

Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Bob Papp's Annual Leadership Address

to the

Coast Guard Academy Corps of Cadets

January 7, 2011

Good evening Shipmates!

For people who serve on or over the water, the term "Shipmate" represents the unique bond that is formed when the people you serve with, and their families, become part of your extended family. How else would you describe persons you spend 24 hours a day with, 7 days a week, sometimes in the most treacherous of circumstances, and other times observing the grandest spectacles of nature that few will ever see.

The term "Shipmate" also encompasses the adrenaline and emotion of our Service: the great joy and satisfaction of a rescue well performed; the deep sorrow when, despite your best efforts, you cannot save someone from the perils of the sea. It's weathering these storms and difficulties, the crests and troughs, laughing and working—and yes, sometimes crying—giving it your utmost while cold, or hot and sweaty, wet, and tired that forges the bond that is Shipmates.

There is no greater compliment than being known as a great shipmate, and no better goal than to become a good one.

I often amuse myself by looking at my busy schedule, and circling the events that I'm personally looking forward to, or will be the most enjoyable, or are the most important. Tonight's meeting with you encompasses all three! – And I have been looking forward to it since my change of command ceremony in May.

But tonight, I have the dubious honor of welcoming you back from Winter Break – and Welcoming you to the Dark Ages of Connecticut!

But I have good news – the Winter Solstice has already come and gone. It's a new year. And, though many of you are probably missing your family and loved ones you spent the holidays with, and its dark and cold here in New London, there's light ahead. I can tell you, from my own experience, the days will get longer, the weather warmer (eventually), and your time remaining at this Academy shorter!

You see, you cadets are all on a voyage together. And, though you are in different legs of the trackline – 1st Class, 2nd Class, 3rd Class and 4th Class – you share a common goal – obtaining a commission in our beloved Coast Guard. Indeed, graduating young men and women worthy of a commission is this institution's mission, its singular purpose, and its reason to exist. There is no more important goal. Everything you've

achieved here, and everything you've learned here, is to prepare you to take your oath and receive your commission.

In just a few short months you 1st classmen will raise your right hand, and stand at attention to take your oath. It's a turning point in your life. In a matter of seconds you will become a commissioned officer of the Coast Guard whose honor, respect and devotion to duty must be second to none.

From the moment you recite your oath, you become a Coast Guard officer, responsible to the President, and your superior officers. It's a great moment. And, it's only about 150 days away! In May, I will be here as you 1st classmen take your oath and receive your commissions.

Now, those of you in the classes of 2012, and 2013 will have to wait just a little longer for this great moment. But it will come. Though many challenges remain, you've already accomplished so much. So if you ever get discouraged, just glance back along your trackline, look into your wake, and take stock of your accomplishments. You will quickly see how far you've come – and my advice to my shipmates, regardless of the length of the cruise, is to take it one day at a time – you'll be amazed at how quickly the time passes! Your commissioning day is the beacon upon which you all must remain collectively focused.

Now, for the class of 2014 – you 4th classman have the greatest distance to commissioning – that beacon might seem to be a bit over the horizon. But I want you to know, I am right here with you. You see, my commission as Commandant is for 4 years – so we are fellow travelers.

We started our voyage together. Class of 2014 you are my class! And, one of my last acts as Commandant will be presiding over your graduation in May 2014! So you see, we are all part of the long blue line – you the Corps – and me as Commandant, navigating our respective courses – all of us adding our individual backgrounds, skills and talents to the vibrant and colorful tapestry that is the Coast Guard officer Corps.

As you proceed along your trackline towards your oath and commission, it's always struck me that many cadets, indeed many officers, have never given much thought as to what their oath and commission actually say.

So tonight we are going to take a "fix" of sorts and do just that – consider what our oath and commission mean. It's important that we do so because these documents constitute the basic and fundamental bond which unites not only the Coast Guard Officer Corps, but the entire Officer Corps of our Armed Forces. As officers, you must understand the meaning of your oath, your essential role in protecting the liberty of all citizens, and your sacred duty to uphold and enforce the law in a country founded on the rule of law. Understanding your oath will put you on track to becoming a good Shipmate!

Rule # 1 – Your oath is sacred.

