

Address of General James L. Jones
Wreath Laying Ceremony
Marine Corps War Memorial
November 10, 2012

Ladies and gentlemen, I have finally reached that point in life where I can come to a wonderful gathering such as this one, and stand up in front of you and say, with some degree of certainty, that I still recall the first time I witnessed this ceremony; it was in 1963, when I was a sophomore at Georgetown. My uncle, then BGen WK Jones, along with my aunt, invited me to attend the ceremony and I did.

Like everyone else, I was deeply impressed by the magnificence of the memorial and the pageantry that was, like today, on display. It also marked the first time I became style conscious where Marine Corps uniforms were concerned.

My uncle was kind enough to introduce me to a number of his fellow general officers, and I was mightily impressed. What I remember most vividly was the color contrast of the then required olive drab overcoat (the horse blanket) worn over the magnificent dress blue uniform. It only took about another 30 years to figure out that blue on blue was the way to go!

By the way, I must also confess that in 1967, while I was a student at TBS, I was one of many Lieutenants who managed to “avoid” buying the “horse blanket” which was still required, even though most of us were destined immediately for Vietnam.

But, it is an honor to participate in this time-honored ceremony today. I echo the Commandant’s special recognition of the sacrifices made by our Guadalcanal veterans just over 70 years ago. In that operation, these Marines wrote a remarkable chapter in the history of the corps.

It is particularly evocative for me because my uncle was a company commander in 1st Bn, 6th Marines in that battle. Shortly thereafter, at the ripe old age of 27, he became the youngest battalion commander in the Marine Corps, commanding 1/6, at the time. For his actions he was awarded the Navy Cross. After the war he kept his rank and had only one more promotion to Colonel between 1944 and 1962 when he was selected to Brigadier General.

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Guadalcanal is one of the storied battles that helped guarantee the “existence of the Marine Corps for the next 500 years”, as Sec Nav Forrester mused as he watched the battle for Iwo Jima unfold.

We gather every year on this hallowed ground to remember our Corps’ great battles -- large and small. Felix de Weldon’s masterpiece, and it is a masterpiece, memorializes Marines who have borne the burden of combat, who have carried the trust of their fellow citizens to foreign shores and the many who never returned.

It is right and fitting to remember the valor and fidelity demonstrated by Marines in the historic battles etched on the base of this monument and emblazoned forever in the history books of the nation, and the hearts of our people.

But our obligation is far greater than ceremonies of remembrance, as important as they are. We also have a duty to honor the heroism of these campaigns by drawing from them enduring lessons that, if we heed wisely, can ensure the future security of the nation for which so many have laid down such a costly sacrifice.

The campaign planning for Guadalcanal provides just such a strategic teaching moment. ***It is instructive*** for us to understand that the actions of Marines taken well before the first rounds were fired, shaped the battlefield and paved the way to victory.

Guadalcanal provides the backdrop against which we can clearly see Marines unbounded in vision, diligent in preparation, and in possession of undaunted courage in execution.

In retrospect it might strike some as unlikely that just over seventy years ago, the road to victory in a future-defining campaign led through a small patch of jungle in a backwater chain of islands called the Solomons.

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My father, then Captain Jones, commanded the Corps' first ever Force Reconnaissance Company under General Holland M Smith, and participated in many missions in advance of our major landings.

Today, Guadalcanal is a small dot on the map. But in 1942, Guadalcanal was strategically critical, and gaining control of the island from the Japanese would mark the United States' transition from the defensive to the offensive in the Pacific. The road to Iwo Jima, and eventually Tokyo bay began at Guadalcanal. The landing at Guadalcanal was virtually unopposed on the first day, a condition that was to change almost overnight. The battle on the Island, in the seas surrounding it, and in the skies above it truly represented the coming of age **not** only of the modern Marine Corps but also of the modern surface Navy.

When one thinks about examples of the Navy-Marine Corps team in action, along with those of the Army-Air forces, scholars would do well to remember this battle as perhaps our nation's first joint combat operation!

In perfect hindsight, however, the success of that first large-scale amphibious operation in the Pacific was not pre-ordained. The Marines, Sailors, and Soldiers who survived the savagery and hardship of Guadalcanal persevered in the face of long odds and sustained enormous casualties. This was an offensive operation into a new theater. This was also the validation of a new way of offensive operation. This was savagery and hardship unanticipated and the results remained in doubt for months. But against all odds, victory was achieved.

We can say that the road to victory in the Pacific began at Guadalcanal and we would be partially right. But the road to victory on Guadalcanal began in the minds of men more than a decade before that battle.

Today we honor the service of those who fought on that distant island. And today we also learn from the visionary leaders and innovators who made that victory possible. The preparation for the Guadalcanal campaign began as early as 1916, when visionary leaders such as Gen. John A. Lejeune began to shape the Marine Corps to meet the needs of the future.

