

231st Marine Corps Birthday Speech

Presented by LtCol. David Cooper, USMC (Retired)

To the Members and Guests of Delta Diablo Detachment 1155 of the Marine Corps League

On 4 November, 2006 at the Lone Tree Golf Course and Event Center, Antioch, CA

Ladies and Gentlemen, friends, Sailors and Marines. Let me first say thank you for allowing me to be your guest here this evening, on the 231st birthday of our beloved Corps. The Birthday Ball carries a special meaning to Marines because it keeps our traditions alive with visible pageantry and ceremony. This Ball is particularly special for me as this is my first birthday as a Retired Marine.

This evening, we have heard the words of our 13th Commandant, and those of our 33rd Commandant. In both of these addresses, the martial nature of Marines and the Corps are brought out. Our history is also brought out, not as a lecture or academic exercise, but in a way to invoke a shared memory of our past. This shared memory, and the fighting spirit that drives it, is central in the development of our common bond and is an attribute that is truly unique to Marines, and the Sailors that serve along side us. It is evident in all aspects of the Corps, in our Hymn, in our recruiting process, in our training, and in our refusal to fail on the field of battle.

Long before we become Marines, we begin developing our shared memory with the words of the Marine Corps Hymn, we Marines "Fought our country's battles" in "every clime and place", and we specifically bring in the danger, noting that "In many a fight we've fought for life and never lost our nerve". Of course, we also bring in our history and traditions, "From the Halls of Montezuma to the Shores of Tripoli" and clearly beyond. Now, for the sake of comparison, let's see what the other branches are singing about. The Army Song sounds like a weekend picnic "Over hill over dale we will hit the dusty trail". Dust can be unpleasant of course, but rarely fatal. The navy Anchor's Aweigh positively celebrates the joys of sailing into the sunset on a great adventure, almost like a Jimmy Buffet ballad. The Air Force comes the closest, to be fair, but while they are flying "under the gun", they are gloriously invigorated and safe. No bad guys in the Wild Blue Yonder, but lots of fun.

Marines are the only service that specifically and actively seeks out warfighters, not just now in time of war, but also in times of peace. This is the basis of the challenge that we issue to prospective candidates "Do you have the metal", "The Few, The Proud". The other services offer personal development, fun and adventure, and security. Missing in their recruiting efforts is the recognition that we ask those who serve in the military to suffer and possibly die for our country and to take lives at the risk of their own. We promise only the truth, and sell only our history yet we are constantly meeting recruiting goals with the most magnificent young people that our country has to offer.

It is in the initial training program, whether the Recruit Depot or Officer Candidate that the collective memory

truly takes form. Throughout this initial accession training curriculum, fully integrated with the Marine Corps Martial Arts training; Close Order Drill; Rifle Marksmanship; and Core Values training; is Marine Corps History, Customs and Traditions. And, of course, not all who have been cleared by the recruiters are able to make the cut. Even now, in a time where every Marine is needed, some 14% of recruits and 34% of Officer Candidates do not earn the right to join our ranks. <86% graduation rate from Boot Camp, 64% for Officer Candidate programs> The Corps reserves the right to be exclusive and elite and to select those deemed worthy of our legacy.

It is because of our training and embedded sense of continuity that, while a soldier would be hard pressed to even name a single battle from the First World War, a similar question of any Marine will likely result in a detailed description of a wheat field at Belleau Wood and the courage of the Fourth Marine Brigade. Faced with an enemy of superior numbers entrenched in improved positions amongst tangled forest undergrowth, the Marines received the order to attack, and attack we did. Starting with a near suicidal advance across an open wheat field that was swept from end to end by the interlocking fires of German machine guns. The attack slowed and began to falter, that is, until a bandy-legged little barrel of a Gunnery Sergeant uttered those immortal words "Come on you sons of bitches! Do you want to live forever"? The Marines, armed with little more than bayonets, hand grenades, and an indomitable fighting spirit, crossed that field into the teeth of the veteran German Seventh Army and expelled them from the wood. French liaison officers accompanying the Marine Brigade, hardened by four long years of bloody trench warfare, were shocked to witness such a display, but were so impressed by the Marines valor and intrepid determination, that their reports stated that they believed that no force could withstand an attack by this Brigade and that surely the war would soon be over. Because of the significance of this action, the French government changed the official name of the wood to Bois de la Brigade de Marine to honor the courage of the Marine Brigade.

Every Marine knows this story, and dozens more. Stories that speak of heroic deeds in places like Tripoli, Guadalcanal, Pelilu, Tarawa, Iwo Jima, Pusan, Chosin Reservoir, Khe Sanh, Hue City, Khafji, Kuwait City, Nasirayah, and Fallujah. We are taught them at the start of our lives as Marines and we are not entitled to wear the emblem, nor can we claim the title of Marine without knowing those that made that emblem and title meaningful. These stories are a part of us, and so long as we can march and shoot and admire the legacy of the Corps, we can take our place in the line.

