**14730, Steve Wheeler**

What It Means to Serve – Marine Corp Birthday Celebration

Good Evening Ladies and Gentlemen,

Tonight we are here to celebrate the birthday of the United States Marine Corps. I imagine most if not all of you have been recipients of a handshake and the familiar “thank you for your service”. But, what does it truly mean to serve?" I am honored to share a little of what serving as a United States Marine does mean.

The Marine Corps truly has its foundations embedded in the foundations of our nation. The first two Marine battalions were formed on Nov 10, 1775 by the Continental Congress. The distinctive dress blue uniform of the Marine’s has evolved over time but has a strong traditions. The high collar was originally a leather collar to protect Marine’s in close attack. This originated the nickname “Leatherneck”. The blue jacket represents the Corps’ naval tradition. The trousers feature a scarlet “blood stripe” down each leg. It was originally intended to honor those Marines who died in the Battle of Chapultepec during the Mexican War in 1847. Now it honors the memory of all our fallen comrades.

Their first battle was against the British Fort Nassau in the Bahamas where large supplies of gunpowder were stored. The Marines were successful in their first campaign to defend our new nation. The famous battle on the Shores of Tripoli sung about in our anthem occurred in 1805 and was the Marine’s first land battle on foreign soil. During the Battle of Derna the Marines, sent by President Thomas Jefferson, rescued the crew of the USS Philadelphia and helped Prince Hamet Bey reclaim his throne. He honored them by presenting his Mameluke sword to the commander, Lt. O’Bannon. That sword became part of the officer uniform in 1825 and remains the oldest ceremonial weapon in use by United States forces today.

During the Mexican-American War the Marines overtook the castle, known as the “Halls of Montezuma” during the Battle of Chapultepec in 1847. They raised the Stars and Stripes over the palace to mark their victory and presented that same flag to their commandant upon returning home. This is also immortalized in the Marine Corps Hymn. In 1862 Corporal John Mackie was the first Marine to receive the Medal of Honor, our nation’s highest military award. He earned this award by leading his crew’s gun operation after most of them were killed or wounded on the USS Galena at the Battle of Drewry’s Bluff in the Civil War.

In addition to the history of Marine Corps Battle excellence, the Marine’s also have a fine musical history. As a youth of 13, John Phillip Sousa apprenticed with the Marine Corp Band. He became their head in 1880 and was known as The March King. His most famous marches are “The Stars and Stripes Forever” – the National March of the United States and “Semper Fidelis”, the official march of the Marine Corps. Armies have always gone off to war with some type of band and celebration, but the United States Marine Corps provides their own band and plays not only for the Marine Corps but for presidents, and many celebrations around the country year round.

Bravery is not something that a person can plan and it’s not defined by acting without fear. Bravery is acting boldly in the face of certain danger despite being afraid. That is exactly what SGT John Quick did in 1898 during the Battle of Guantanamo Bay, when he and his men found themselves being attacked by friendly fire when the USS Dolphin misunderstood a signal and opened fire on them. Quick put himself at great risk when he exposed himself to crossfire to signal a cease-fire to the ship, which earned him the Medal of Honor. This type of bravery is not uncommon in the Marine Corps. We are accustomed to deploying at a moment’s notice to defend freedom anywhere in the world. In 1901 they had recently handled an insurrection in the Philippines, and were immediately called upon to travel to China to join an international force to stop the Boxer Rebellion. These two events cemented the United States’ military in the Pacific and led to their role in WWI.

The Marines have served on the land and on the sea and in 1912 they served for the first time in the air. The first Marine Corps pilot was First Lieutenant Alfred Cunningham who soloed after only 2 hours and 40 minutes of training but his flying service was interrupted for 3 months by military duty. Upon his return he began the legacy of Marine Corps aviation. Aviation was not the only thing that the Marine’s made history taking into battle. In 1914 The Armor Motor Car Company of Detroit built the first armored cars for American military use that included armor and machine gun turrets. The first ones out of the factory after successful testing were assigned to the 1st Armored Car Squadron of the 1st Marines at Philadelphia.

Bravery is not uncommon to members of the Marine Corps, but Marines don’t go into battle for the purpose of winning awards. We go into battle to do what is needed to secure freedom and to overcome enemies of the United States. That said, many Marines have distinguished the Corps with the medals they have earned while simply doing what they have been trained to do. In 1915 Maj Gen Smedley Butler did just that by earning two Medals of Honor in back to back campaigns. He earned his first during the U.S. occupation of Vera Cruz and a year later earned his second Medal of Honor as a commanding officer during the Haitian Occupation. After serving 34 years he earned a total of 16 medals, five for heroism and was the most decorated Marine in U.S. history when he died. He was not the only Marine to have this honor but he was the first.

Marine Corps training as it is known today didn’t actually begin until 1911 and in 1915 Parris Island became the first base dedicated to training enlisted Marines. They began training female recruits in 1949 and Marines are still trained at Parris Island today. The Marines can proudly say that we have brought about many “firsts” in the military. In 1918 Opha Mae Johnson became the first female Marine. Today, women proudly fill many important positions in the Corps today at all levels. In 1949 the first African American recruits joined the Marine Corps.

The Marines have a reputation of going for the win and never giving in. We have an aggressive warrior’s heart. One example of that was at the 1918 Battle of Belleau Wood, just outside Paris. The 4th Marine Brigade had been fighting relentlessly and were pinned down. But, on June 7, with most of their ammunition and gone, they launched an assault with fixed bayonets, seized enemy positions and with their superior marksmanship won the battle, stopping the German’s. For this accomplishment they earned the nickname “Devil Dogs”.

Not only have the Marine’s excelled in battle, but they have also aided in war time communications. In 1942 they had a group of Navajo Indians who decided to send secure voice messages based on their native language since they knew very few people would understand it. They were called the Navajo Code Talkers and made it impossible for the enemy to gain intelligence because they didn’t know this language. This gave our military an extreme advantage during the Battle of Iwo Jima and other WWII battles. Another first they brought about was Marine photographers and cinematographers took still pictures of live battle action and created documentaries, not only to let people back home know what was happening but to send to the leaders of the military for the sake of history.

The Marines haven’t just earned recognition for bravery on the land and sea. During WWII there was a squadron of fighter pilots led by Colonel Gregory “Pappy” Boyington. He earned his nickname because he was a decade older than his pilots. In 1944 he earned both a Medal of Honor and the Navy Cross for his heroism as a WWII Marine Pilot and Leader of the Black Sheep Squadron.

In 1945 one of the most important battles of WWII in the Pacific was the Battle of Iwo Jima. The Marines had been sent to capture Japanese airfields. It lasted 36 days with heavy casualties before Marines secured it. This was where the iconic photograph was taken showing a group of Marines raising the United States flag on the summit to encourage the Marines below to continue fighting. The photograph taken of this made front page news back home and later a monument of it was built to encourage all Marines to strive for greatness. I believe it encourages all who see it to strive for greatness.

These examples are only a few of the great experiences of the United States Marine Corps. There are far too many to name tonight. In 1775 the Corps began with two battalions. In 2010 we had more than 200,000 Marines both officers and enlisted. We have led the way in developing weapons, equipment and training and have the reputation around the world as being the most aggressive fighting force in existence.

We have a long and a proud history of protecting the United States around the world both in war and in peace. I can think of nothing better than to have served my country as a member of the United States Marine Corps.

It may sound corny but I am pleased to stand here and ask all of you to join me in wishing the Marine Corps

Happy Birthday!