

Remarks by the Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
Our Community Salutes Ceremony for Military Recruits
Jackson, Mississippi
Saturday, 12 May 2012

Dr. Dorsey Carson; you know, my parents are both gone for a long time, but I wish they had been here tonight to hear Dorsey. My father would have been very proud. My mother would have believed every word of it.

I want to thank you all.

To General Harold Cross – Dorsey, you're not the only one that has to speak after a mesmerizing, spellbinding speaker.

To Kenneth Hartman, thank you for being here and for founding *Our Community Salutes*.

And as proud as I am to get this award, and I am, and as proud as I am to be home, and I am, I am prouder of the people in this room who are stepping forward, willing to serve this country, willing to wear the uniform of this country.

You have in your midst a lot of people on active duty. Some of you are Sailors, Marines, Airmen. And they represent what you will soon represent – the heritage, the history, the dedication and the skill that are the armed forces today.

Mississippi has a long history with the American military. We enlist at a rate higher than almost any other state. We serve America as Mississippians. And I want to tell you a very quick story about one Mississippian named Jack Lucas.

Jack Lucas was from Hattiesburg. Unlike you, he lied about his age and joined the Marine Corps in World War II. He was 14. He made it all the way through boot camp, made it to Hawaii, before they found out how old he was. And they pulled him out and said: “You're going home; you're too young.”

Jack Lucas did not want to go home, so he stowed away on the first ship he could find. Didn't know where it was going. It happened to be going to an island called Iwo Jima. By the time they found him, it was too late to do anything, and he went ashore with one of the first waves.

Two grenades came into his unit's position and he grabbed them both and fell on them. Now, Iwo Jima is made up of volcanic rock and sand that's very fine and very soft. He took both those grenades and shoved them as far down into the sand as he could.

They both went off, and he was hurt pretty badly. His unit thought he was killed. When a corpsman came along and patched him up, he went back to the U.S., went to the White House and was awarded the Medal of Honor. And then he came back home and started the ninth grade.

That's what Mississippians are made of. That's what your heritage is. There are thousands of stories like Jack Lucas' – thousands of stories of heroism, courage, of dedication, of patriotism. And that's what you are joining.

Dorsey mentioned last year, and last week was the anniversary, the first anniversary of the raid that brought the worst terrorist in the world to justice. That was a raid led by Navy SEALs, but every single service had people on that raid. Every single service participated in that raid.

And as brave as those warriors were and are, as skilled as those Special Forces were and are, they are not out of the ordinary. Everybody, everybody who wears the uniform of this country, everybody who serves in the military today, everybody who has been willing to volunteer to stand a watch, to protect this country and protect and defend freedom, is equally skilled, equally dedicated, equally patriotic and equally up to the challenge as those Special Forces who got Osama bin Laden. That is what you're joining.

Harold Cross is an incredibly eloquent speaker. He and I are pretty close to the same age. When I joined the Navy over 40 years ago, the Navy I was in had a lot of dedicated people. But we couldn't touch the service of today. The military that we joined just couldn't match the military that you are joining.

I mean, we never left port on my ship without leaving a couple folks back in jail. That just doesn't happen today. It does not happen. And there's not a judge in this country that says, "Go to jail or join the Navy." Because if they do, we're not going to take them.

I talk about the Navy and the Marine Corps because that's what I lead. But when I'm talking about it, if you're joining the Army or the Air Force or one of our National Guard units, it stands for them, too.

But I want to tell you about one day in the Navy and Marine Corps. The day I pick was March 19th of last year. Let me tell you what your Navy and Marine Corps were doing that day, because the Navy and Marine Corps are America's away team.

If we're doing our job, we're usually a long way from home and people don't understand exactly how good the Navy and Marine Corps are, or how skilled or how complicated what they do is.

On that one day we had submarines and surface ships shooting cruise missiles into Libya to establish a no-fly zone. That same day we had a big deck amphibious ship flying air support over Libya to help establish that zone. That same day, 20,000 Marines were in combat in Afghanistan. That same day, 4,000 Sailors were on the ground in Afghanistan supporting that fight.

That same day, there were 12,000 Sailors on the ground in the Middle East. That same day, there were 9,000 Sailors at sea in the Middle East. That same day, you had ships fighting pirates off the coast of Africa. That same day, you had a carrier strike group, USS Ronald Reagan Strike Group, that had turned in less than two hours after the tsunami hit Japan and went to Japan to deliver aid, bringing medical care and food and water to those stricken communities.

That same day, an amphibious ready group out of southern Japan loaded its Marines, loaded its equipment and went north into the danger zone to help the people of Japan. That same day, we had ships in the Caribbean interdicting drugs headed for America. That same day, there was a ship going around Africa, an Africa partnership station, to build partnerships that we're going to need in the future.