And that line is unified in spirit as much as in purpose. A soldier or airman wears a branch insignia on their uniform, and patches or crests to identify the unit. A Sailor wears a rating badge to indicate their function in

the Navy, and if in a sea billet, a tab on the shoulder to indicate the ship. A Marine wears only the Eagle, Globe and Anchor, personal awards and shooting badges. Nothing else. In fact, it has only been since 1992 that we have been wearing nametags on the field uniform and we are the only service that does not wear nametags on our service uniforms. A Marine is, by design, anonymous and unknown as an individual, first, foremost and always a rifleman and identifiable only as a Marine. And this is as true for those who have served two years as it is for those who have served 20, in war or in peace, active or reserve. All are willing and all are able.

On 7 May, 2005, Lance Corporal Todd Corbin, a 32 year old Marine Corps Reserve Motor Transport Driver with 3/25, was serving as a truck driver for a quick reaction force operation when a suicide bomber drove a van between the two lead vehicles and detonated it destroying both vehicles and killing three Marines. Almost simultaneously, the small force was taken under intense fire from a numerically superior enemy using machine guns and rocket propelled grenades, disabling the other 7 ton truck and killing a Navy corpsman. LCpl Corbin immediately moved the sole serviceable vehicle into the kill zone, placing it between the enemy and many of the wounded, and leaped into the enemy fire directing Marines to engage and marking targets with aimed rifle fire from his M-16. Organizing the Marines to suppress and repel the ambush, LCpl Corbin repeatedly crossed the open kill zone to recover wounded and dead comrades, loading everyone into his truck. Once all Marines and Sailors were onboard, he remounted the vehicle, activated the emergency systems, and departed the kill zone and returned to his base. Of the 19 Marines and Corpsmen in the Quick Reaction Force, only 5 returned uninjured, but due to LCpl Corbin's leadership and initiative under fire, no American lives were lost after the initial attack. For his actions, LCpl Corbin was awarded the Navy Cross. His only comment on his heroic actions was "It's just what you're trained for... and you do it for your buddies."

"You do it for your buddies". You don't let your fellow Marines down, past, present or future. LCpl Corbin is a truck driver, a reservist, a warrior, a leader, a rifleman, a Marine.

And of course, we never cease to be Marines. We take the Corps with us wherever we go. By the time the Drill Instructors are through with us, they have tattooed the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor on our very souls. Unlike the aches and pains of recruit training, or the scars of wounds received on the battle field, which tend to lessen and fade over time, the presence of the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor in our hearts and in our minds, in our very consciousness, only grows in intensity and becomes more defined. There are those here present this evening, who, on finishing their term of service, thought that they wanted nothing more to do with the Corps. But as time passed, and the physical and emotional injuries faded, the aching need to rejoin that company of warriors and to be among fellow Marines, among a band ferociously loyal and devoted to an ideal, began to stir once again. You see, we cannot cease being Marines. It is truly more like a vocation than profession, and

to turn away for very long would be to deny our very beings.

This aspect of our nature is exemplified in the story of a young man who enlisted in the Navy during the First World War, decided to join the Army after the war ended, and finally determined to serve in the Marine Corps as a PFC from 1920 to 1922. Following his military service, he worked as a miner while obtaining a college education, eventually becoming a professor of history and political science at Montana State University. He then entered politics and served for 11 years in the House of Representatives, only leaving it when elected to the US Senate, where he served an additional 24 years, including terms as both the majority whip and the majority leader. When he decided to retire from the Senate, he was asked to serve as the Ambassador of the United States to Japan, where he served for 11 more years before finally retiring from public service. When he died in 2001, he was buried in Arlington Cemetery and his marker, in accordance with his wishes, identifies him as Michael J. Mansfield, PFC, US Marine Corps. It seems that Ambassador Mansfield, with over 50 years of distinguished public service and 10 years of academic prominence, was most proud of being a Marine. But I would expect that, as he was a historian and was well versed in our common history.

You see, we Marines really are more alike than we are different, at least in the things that really matter. Among Marines, we do not generally stand out, but among the rest of our fellow Americans, we absolutely stand apart. We stand out because of that essential building block of our character that drove us to become Marines in the first place. That willingness to dedicate our whole selves to an ideal and to, if necessary sacrifice our lives for the survival of our fellow Marines, our Country, and our Corps. And as a result of this, we have become a truly American institution, the living embodiment of chivalry, self discipline, reliability, and the American spirit. This is why of the 19 individuals to receive two awards of the Medal of Honor, 7 are Marines.

And it is because of our shared memory, personalized, internalized, eventually forming a core element of our DNA that we know not just where we come from; but where we are going and why we cannot fail in completing the mission. The history of our Corps is so infused into our collective memory that any thought of failing those who came before, of not being true to their example, is anathema to us. Marines do live forever, not as individuals, but as a permanent part of the continuing legacy of the Corps. I will close my remarks this evening with two lines from our 13th Commandant's favorite poem. The Battle of Belleau Wood by Edgar Guest: "For the honor of the fallen, for the glory of the dead, The living line of courage kept the faith and moved ahead".

Semper Fidelis.
Happy Birthday Marines.