

# **Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Bob Papp's Remarks**

**At the**

## **Coast Guard Basic Training Company Zulu-186 Graduation Ceremony**

*Coast Guard Training Center*  
*Cape May, N.J.*  
*Friday August 16, 2012*

Good Morning Shipmates! I am so proud to be here today to celebrate with you and your families your completion of basic training.

And it is a cause for celebration. You have just completed 8 difficult weeks getting you ready to serve your country in the world's best Coast Guard. Congratulations on your achievement!

I know that for some of you it's been the most challenging and difficult 8 weeks of your life. You should be proud of your accomplishment.

It's been hard, and we make it hard for a reason. As the old saying goes, "the hottest fire yields the strongest steel". And we need the strongest steel. Because what you've really been doing here is building a foundation. And for a strong foundation, you need strong steel.

And that's because a strong foundation is absolutely critical. Without a strong foundation, anything you build later will eventually collapse. Whether it's a house, a monument, a ship, or a career.

Now, as I'm sure you learned during your classes here, a keel is the foundation of a ship.

I've been asked to kid one of you about a response you gave to your Company Commander when asked what a keel was. SA Shirey, "keel" does not mean, as I understand you told your Company Commander early in your training, to "fall over and die". However, you are very close. To "keel over" – to have the keel inverted and above the water – is indeed a very bad thing. SA Shirey, I see you are headed to the Coast Guard Cutter MIDGETT. I'll make sure I give CAPT Laura Dickey, the CO of the MIDGETT, a call to ask her to pay special attention to your shipboard qualifications.

The keel runs from bow to stern and serves as the foundation for the rest of the ship's structure. It provides the major source of strength for the hull, and for the superstructure above that.

Now there are four significant ceremonies in the life of a ship – the keel laying – which is the initial step in the construction of a vessel; christening, where the ship is launched and named; commissioning, where a ship is placed in active service, and then, ultimately, decommissioning, where she is taken out of active service. I will have the great good fortune next month to attend the keel laying ceremony for our fourth and newest National Security Cutter – the HAMILTON.

The Keel laying is a momentous event in the life of a ship – just as this graduation is a momentous event in your Coast Guard career.

And much like our ceremony here today, the keel laying ceremony is a celebration that involves the shipbuilders and their families as well as the crew that will operate the ship and their families. During the ceremony, a special guest is invited who authenticates and then signs the keel. And the ceremony usually ends with the statement: “The keel has been truly and fairly laid”. This signifies to everyone there that the initial work has been successfully completed and the construction of the vessel can begin.

You probably know some of this even if you have never been around ships or shipbuilding. Just like “keel over”, “laying the keel” has entered our everyday language as a phrase meaning the start of any significant undertaking....

And today - this is your keel laying ceremony....the start of your Coast Guard career.

And now that the foundation – the keel – has been laid, you must start building.

And one of the most important things for you to start building is what I’d like to talk with you about this morning. It’s something that I have been talking about since I became the Commandant two years ago and something you will continue to hear me talk about as you start your Coast Guard career. What you must start building – and what we ALL continually to strive for -- is proficiency.

Now when you get to your new unit, you will all be required to become qualified at a particular job. You’ll have a qualification book and will check off tasks as you learn and complete them... This is an important step, and I want you to complete it as quickly and thoroughly as you can once you report to your unit. But proficiency is much more than that. Getting a particular qualification - whether it’s small boat coxswain, pollution investigator, or helmsman on a cutter - is only the first step in becoming proficient.

And when I talk about proficiency – I break it down into three essential parts, each of which is critically important – and which I see over and over again in our best people and in the successful exploits of our service. They are Proficiency in Craft, Proficiency in Leadership, and a Disciplined Initiative.

Let me share a couple of stories with you to show what I mean by this.

I had the honor a couple of weeks ago to commission our second Fast Response Cutter, the RICHARD ETHERIDGE. These are terrific new ships. I see that one of you, FN Jamie Myree, is headed for our first FRC, the BERNARD WEBBER, which we commissioned back in April. We're going to build 58 of the magnificent cutters – I hope all of you get the opportunity to serve aboard one of them.

These Fast Response Cutters will all be named for Coast Guard enlisted heroes – and the RICHARD ETHERIDGE is no exception.

As I saw in your Company Journal, you have learned over the past 8 weeks that much of our success as a unit or a service depends upon working together with our shipmates, and how the success or failure of a single individual can often impact the success of the whole crew. (I think I read something in your Company Journal about some incentive training?)

But while we work together as a team to accomplish our mission, each Coast Guard man or woman is an individual who is capable – and expected – to make a difference. And RICHARD ETHERIDGE provides a terrific example that one person – with proficiency – can truly make a difference.

Richard Etheridge was the Keeper of the Pea Island Lifesaving Station on the North Carolina Outer Banks. He rose to that position in 1880 and served there for the next 20 years.

