So, why did I tell you these stories?

Because what’s on my mind...in a word, is history.

As I have traveled around the country meeting with our great Coast Guard men and women, I have been struck by the lack of knowledge many of our shipmates have about our own rich history. About our story.

But history is more than just our story. It also contains our values. Values you can seek to reflect – of both individual accomplishment and collectively as a service...

As part of “Honoring our Profession” we must be fluent in our history.

I suspect many of you had a broad range of choices in which colleges to attend...as well as many other opportunities...but you chose to come to the Academy – or Officer Candidate School because you wanted to be part of something bigger....a service with strong personal bonds....with a culture, tradition and heritage...and, of course, the opportunity to perform our maritime missions!

Well, our history is the very fabric of our Service. To be part of this fabric, you must know our ideals...our values...our character...our story.

Teaching that history is our responsibility. It continues to be my job (and the Superintendants and leaders of this great institution) to ensure you are trained to take your positions in the officer corps.

Whether you are an OCS or Academy graduate, the road to your commission comes through here. So, it is here that we will begin.

Tomorrow, we have called in a group of experts to discuss how we might design a useful Coast Guard history program...and to be clear, I am not looking for a course of study that is about memorizing facts....or timelines.

I am looking for a way to ensure that you know about inspirational individual and unit actions, about relevant leaders, and the decisions they made that shaped who we are...and what we do...

You need to know the surfman of the lifesaving service assisted in getting the Wright Brothers off the ground...

You need to know that the crew the Taney not only valiantly fought in Pearl Harbor...but that it served as the inspiration for the pursuit of a rotary wing aircraft that rescued countless mariners from the pearls of the sea...

You need to know about the BLACKTHORN tragedy...why we have a Command and Operations School... and why our newest cutter is named FLORES...

You are part of the long blue line, that continues to march through time – but to understand where this line is going, you need to have an appreciation for where it's been.

Why?

Because YOU are now the custodians of a rich legacy of service to the Nation – a legacy that spans more than 221 years.

YOU are part of a service that performs maritime missions that no one else can do! It is something of which you can truly be proud!

And, soon YOU will be performing them!

You are the future. But, you are also charged with ensuring the stories and sacrifices of your past shipmates are well known.

This is our chosen profession. This is our way. This is what we do. We are Coast Guardsmen. We are the men and women of the United States Coast Guard.

Semper Paratus ... Go Bears!