



# SMDC / ARSTRAT



## **Flag Day speech as presented by LTG Richard P. Formica on 14 June 2011 at Athens State University**

In the Army, we say Hooah and we say Hooah for lots of different things – it's a good thing. How are you Smith? Hooah! Smith, go take that hill. Hooah First Sergeant! Hey where's Smith? Hooah Sir! So I gotta start off by asking: Is this a Hooah day at Athens State University or what?

I would like to introduce you to my wife Diane who's a teacher and an educator in her own right. I'm so glad that she could be here.

I'd like to thank Chad Easterling (Athens State University Alumni Board President) for inviting me to speak today on the occasion of Flag Day. I thank and recognize Athens State University President Dr. Bob Glenn and his family – thanks for being such great hosts, and for allowing me to share this event with you. And of course, thanks to Lisa Payne for doing such an excellent job of organizing and orchestrating this event. And I add my thanks and Hooah to Tina Betts – you did a wonderful rendition honoring our nation, thank you!

Thank you for taking time today to honor our Flag.

It is truly an honor for me to be here – and I'd like to add recognition to the many State, County, local civic and business leaders, educators, the 203<sup>rd</sup> MP BN (ALARNG) – represented by Lieutenant Colonel Mike Hugo and his team, and the faculty, staff, and students from Athens State University.

So, as you know or may know, the Army shares its birthday – June 14<sup>th</sup> with Flag Day – which you're here to celebrate today. The histories of our Army and our national flag are intertwined. Both symbolize the very best things about our country and the people who have fought for democracy from the earliest days of our Nation's history. Our Soldiers cherish our flag and the values that it represents.

So today – as you gather to celebrate Flag Day, we also celebrate the 236<sup>th</sup> birthday of your U.S. Army. (Audience – Hooah!) Hooah!!

Happy Birthday Army.

So on June 14, 1775, Colonial Soldiers banded together to fight for independence and a democratic way of life. 236 years later, U.S. Army Soldiers and Civilians are still volunteering to do "heavy lifting" for our nation. Many have paid the ultimate price for our freedom.

There's a 183 campaign streamers hanging from our Army colors that provide a glimpse of our nation's history and a measure of the commitment of American Soldiers to our Nation and its cause. The streamers represent the strength and courage of the Soldiers who wear the uniform and who serve today to defend our freedom and our way of life.

Now I would just say that broadly speaking there's probably three groups of folks represented here today: First Soldiers, second Veterans – thank you for your service, and then the Community – represented by many of you. I'd like to briefly address each group.

First, our Soldiers: Today, more than 239,000 Active, Guard, and Reserve Soldiers are deployed or forward stationed in many countries around the world doing our nation's business. Soldiers and Civilians serve with distinction, whenever and wherever they are needed – making enormous contributions vital to our Nation's security. They fight with courage and valor at the forefront of this war against global terrorism. Our Soldiers are deterring aggression in troubled regions worldwide; they're securing our borders and preventing attacks on our nation. We appreciate and value the service and sacrifice of our Soldiers, and the sacrifices of their supporting and caring Families. Thank you to our Soldiers.

Second, our Veterans: Veterans are an integral element in the fabric of our community – in local communities all across America, and they are visible reminders of service, patriotism, and enduring commitment to our Nation's values. They're active in our community – we see them at Memorial Day, on Veterans Day at 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebrations and at events like these. We see them at Military Funerals – paying respect to our fallen. Our Veterans are an integral element of the fabric of our society. We are thankful for their service and so pleased with their continued involvement in our lives. If you're a Veteran, will you please stand up so that we can recognize you? And to each of you who stood and those who served alongside you, thank you for your service.

Thirdly, Communities: Many of you represent the community here in Athens and at Athens State University. Communities across America demonstrate an outpouring of support to our Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen, and Civilians who serve today. Communities are the life lines to Families separated by numerous deployments. Support from our communities is important and appreciated. One of the things I've realized these past few years is that America has learned to say Thank You again. As I travel around the country, I proudly wear my uniform – and the outpouring of support and gratitude I get from our citizens is simply overwhelming.

So – today is Flag Day. I'd like to share a story about a U.S. Flag – that Diane and I have recently experienced and that I thought would be fitting for this celebration. A few years ago, I was in the Pentagon. And, minding my own business by the way, doing Army force management work, when a retired Colonel, who was also a former

contractor who served on the Army Staff with me when I was a Lieutenant Colonel many years before, out of the clear blue sky contacted me by email. He was down in Cullman Alabama. East Elementary School in Cullman Alabama had a flag that flew on their flag pole that was tattered and they wanted to retire it and replace it with a new flag.

They're a patriotic community, like here in Athens, and they chose to retire it on the anniversary of September 11<sup>th</sup>. And they wanted to, after much discussion about what they should do with the flag once they retired it, bring it to the Pentagon so that I could receive it and destroy the flag at the Pentagon.

Now the secret is, we don't destroy flags at the Pentagon, it's not one of the things that we do. But he said "Hey we'll get a picture of me giving you the flag and they we can figure out the best way to dispose of it. Would you be willing to do that?" And I said "Sure."

So, a few weeks later he shows up and he's got this old tattered flag that had been retired from the flag pole in front of East Elementary School in Cullman Alabama. And he presents it to me and we took our pictures so that he could bring them back to Cullman.