That same day, another ship was going around South America doing exactly the same thing. That same day, a hospital ship was going through the Southern Pacific, bringing humanitarian assistance to people in need.

That's one day. That's one day, and that is not an unusual day in the Navy and the Marine Corps. That's what you're joining. You can tell story after story.

I went to the Reagan two weeks after the tsunami. I got briefed about how they were using the same targeting techniques to get the right things in the right aircraft in the right sequence going to the right place, the same targeting techniques they were going to use to provide combat air support over Afghanistan.

And by the way, the Navy and Marine Corps provide over a third of the air support over Afghanistan.

And the people that briefed me were an ensign and a third class petty officer. The third class petty officer was 20 years old. We push responsibility down in the military, and that is our secret weapon. That is why we have the best military in the world. We don't make decisions from the top all the way down. We depend on people throughout the ranks to make decisions and carry their load. To not wait to be told to do something.

The Marine Corps, we've got some Marines right here, have something they call the strategic corporal. Every corporal in the Marine Corps has to know what his job is or her job, they have to know what their unit's job is; they have to know where they are and why they are there.

And if you ask a corporal in the Marine Corps, that corporal is going to be able to tell you everything I just went through. My Navy aide, an F-18 pilot, talked about being on the deck in his airplane of a carrier that was in a storm and was pitching so violently that he thought his plane and a bunch of other planes were going over the side and he was going to die, when the flight crews came running out on deck with chains and hooked them around the aircraft to hold them.

The average age on a flight deck in the United States Navy on the carrier was 19 years old. Nobody had to tell those folks to go out and save the people and the aircraft.

What you are going to do is going to be hard. There's no getting around it. But what you're going to do, whether you serve for four years or 40, will stick with you for the rest of your lives.

I get to do a lot of cool things in this job. I get to name ships; I get to visit Sailors and Marines all around the world. One of the things I get to do is I get to talk with some of the veterans Harold Cross talked about. And I went and talked to the crew of the USS Stephen Potter.

Launched in 1943, it went to sea in 1943 and did not come back until the war was over. Twelve battle stars in 18 months. Survived submarine attacks, five kamikaze attacks. And all these veterans on the Stephen Potter, when you talk to them, and they're all in their late eighties or nineties now, this was the time in their life that burns the most brightly. This is the time of their life that they're the most proud of.

This is the time in their life when they did something bigger than themselves, when they served a cause greater than the individual, when they served America.

Harold Cross did the math. Fewer than one percent of America serves in the uniform of America. One percent to protect the other 99 percent, and that is a special bond.

Parents, I want to give you one other statistic, and this ought to scare you. Your children that are joining tonight have done something that three out of four Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 cannot qualify to do, and that's join the U.S. military. Seventy-five percent of our children can't qualify to join the armed services and participate in the defense of this country.

Your children have already succeeded. We don't take anybody in the military without a high school degree. Don't do it. We don't issue any waivers anymore. We don't take anybody that's not in good health and not in good shape, although you'll be in better shape after boot camp. And we don't take anybody who's ever gotten in to trouble. Three out of four don't qualify. The people here tonight do.

But when you go back to your hometowns across Mississippi, I want you to talk to the other parents. Talk to the other teenagers, young people. Tell them that there are no jobs in the military or anywhere else anymore for strong backs and weak minds.

When you join the United States military, you're going to be operating some of the most complicated and complex and expensive equipment in the world. A new destroyer built in Pascagoula cost almost \$2 billion. It'll have about 280 Sailors on it. We don't entrust that kind of equipment to just anybody.

The new Joint Strike Fighter is going to cost 70 [million dollars], \$80 million in aircraft. The F18s we fly today cost \$25 million in aircraft. We don't entrust those to just anybody.

The attack sub, the USS Mississippi, we're going to commission from Pascagoula on June 2nd has a crew of 125 and cost \$2.8 billion. We don't entrust that to just anybody.

You have to get a good education. You have to. And America has to graduate more people from high school. America has to do a better job of education. America has to have more than three-quarters of its people, or more than a quarter of its young people, to qualify for the military if we are going to retain the title of the greatest nation on earth that Harold Cross so eloquently described.

You have chosen, whether you're in for one enlistment or a career, a life of service, and that is the highest calling anyone can choose.

So thank you. For 237 years the United States Army, and for 236 years the United States Navy and Marine Corps – and Harold, I'm counting the Air Force as part of the Army – have protected America, have projected our power, have made sure that nights like this exist.

On behalf of the United States, thank you. On behalf of the Navy, Semper Fortis – forever courageous. On behalf of the Marines, Semper Fidelis – forever faithful.

Thank you all.