He was the first black man ever appointed as Keeper of a U.S. Lifesaving Station. What's remarkable about that is that less than 40 years earlier, he had been born into slavery near Oregon Inlet, just north of Pea Island.

And only 15 years before his appointment he had become a freeman by joining and serving in the Union Army during the Civil War.

After leaving the Union Army he served for a time as a surfman at a nearby Lifesaving Station on Bodie Island. And at Bodie, he was the lowest raking surfman at that station.

And then, in 1879, he finds himself being recommended by the Superintendent of the Lifesaving Service, Sumner Kimball, to the Secretary of the Treasury, for a position in Command of a Lifesaving Station.

In an era of such open and hostile racism, post-Civil War, why was Richard Etheridge chosen for this job?

The reason is proficiency.

You see, he was not the lowest ranking man at that first Life Saving Station because he was the least proficient surfman or the newest member to report. He was the lowest

ranking man because in that post-Civil War era, black men were always listed last on the rolls.

He was actually incredibly proficient. He had grown up on the shores of the Outer Banks and knew the winds and tides and currents as well as anyone. And his proficiency was recognized by an inspector for the Life Saving Service. This inspector was so impressed that he took the time to write a letter to the Superintendent of the Service about what he had seen in Richard Etheridge.

I know this because a few weeks ago my staff surprised me with a trip to the National Archives in Washington, DC to view some original Coast Guard documents. For a lover of history like me, it was a real treat. I saw the original legislation – the Tariff Act of 1790, signed by George Washington – creating our Service 222 years ago this month. Happy belated birthday!

Among the other documents I saw were the rolls of Bodie Island Station in September of 1879. Richard Etheridge was there – the last name on the rolls - the lowest ranked surfman at the station.

I also saw the letter written by that Inspector, LT Charles Shoemaker, to Superintendent Kimball. It read:

“Richard Etheridge is 38 years of age [and] has the reputation of being as good a surfman as there is on this coast, black or white...”

That’s proficiency. Those in authority recognized it and knew that it was what really mattered.

The letter continued: “I am aware that no colored man holds the position of keeper in the Lifesaving Service. I have given the matter as careful consideration as I am capable of and have weighed every argument for and against its adoption... I am fully convinced that the efficiency of the service at his station will be greatly advanced by the appointment of this man to the keepership...”

The service was facing heavy criticism in the face of loss of life and property and needed skilled Keepers. Despite the racism of the time, his Proficiency of Craft got him the job.

But Keeper Etheridge knew instinctively that his own proficiency of craft alone was not enough. He knew that he needed his crew to be just as proficient. And he knew that he needed to lead them there. He understood the requirement for Proficiency of Leadership.

He developed rigorous lifesaving drills that his crew performed 6 days a week. He demanded swift obedience and required strict adherence to standards of grooming and appearance. We know how hard Etheridge trained his men because he kept meticulous

records of their daily activities. Patrols, drills, training and inspections were conducted continuously. He trained his crew until satisfied they could take on any mission. And on Sundays, their “rest day”, Etheridge read the regulations to his crew and quizzed them on their knowledge of procedure.

This doesn't sound terribly different than the last 8 weeks here, does it? Well I'll tell you what.... The Coast Guard still relies on – and requires – this type of leadership. It inspires us. It motivates our crews. It allows us to reach that which was thought unachievable.

I'll bet in the last eight weeks that some of you have been pushed beyond what you thought you were capable of....

And don't think the fact that you'll be the most junior person at your new unit means you don't need to worry about building your proficiency of leadership. One of the many great things about our Coast Guard – we have a long history of providing great responsibility and opportunities for leadership to our most junior people. That coxswain in charge of the 47' MLB, taking it into rough surf in the middle of the night to conduct a rescue mission – that could be you in a very short period of time. You could be a crewman on that boat within days or weeks of reporting to your first assignment....

And remember, Richard Etheridge was the most junior person at his station when his proficiency was recognized and he was selected for advancement....

Proficiency of Craft and Proficiency of Leadership would pay off for Richard Etheridge and his crew. They would go on to rescue hundreds of souls, including their most famous rescue - that of the E.S. NEWMAN. The E.S. NEWMAN was caught in an October Hurricane in 1896 on her way from Providence to Norfolk. When her captain realized there was no hope for making it safely to port, he grounded his ship close to shore near Pea Island and shot off a flare. That evening to the storm was so bad Etheridge had kept his men from patrolling the beach with fear that they would be swept away by the tide. But one of his surfmen, who was watching the coast, spotted the distress signal and reported to Keeper Etheridge.

When Etheridge and his crew arrived on scene, it was apparent that the normal lifesaving procedures would not be effective. Their Lyle Gun – a beach cannon used to shoot a line to a vessel in distress and establish a Breech's buoy – could not reach the ship. (You learned about rigging a Breech's Buoy in your seamanship class, right?) Strong winds and high tides kept the E.S. NEWMAN too far off shore. Keeper Etheridge later wrote in his log “It seemed impossible under such circumstances to render any assistance.”