It was one of our founding fathers, and the father of our Service, Alexander Hamilton, who recommended to Congress that the officers of the Revenue-Marine be given the

rank and standing of military officers, because, as he said, “it would attach them to their duty by a nicer sense of honor.” And, it was Hamilton, in his letter of advice to officers of the newly formed Revenue-Marine, who said they should take the oath to support the Constitution of the United States...and so began our story.

Today we take an oath to uphold our Constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic, to bear true faith and allegiance, and to discharge well and faithfully the duties of office.

Your oath is a constitutional requirement. But, it’s also sacred.

Former Chief of Naval Operations, Arleigh Burke once said:

“When you take your oath, you assume an obligation. The oath is elegantly simple. When you swear to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic, you will assume the most formidable obligation of your life. Thousands upon thousands of men and women have died to preserve for you the opportunity to take such an oath .

What you are actually doing is pledging your means, your talent, indeed your very life to your country. This is an obligation that falls to relatively few men and women – It should be considered as a sacred trust.

We hear much these days about the rights to which we are entitled as citizens of this great nation. There is less emotion about the corresponding ‘duties’ to which we inherit.”

The Oath is not only sacred, each part carries its own history and message – a message meant for you as future military officers.

I, Do Solemnly Swear (or Affirm)

The oath is a public statement of your personal commitment. As Officers you must take personal responsibility for your actions.

That I Will Support and Defend the Constitution of the United States

The oath requires officers to support and defend the Constitution – not just the United States of America – not just the President – or even your Commandant! The Constitution symbolizes all three branches of our government—legislative, executive and judicial—and much more. The Constitution is our country, our flag, our military – and most importantly “We the People.”

Taking an oath to support and defend the Constitution suggests that officers don’t blindly follow orders. Compare this to other oaths that have required absolute and unconditional obedience to a superior. To take an extreme example, the oath of the Nazi party stated: “I owe inviolable fidelity to Adolf Hitler; I vow absolute obedience to him and to the leaders he designates to me.” Well – we have since born witness to the horrors that such absolute obedience to one individual and unconstrained sovereignty can produce.

We are different. Unique. Ours is a constitution and a form of government that wasn't handed down by a sovereign or king – it emerged from the people. Power flows from the people. In your role as an officer, you are a servant of the people. Let me say that again – because it's a concept that is personally important to me – you are a servant of the people. As an officer, you are a servant-leader.

You are sworn to support and defend our citizens, their rights, and the values and ideals embodied in the Constitution. Values like equality, inalienable rights, the democratic process, sovereignty of the people, and the supremacy of the law. So although your chain of command ultimately leads to President Obama as Commander in Chief, your oath of allegiance to the Constitution signifies you are swearing to a much broader allegiance. Your oath is in fact your bond to the American People.

It's your promise to protect even those parts of "We the People" who may not look like you, or behave as you do—or even think like you.

There's no better example of this than Congress's recent decision to repeal the law known as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." Some of the Service Chiefs cautioned against doing so. And the survey responses of our men and women currently serving revealed a broad range of opinion.

However, once the final decision was made, we accepted the decision of our civilian leadership, and we will uphold the law—I have no doubt we can effectively implement this historic change. This is what makes our Nation unlike any other. This is our system. It truly belongs to "We the people." While we serve in uniform, we are the trustees of our system. And, it's also the heart of what makes your Oath sacred – that you are pledging your loyalty to all that the Constitution represents – We the People.

Against All Enemies, Foreign and Domestic

This phrase was added in 1862 as a direct result of the Civil War- specifically, to address the possibility of Union soldiers joining the Confederacy – that is, officers who had previously sworn their allegiance to the United States and were now fighting against it.

Today, in the post 9/11 world that we live in this language is equally applicable. Our Service is under the Department of Homeland Security – our duty is to protect those on the sea, protect our homeland against threats from the sea, and to protect the sea itself – today's threats are often domestic threats. Thus, you must be ever-vigilant and be *Semper Paratus* as you protect and defend our homeland.

That I Will Bear True Faith and Allegiance to the Same

The phrase *faith and allegiance* dates back to 1606, when King James required an oath of "utmost faith and allegiance to the King's majesty" from everyone leaving for America to work in the Virginia Company.

In exchange for the limitless opportunity you are given in this country, you have a responsibility to "bear true faith and allegiance" to our Nation.

