

SPEECH --- MOAA 11/3/12

Robin Beres, Richmond Times-Dispatch

Good evening, everyone. Thank you for including Tony and me at this wonderful event.

It is an honor to be here. It is always a pleasure to address fellow veterans and a special pleasure to address the MOAA. The tireless efforts of your organization to protect the benefits and privileges of service members and veterans is impressive and I thank you for all you do in that regard.

I would like to take just a moment to remember those who are suffering so badly in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. Most of Virginia dodged the worst of the storm. Others weren't so fortunate. Folks 100 miles to our west experienced blizzard conditions and 100 miles to the North they suffered catastrophic flooding.

God bless the Coast Guard and the National Guardsmen that have been called up to aid in rescue and recovery efforts in New Jersey, New York and Connecticut. Those brave young men and women have certainly been kept busy both at home and abroad in the past decade.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank all the family members of veterans who are here tonight. Without the unfailing support of family, very few successful military careers would be possible.

I wouldn't be completely honest if I didn't admit that there is another, more personal reason I am so delighted to be speaking with you tonight. Even though it's been eight years since I retired, I can't help but think how many NCOs would give their left hash marks to be standing here in front of a captive audience of senior officers listening to him or her expound!

There is no question that the success of the most outstanding military the world has ever known is due in great part to the incredible leadership capabilities of our officer corps. Thank you all for your dedication and service.

There is a special relationship between officers such as yourselves and the senior NCO ranks. That link has long formed the cornerstone of every effective military organization. And when it comes to training the younger officer corps, the amount of guidance and knowledge an NCO can impart to

an inexperienced junior officer who may be in a position of authority but might be lacking practical experience is often invaluable.

If I may, just a quick story to illustrate that point: Once, a company commander and the First Sergeant were in the field. As they hit the sack for the night, the First Sergeant said, "Sir, look up into the sky and tell me what you see." The bright young captain replied, "I see millions of stars," and the 1st Sgt asked, "What does that tell you, sir?" The company commander replied: "Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Theologically, it tells me that God is great and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, it tells me that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. And what does it tell you, Top?" The 1st Sgt replied: "Well sir, it tells me that somebody stole our tent."

But all joking aside, the success of any military unit is not only a well-defined command structure -- teamwork throughout the ranks plays a vitally important role. So much is being asked of our military. Our troops are bone-tired weary. And the further hardships that will be placed upon them with the looming budget cuts already in place and the additional threat of sequestration cuts (that daily seem to become more of a reality) is very concerning.

These are difficult times for our military and I worry about how disenfranchised the American public is with our military forces. Fewer and fewer Americans even know anyone serving in the military. 10 or 20 years ago, most Americans at least knew a grandfather or a great uncle who had served in WWII. But time is marching on and those vets are leaving us at ever faster rates. It won't be in the too-far-distant future before every WWII unit will report to St. Peter: All present and accounted for.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in September 2012, there were roughly 1.4 million men and women serving on active duty. Counting Ready Reserve numbers, the total comes to around 2.5 million. That's less than one percent of our total population.

Civilians read of distant wars and occasionally stop what they're doing to cheer a Medal of Honor recipient or grieve at photos of flag-draped coffins but then they go about their daily lives and the military goes about its business. For most families in America, the only concept they have of military life comes from news stories and, unfortunately, video games like Call of Duty.

They have no concept of delayed hellos and goodbyes. Of Christmases celebrated in January and weddings, baptisms and birthdays often missed. They have no idea of what it is like for a teenager to put on a cheerful face as she kisses a parent goodbye for a year and then cry herself to sleep that night. Civilians know nothing of the clutching fear that grips military families when we read of downed helicopters or of terrorist attacks like the one at Fort Hood. Yes, life is different for military families.

I am the granddaughter of a Marine, the daughter of a Marine, the sister of a Marine and now the mother of a Marine. (It's ok – after a few years of therapy, I'm fine!) I am a Navy retiree and my husband is an Air Force veteran. He is also the son of an Army Air Corps veteran. Two of our sons are now in the military, and our youngest, Emily, is considering applying to West Point or an Army ROTC scholarship. One could say that for us, the military is the family business.

My dad was a Marine. He did not make a career of the Corps, but the impressions the Corps made on him lasted a lifetime. It affected every aspect of the way he lived his life and the way he raised his 11 children. His unabashed love of God, country, Corps, and family was something that was impressed upon all of us. It wasn't until I was almost a teenager that I realized our family was a little different from most families. Most kids didn't sing every stanza of the Marine Corps hymn on family car trips and weren't told bedtime stories about Lt. Presley O'Bannon and his mighty mameluke sword.

Most families didn't have a dad who throughout his life would meet active duty Marines and Sailors in the oddest places and invite them over for dinner or buy them a meal. There was many a Thanksgiving dinner that we'd have a stray Marine or two at the table. One year, after returning home on Good Friday from a business trip to Hampton Roads, my father announced that he had invited eight crew members from the visiting British carrier, the HMS Ark Royal, home for Easter Dinner. (ASIDE) With three daughters in high school at the time, you can well imagine how "thrilled" my mother was.

But my dad felt that the military is akin to a big family. A big, huge, networking family. My military career spanned nearly 23 years. Being a part of something as big as the United States Navy was a great experience. I had awesome duty stations. Perhaps the highlight of my career was witnessing the final days of the Cold War. We knew the end was coming. While

conducting NATO exercises in the 1980s, it became obvious that there was no longer the number of Russian ships shadowing the at-sea segments of exercises. Message traffic spoke of large numbers of Soviet soldiers and sailors going AWOL because of no pay and little food.