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In the uncertainty and fiscal austerity of the inter-war period, the Marine Corps took stock of a changing world, and realigned the Corps' capabilities to meet the demands of a modern United States nation that was destined to lead in the family of nations for the rest of the century.

This was not a time for retrenchment. It was a time for action. The Corps transitioned from a small-wars constabulary force into an expeditionary one, and it needed to do so very rapidly. We transitioned from the trench warfare of WWI to a force that could seize and defend advanced naval bases. We transitioned from small ship's detachments to an effective combined-arms landing force. The Corps recognized the fundamental value of the amphibious assault, and it needed to overcome enormous resistance to the reality that change was necessary to meet the challenges in a new and evolving security environment.

In effect, transition and modernization were necessary to produce a force that could, when called upon, produce victory on Guadalcanal. In many ways, we find ourselves in circumstances similar to those of earlier days. After years of extended land campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, our security landscape is again changing. After years of steady defense funding, our fiscal landscape will affect our forces more so than the customary post-war push for a "peace dividend." The economic and budgetary strains of our time are greatly challenging the ability to meet our nation's needs and expectations in a swiftly changing world.

Nonetheless, the nation will continue to place different demands on her Marines, and will expect us to meet them with frugality and creativity. Marines will have to adapt to new missions and new challenges to meet new threats.

Our adversaries today are cunning, brutal, entrepreneurial, and opportunistic. They study our actions and can be counted on to avoid our strengths. They have moved deeper into the human domain to circumvent our conventional military superiority.

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It is on this ground where they hope to gain their advantage: by preying on human want and desperation; by perverting faith, subverting human rights, and eradicating rule of law; by employing subterfuge, fear, and intimidation to wrest power, find refuge, and gain strength in conducting an asymmetric fight they believe they can win. And it is on this terrain that we must fight them.

Modern human conflict is forging complex, new realities -- realities that belie the ability of precision fires to solve every security challenge; realities that demand tighter interwoven strategies, not just for the joint force, but for a whole of government, indeed a whole of society approach.

Realities that demand a new kind of capability that can step into the breach between the passions of human aspiration and the ugliness of tyranny, violence, and greed.

Like Guadalcanal, the road to victory in this changing context of conflict begins in the minds of our Marines today. Today, we must have the same vision and courage to embrace new missions, new strategies, and new tactics. After a decade of conflict, it is once again a time for action, not retrenchment.

Today we can see the outlines of new challenges and our new responses to them. We see ahead the demand for coordinating the three pillars of human advancement: security, economic development, and good-governance/rule of law. We can see the advantages of collective security and the complex web of diplomacy, commerce, and military cooperation that must be woven together in order to be effective.

Today we can see that our nation is made more secure, not solely through conventional military advantage, but also through the ability to create common interests and values, meet common human needs, and forge a common global system of security.

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Marines are a natural conduit to success in this environment. Our nation needs a capability that can deter enemies and respond to crisis. We need Marines who can provide a stabilizing presence forward and build strong security partnerships. We need Marines that can operate with agility as part of a new and comprehensive national toolkit -- one that sets conditions proactively in order to prevent future conflict, respond to crisis and defeat our enemies.

The Marines of vision today must prepare for the missions of tomorrow before they are imposed on us.

The Marines of vision today must innovate new ways of power projection that enable and align multiple elements of national power.

The Marines of vision today must build not only strong military partnerships, but also create access for broad-ranging human connections with our friends and allies around the globe.

It is the legacy of success that our veterans here today have created for us -- a legacy of battlefield and institutional courage that those memorialized by this monument would be proud of. In our well-conceived vision of the future lies the seed of our success.

The continued success of Marines on future battlefields must begin in our minds today. If history is any guide, Marines will weather a tough environment and emerge from it even better than we were before.

Marines will continue to earn their reputation, not just for uncommon valor, but also for the difficult virtues of innovation, adaptability, discipline and moral courage.

Ladies and gentlemen, our children and grandchildren must know of the great cost of freedom through ceremonies such as this one today. They must know that courage and determination in the face of adversity can be the difference between success and failure.

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They must also know that vision, preparedness and devotion to duty even before crisis erupts will influence the course of history in ways we cannot imagine. With that in mind, we reflect on the codename assigned to the Guadalcanal campaign: Operation Watchtower! Let that aptly-worded title serve as our code to forge a future worthy of the service and sacrifice that have made America an inspiration to the world.

I thank you for your service and your sacrifice. Your presence here today honors those who have gone before, and those who serve today. Let there be no doubt, our nation will remain strong as long as we hold faith with our principles – the virtues from which we have always drawn our energy and passion.

For over half a century, the Marine Corps has fulfilled the charge of the 82d Congress -- to be 'the most ready when the nation is least ready.' There really is no substitute for ready forces that can swiftly answer the nation's call. There is no substitute for a force composed of men and women who are steadfastly and courageously devoted to the defense of the nation. There is no substitute for United States Marines.

God bless, Semper Fidelis, and happy birthday Marines!

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