But it was then that Keeper Etheridge demonstrated that final piece of proficiency I spoke of – one that comes only with Proficiency of Craft and Proficiency of Leadership: Disciplined Initiative.

He recognized that he needed to deviate from the normal operational doctrine and exercise on-scene initiative if he was to rescue the crew of the foundering vessel. He trusted in his crew, and he trusted the training and discipline he had instilled in them. He directed two of his surfmen to bind themselves together with a line. These two surfmen then grabbed a second line and fought their way through the howling wind and breaking surf until they reached the foundering E.S. NEWMAN. When they reached the distressed vessel, the second line was tied to a survivor and the crew on shore pulled the survivor and the two surfmen back to the shore. They repeated this process ten times that night – ten times in the middle of a hurricane – until they had rescued all of the survivors aboard the ship.

It is interesting to note that on the first trip out to the E.S. NEWMAN, a wave caught the leading surfman and knocked the air out of him. That wave would have carried him away and may have ended the rescue right there – and meant certain death for the crew of the E.S. NEWMAN – had he not been tied to his fellow surfman. He was bound to his shipmate the same way that training and discipline binds every member of a crew – or a Company – to the other. While one person can truly make a difference, bound together we are practically unstoppable.

Richard Etheridge's dramatic rescue that night came after a career of building proficiency.... But it is critically important that you begin building yours the minute you step aboard your new unit, because you never know when YOU might be called upon....

I'll give you an example.

In a few months we will commission our next Fast Response Cutter, the sister ship to the RICHARD ETHERIDGE.

This new cutter is named for Seaman Apprentice William Flores – “Billy” he was called – a crew member aboard the Coast Guard Cutter BLACKTHORN, one of our old 180-foot buoy tenders.

SA Flores reported to the BLACKTHORN right after graduating from Recruit Training in 1979. He was a member of class Hotel 123. Thirty-three years ago he was sitting at his keel laying ceremony just like you are now....

And just a few months after reporting aboard his new unit – on his very first trip underway – the BLACKTHORN was involved in a terrible collision with the tanker SS CAPRICORN. When BLACKTHORN began to keel over, the Captain realized that the ship was going to sink.

For the safety of the crew he gave the order to abandon ship. But after that order had been given, and many of the crew had begun to depart the sinking vessel, Seaman Apprentice Flores stayed put. He went to the locker where the ship's lifejackets were stored and opened the door. Then he took off his belt and used it to secure that door

open. He secured the door so that more lifejackets would float to the surface as the vessel sank and be available to the rest of the crew that had abandoned ship. He also stayed and helped members of the crew who were trapped and comforted those who were injured or disoriented.

Unfortunately, when the BLACKTHORN ultimately sank, Seaman Apprentice Flores went down with her. He gave his life that night along with 22 of his shipmates.

When interviewed later, many of his surviving shipmates told the same story: “they would not be alive if not for the new guy, Billy.”

That is disciplined initiative.

SA Flores was posthumously awarded the Coast Guard Medal – our highest non-combat award for heroism. In presenting this award to his parents, the Eighth District Commander said “Seaman Apprentice Flores’ exceptional fortitude, remarkable initiative, and courage...were instrumental in saving many lives.... He set the standard for us all and embodies the true spirit of what we stand for.”

The long hours and difficult work it takes to achieve proficiency is not easy. In fact, it is hard. As you sit here today at your graduation – at your keel laying ceremony – you know this and have experienced it up close for the past 8 weeks.

And you are ready. Based on my conversations with your Company Commanders – and the looks on the faces I see before me – I can state with confidence that “the keel has been truly and fairly laid”. Today you begin your journey towards true proficiency – the kind that Richard Etheridge demonstrated over 100 years ago – and the kind that William Flores and the men and women of this service have consistently demonstrated both before and since. And the purpose of this journey towards proficiency is so that when you spot a distant flare on a dark and stormy night – or when your shipmates need you – you are not only willing, but ready to respond.

In a few weeks, most of you will be conducting front-line Coast Guard operations. We face many challenges out there. I call them “uncertain and stormy seas.” The continued flow of drugs and migrants towards our shores. Threats to our fisheries. Increased activity in the Arctic. Our mandate to protect the safe and secure approaches to American ports. And sometimes, to protect even the sea itself. To meet these threats, you, the Coast Guardsmen of Zulu Company, must continually build your proficiency. It will serve as an anchor to which we can all hold fast in uncertain and stormy seas.

And we don’t fear uncertain and stormy seas.

That’s when we go to work.

That’s when our country needs us the most. And that’s when we are at our best.

We are Coast Guardsmen.

This is our chosen profession.

This is our way.

This is what we do.

Thank you.

And Semper Paratus.