When the Berlin Wall came down, it was one of the most moving events I have ever seen. Some of us on active duty at the time joked that we might soon be out of our jobs (boy were we ever wrong!). And while the “peace dividend” that the world had hoped for in 1990 never happened, knowing that I played a role, no matter how tiny, in ending the Cold War is something that still makes me proud.

When I retired from the Navy, I had no idea what I was going to do until I picked up the newspaper one day and saw that the Editor of the Editorial Dept was looking for an officer manager and executive assistant. The duties sounded remarkably like the duties expected of a flag writer. I did a little research on then-editor Ross Mackenzie and was delighted to find out that his two sons were career Navy officers. Remember that big, huge, networking military family I mentioned earlier? That certainly paid off for me. When Ross asked his sons if they thought he should hire a Yeoman Chief for the position, thankfully they encouraged him to do so.

Although, originally hired as an office manager and Ross’ executive assistant, I gradually began helping edit letters to the editor and proofreading copy (that good old, “attention to detail” paid off!). Ross retired in 2006 and Todd Culbertson became the editor. I eventually became the letters editor and responsible for putting together the editorial page.

Today the editorial board consists of our editor, Todd Culbertson, the deputy editor and columnist, Bart Hinkle, Commentary editor and columnist, Bob Rayner, Op/Ed page editor, Cindy Paris, and myself, columnist, letters-editor and still the office manager.

And what a wonderful 8 years it has been. Working with the Editorial Department has been a fantastic experience. They are an incredible group of people. Being a member of the editorial board has been a wonderful education in how a newspaper works, and has been very educational in politics and in life matters. Meeting everyone from the governor to congressmen to Cabinet-level secretaries to religious leaders and candidates has been incredibly enlightening.

And while I may be tooting my own horn, I have to tell you that from no other media source will you get such in-depth, researched news as from the newspaper. Online sources, television and radio stations simply don't have the reporters, the resources or the space to research and report in detail critical information and news.

So how does the editorial board work and how do we decide on endorsements and policy stands? Editorial board decisions are made as a group. Discussions on who to endorse and what stands the newspaper will take on various issues invoke lively, intense discussions. And because those decisions are controversial and opinionated, they are left entirely to the editorial department alone. There is a very necessary firewall between the editorial department and the newsroom. They don't tell us what to say and we don't tell them who or what or how to report a news story.

The Editorial Department has a creed. Every single day we do our utmost to follow the philosophy spelled out in that creed. Very briefly: We believe in truth, facts, and objectivity. We believe in right reason.

We believe in moral absolutes. For just as there are physical laws that cannot be ignored without grievous consequence, there are universal moral laws that must be followed as well.

We believe in freedom – in liberty, the ultimate cause.

We believe in the right to property. Individuals are granted a limited time on Earth, and they spend much of that time in arduous toil. To divest them of their money and property without profound justification is to rob them of their labor.

We believe in free enterprise. There is no such thing as the capitalist "system" – capitalism is but the sum of economic interactions occurring naturally among individuals pursuing their own prosperity. A system of laws and regulations is necessary to safeguard the innocent from the depredations of the wicked, but government should not interfere in the free and honest exchange of goods and services.

We believe in man's fallen nature. Any institution of man will be fallible; great plans always entail unintended consequences. For that reason, governments ought to undertake major endeavors rarely.

We believe in a strong national defense. Before a people can set the course of their country, they must secure its autonomy from outside predation. THAT is the chief purpose of the national government.

We believe in fiscal conservatism. Because taxes confiscate the labor of the people, public officials have a solemn responsibility not to waste the proceeds on frivolous or foolish programs or projects.

And finally, we believe in civility – it is the glue that keeps a community together.

It is an exacting creed and one I always try to bear in mind as I write my columns. Column-writing has been a learning experience for me and led me down previously undreamed of paths. Five years ago, I would never have imagined that I would be invited to attend a mini-bootcamp at Parris Island, skydive out of an airplane or chair a parade to welcome home troops returning from war.

As I write and research, I often find that with more knowledge and awareness, the views I thought I had on any given topic, may not be the same views I hold when I finish writing my column. My faith, my family, my belief in a strong national defense and my own military experiences influence everything I write and everything I do. I would venture that holds true for almost all veterans.

For the rest of our lives, we continue to reap the benefits of the strategic thinking we were taught as soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen. Recently I read of a retired veteran in Florida who lived on a large farm. In the back field, behind an apple orchard, he had a large pond that he had fixed up nicely. There were picnic tables, a horseshoe court and an American flag waving atop a tall pole. The pond had been fixed up for swimming when it was built. Well, one evening the old vet decided to visit his lovely pond. He grabbed a 5-gallon bucket to bring back some apples from the orchard. But to his surprise, as he neared the pond, he heard female voices shouting and laughing. And as he came closer he saw a group of young women skinny-dipping in his pond. He made the women aware of his presence and they all quickly swam to the deep end. One of the women shouted, "We're not coming out until you leave!" The old Veteran frowned, "I didn't come down here to watch you ladies swim naked." Holding the bucket up high, he smiled and said, "I'm here to feed the alligator."

The moral of the story is that old veterans still think pretty darn fast to when it comes to having their way and getting their say.

PAUSE – one --- two --- three

Ladies, and gentlemen, on that note, I am perfectly confident that every one of you is determined to have your say in this upcoming, oh-so-important election. And as we all go to vote on Tuesday, remember just how fortunate we are to have ***our say*** in who shall lead this great nation for the next four years. No matter who wins the White House, it's important to remember it's not the president that makes this country great, it's the American people who do that.

Thank you all, good night and God bless you all.