

Prepared Remarks for the Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
Semper Fidelis Society/Fisher House Dinner
Boston, Massachusetts
Tuesday, November 10, 2009

Ms. Anne Allred, thank you for that introduction. Mayor Tom Menino, Lt. Governor Tim Murray, distinguished guests; it is an honor to be here tonight on the birthday of the United States Marine Corps. I am especially grateful that we could be joined by some of our Wounded Warriors and by ten valiant Medal of Honor Recipients from the Second World War, Korea, and, Vietnam.

Mr. Finn, I'm told that you believe that the hero business is overstated – that most people, if placed in the situations where you and your comrades found yourselves, would have acted the same way. What I believe is that when each of you were confronted by dangerous and difficult circumstances against a determined enemy, you acted as heroes. All our Sailors and Marines rightly hold up your actions as examples of the meaning of duty, honor, and country.

The term hero is often overused, but tonight we are in the presence of real heroes.

Among us tonight sits a Sailor who, courageous and exposed, fired a machine gun directly in the face of attacking planes at Pearl Harbor.

Among us tonight are those who have thrown themselves on grenades to save their comrades.

Among us tonight are those who rallied their troops in the face of loss and life-threatening injuries to take an enemy position or hold their own against overwhelming odds.

And among us tonight are some of our nation's present day warriors. Those who have served in Iraq or Afghanistan and have borne the cost in the injuries they sustained.

To our Medal of Honor recipients and to our Wounded Warriors, I cannot adequately express how grateful the nation is for your service. You represent the best of the military, the best of the Navy and Marine Corps, and the best of America – we owe you a debt of gratitude that can never be fully repaid. Thank you.

I'd also like to thank some different, but no less real, heroes; the Semper Fi Society and the Fisher House Foundation. Since 1991, the Fisher House has provided housing near military and VA medical facilities for our Wounded Warriors and their families while they are undergoing specialized treatment. The Fisher House Foundation has also provided over 18,000 airline tickets worth \$25 million through the Hero Miles program, and they have donated monetary awards to dozens of other charities and organizations committed to our veterans and their families. When Fisher House Boston is up and running on the grounds of the VA Medical Center in West Roxbury, it will fill a vital need in the veteran community, providing 20 suites to veterans and their families when they need it.

For its part, the Semper Fi Society, under the adept leadership of Tom Lyons, has been a force for good with our veterans and active duty personnel throughout the Boston area. Called Mr. "Fix-It" by the Quantico Sentry last year, Tom has done just a great job up here.

It is wonderful to be back in Boston. After college, I joined my ship here, the *USS LITTLE ROCK*, down at the Boston Navy Yard. Later, I went to law school here – most of my classes by chance happened to be held at Fenway Park and the old Boston

Garden. I feel like Boston is a second home; as far as I'm concerned it's actually the northernmost city in Mississippi. And it's great to be able to share my memories with my daughter Elisabeth, who is here tonight taking a break from her classes at Harvard. So you'll have to forgive me if I'm nothing but smiles – my excitement at being in the city is only tempered by my disappointment in the end of the baseball season.

Today is a very special birthday. 234 years ago today, Captain Samuel Nicholas walked into a tavern in one of the tougher parts of the Philadelphia waterfront seeking to find men to serve as Continental Marines aboard the ships of the new Navy. He recruited five companies of Marines and early the next year set sail with Esek Hopkins en route to capture Nassau in the Bahamas on March 3, 1776 – an attack that foreshadowed the expeditionary and amphibious capability of the Marine Corps that they have demonstrated to deadly effect over the history of our country.

234 years later; the times have changed, the technology has certainly improved, the missions of the Marine Corps have grown and expanded, and the Corps is much bigger – but its ethos and its purpose are the same. The Marine Corps stands ready as America's elite fighting force to fulfill any mission it's assigned, and it has consistently proven its professionalism and superior combat capability in defense of the United States. Marines deter when they can, fight when they must, and always win.

That is a legacy that has earned Marines the titles of Leatherneck and Devil Dog; titles earned in battles fought since the beginning of our country. The history of the Corps is very much the history of our nation. Every significant military action of the United States, and most of the smaller ones, have involved the Marine Corps. That is an impressive feat, considering that less than 1 percent of the population of the United States

wears a military uniform, and only 1 in 10 of those in uniform are Marines. Never has the freedom and liberty of so many rested on the skill and courage of so few.

The Marine Corps is our expeditionary force, and in combination with the Navy, they have fought as the United States' "Away team" for 234 years. They are still fighting in that role. A snapshot of the Navy and Marine Corps today would show you a Marine Expeditionary Brigade fighting in Helmand Province, Afghanistan and almost 7000 Marines still operating in Western Iraq. In their operations, they are supported by attack aircraft flying off of the USS *NIMITZ* operating in the Arabian Sea. Moving around the world, you'd see the USS *GEORGE WASHINGTON* sailing off the coast of China, having just completed a visit to Hong Kong. You'd see the AEGIS ships *ANZIO*, *PINKNEY*, and *CHOSIN* conducting counter-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden. And just to the south of us, in New York City, you'd see the Sailors and Marines of our newest warship, the USS *NEW YORK*, enjoying a few days of liberty after the ship's commissioning before getting underway and getting back to the business of the Navy.

In my six months as Secretary, I've had the opportunity to travel to the places where Sailors and Marines are working and fighting. Their service is truly exemplary.

Within the Marine Corps:

- 75 percent of Marines have been to the fight in Iraq or Afghanistan.
- 75 percent of these young men and women are under 25.
- 75 percent of them are Lance Corporals or junior.

More than any other service, the Marine Corps lives the truth of the Strategic Corporal. The effect one young Marine has upon this country and her perception abroad is just tremendous. They are making us proud every day.

Vignettes about:

- Pendleton – Infantry Immersion Training center
- Afghanistan – Camp Bastion, Camp Leatherneck
- Iraq – how Marines are maintaining focus as drawdown occurs
- Okinawa/Japan – Marines here are standing on the walls, making sure nothing bad happens in the neighborhood.

Marines and Sailors are literally deployed around the world, engaged in the full range of military operations. They are fighting the enemy in combat, they are assuring our allies, they are keeping the peace, and they are providing humanitarian aid and disaster relief to those in need. That is the beauty of our forces. We don't need anyone's permission to operate at sea. We don't have to go home and get our gun. We bring our guns and our supplies with us, and we can enter a crisis or operation at any point along the spectrum of conflict.

I'd like to close by focusing again on the Marines and Sailors serving out there on the front lines. They are the finest young men and women in America. Whether serving in Afghanistan or in the Arabian Gulf, they serve with distinction and do whatever we ask of them. They are carrying on the fine traditions of the Service and the example set by the heroes in this room. Thank you again for coming. Thank you for your continued support of our military, our Navy and our Marine Corps. Godspeed and Semper Fi.