That I Take This Obligation Freely, without Any Mental Reservation or Purpose of Evasion

This passage originated during the Civil War. Congress and President Abraham Lincoln, wanting to ensure that soldiers did not defect, expanded the oath in an attempt to guarantee loyalty. Loyalty is about Honor. Who Lives Here Reveres Honor, Honors Duty. And, as you know Honor is the first of our three Coast Guard core values, Honor, Respect and Devotion to Duty.

And That I Will Well and Faithfully Discharge the Duties of the Office on Which I Am about to Enter

This wording has its genesis in the first statute of 1789.

This clause epitomizes the Coast Guard's third core value – "Devotion to Duty." You must always strive to perform your duties to the best of your abilities.

So Help Me God

To some, this is the most important phrase in the sacred oath. Although the Constitution does not include the phrase *so help me God* in the President's oath, our first President, George Washington, added these words when he took the first oath. In God We Trust is on our currency. We are a Nation Under one God as stated in our Pledge of Allegiance.

The President traditionally ends his speeches with God Bless America. And, thus it's no coincidence that "So Help Me God" is how you end your oath.

Uttering the words, "So help me God," however, does not require you to assume any type of religious or other obligation. Rather, these words charge you to carry out your duties in good faith. However, for those of faith, and certainly our founding fathers, uttering the words "So help me God" symbolizes that this oath is the most solemn of commitments.

So – the Oath is Sacred – that's Rule # 1, and now you know some of the reasons why...

Your commission is timeless.

Take a look at the commission of the first Coast Guard Officer – Hopley Yeaton – signed by George Washington as President, and Thomas Jefferson as Secretary of State.

Now, take a look at my commission – signed by Barrack Obama as President, and Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State.

Despite the passage of over two centuries – and 220 plus years – the language remains virtually unaltered. It's timeless.

Your commission is the sacred scroll that sets forth that the President, on behalf of the American people, reposes “special trust and confidence” in your patriotism, valor, fidelity and abilities.

Your commission confers your rank and authority. It orders all those of lesser grades to obey you.

By your commission, and the historic words “Know ye that Reposing Special Trust and Confidence in you,” the President is certifying that you are different than your fellow citizens. And, precisely because of this difference, you are granted special authority and privileges. In return, your devotion to duty, and to our Nation must be absolute.

With your commission, the American people are entrusting their leadership, safety and freedom – their very blood and treasure – to you. You have an awesome responsibility to bear. As an officer, it will be you who are entrusted with leading and protecting their sons and daughters when they are called to go into harm’s way. There’s no greater responsibility.

In many ways, giving a commission – with such unmitigated responsibility – to a brand new Ensign is a giant leap of faith. You have limited experience. You’re young. You still have much to learn—and learning involves making mistakes – and learning from them.

Why should the Nation bestow on you the high responsibility of protecting its sons and daughters, and indeed the nation itself when you still have so much to learn?

The answer is simple. You’ve answered the call. You cadets are the very best of America – you represent the very best of what our Nation has to offer. “We the People” are counting on you! Our service is counting on you! And, those that have come before you are counting on you!

Ultimately, the success of our challenging maritime missions depends on the leadership of young men and women performing their jobs well—sometimes under difficult, demanding and evening harrowing circumstances. It always has. And, that’s the true meaning behind why your commission is timeless.

And this leadership starts right here. As a squad leader, a platoon commander, a company commander – or your responsibilities while sailing aboard EAGLE. Each of these experiences is a building block in your development as a leader. And, all of these actions as a leader are anchored by the obligations of your oath, and the force of your commission.

Rule # 2 – Train your replacement.

You know this. You live this. It’s your mantra. Every year a new group of 2nd class breaks in a new group of 4th class. You are indoctrinating. You are leading. You are teaching. And, though you may not have realized it, you are also training your replacement.

It continues to be my job, and while my focus is usually on the Admirals who may someday replace me, it is also important for me to be with you tonight to help train those who will take their positions in the future officer corps!

This is precisely how the long blue line marches forward through time. So it continues for you 1st classman – those of you who will soon graduate will be deemed fully qualified and fully capable by this Academy. The Academy will have completed its mission—to graduate commissioned officers. You are the replacements we have so richly invested in, that we have so carefully trained. You are the future. You have a large role as future leaders of our Service, and officers in the armed forces, in helping to meet the Constitutional goals that our framers adopted—and upholding and enforcing the laws. It's something of which you can truly be proud!

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. And, proudly so.

Semper Paratus.

God Bless America and our Service.