Along with the flag he also handed me two envelopes. And those envelopes were filled with notes from students describing what that flag meant to them. And by the time I finished reading the notes, which were accompanied by a poem written by a 6<sup>th</sup> grader, about our flag, I had tears streaming down my face and I said there's no way in hell I'm going to destroy this flag!

So, we folded the flag into a tri-corner, got a frame for it, and displayed it in our office in the Pentagon. And I sent a letter to Mr. David Wiggins, the principal at East Elementary School and said hey, got your flag, got those wonderful notes from your students. There's no way I'm destroying your flag. It's going to be on display here in the Pentagon.

Fast-forward 3 years later, without ever expecting it, Diane and I find ourselves in Huntsville Alabama. So I said, geeze, I wonder where Cullman is? And I was carrying around a letter that I had gotten back from Mr. Wiggins acknowledging my note, so we found Cullman on the map, realized that it was just a few short miles south of here.

We contacted Mr. Wiggins and told him that if there was ever an opportunity for us to come and visit the school, I'd like to do that. So he wrote back, he said "yes," and he invited me to come down, which Diane and I did recently on the day before Memorial Day. We went there to participate in their awards ceremony.

Two days prior to that, the office that I had worked in at the Pentagon, knew that we were now in Alabama and that we didn't want that flag destroyed, and shipped the flag to us. So, it is now on display in the Headquarters of the United States Army Space and Missile Defense Command, right outside the CG's office. And that's where it will stay, at least as long as I'm in command.

So, we had the opportunity to go down and talk to the students about character. While we were listening to all the awards that those young students were getting, it dawned on me that I was learning more about character from them than anything I was goanna share with them.

But it was a great privilege and honor for Diane and I to be down there to link up with that school, to meet those students. And, oh by the way, just to bring the story full circle, while we were there we heard the Principal's side of the story. They retired the flag, had two Marines in their dress uniforms who folded it properly; they put it on display in their library. Students had the opportunity to go by and say farewell to their flag... Can you imagine an elementary school doing that???

And it was in that period that they were dropping the notes off with the flag that ended up accompanying the flag to the Pentagon. And Katie Peyton, who is now an 8<sup>th</sup> grader at their middle school and who is the author of that poem was at the awards ceremony and read her poem to the students.

So, that's my flag story. I thought you'd appreciate that as you pause here in Athens to celebrate our Nation's flag. That's a real world story from right here in hometown Alabama about our flag. Is that Hooah or what?

And just as I hope that his experience, and the opportunity that Diane and I had to come to Athens State for the first time to honor Ms Cathy Dickens when she was awarded an Alumni award a few months ago, will become an opportunity to stay connected with Athens State University, so too we expect to stay connected to Cullman. I've already been invited to come back for their Veterans' Day ceremony in November.

Just as the United States has its flag, so too our units have unit colors and Soldiers rally behind their colors. Our unit colors symbolize our history – they represent our lineage and our honors. In the Space and Missile Defense Command our motto is "Secure the High Ground," – the highest of the high grounds. It's an honor for me to be able to tell you that our colors were able to accompany one of our Army astronauts into space.

On December 21, 2009, Army Astronaut COL T.J. Creamer, seated here next to Diane on the front row, carried the United States Army Space and Missile Defense Command colors into space. COL Creamer lived and worked aboard the International Space Station, returning to Earth on June 2, 2010. All told, COL Creamer and our Unit

Colors logged 163 days in space. Later this afternoon, at a ceremony in our Headquarters, COL Creamer will formally present those colors to the command where they will go on display – probably next to the National colors that we took from East Elementary School in Cullman Alabama.

These colors, by the way, are right behind Dr. Glenn. Those are the colors that flew to the International Space Station with COL Creamer. COL Creamer is with us as I said, and will be available to visit and sign autographs during lunch. We're very proud of him and all of our currently serving four U.S. Army astronauts. In fact he and I had an opportunity to talk today about what we need to do to sustain the program. If you've got any young students out there that are interested, we're looking for future astronauts. And we're very, very proud of his selection, his service to our nation in the Army and his service to our nation as one of its elite astronauts. So TJ, thank you very much for your service.

Today we paused here at Athens State University, took a little detour to recognize the birthday of our United States Army 236 years ago – Happy Birthday, and you paused really to honor the Flag and our Nation. And again I thank you for taking the time to do that.

You can all be proud of America's Team – Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen and Civilians that serve that flag today and are keeping our nation safe and secure in this dangerous and uncertain world.

On behalf of our United States Army, I thank you for pausing to reflect today. I thank you for supporting our Soldiers and their Families. I thank you for what you do for us every day in your community and in this Nation.

Happy Birthday Army! Happy Flag Day!

Thank you. Hooah! Army Strong!

Written: 2008 by Katie Peyton

Read: 27 May 2011 at East Elementary School Award Ceremony

### Flawed but Not Forgotten

Old Glory, Looking down on me,  
I watch you for a while.  
You show off our right to be free.  
You make your people smile.

I think of feelings that you bring,  
to people, far and near.  
Sometimes they grin, sometimes they sing,  
Sometimes they shed a tear.

Your rips and tears I now find.  
I know you're almost through-  
with waving at my school, so kind.  
Your flaws are part of you.

I pledge to you every day.  
In your comfort, I stand.  
You must retire, you cannot stay-  
But we still think you're grand.  
Old Glory, we miss you so.  
We know, soon you will leave.  
Remember us, please, when you go.  
In you, we always believe.

With love, and always respect, Katie Peyton