VETERANS DAY CELEBRATION

ITHACA COLLEGE

10 NOVEMBER 2009

LARRY B. OLSEN, CAPT, U.S. NAVY

 Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, and a special welcome to fellow Veterans! It is a great privilege for me to be with you here today, and I would like to thank Mr. Doug Armstrong and Ms. Patricia Phelps for inviting me to be the guest speaker at this year’s Veterans Day Celebration. I would also like to thank the Ithaca College Veterans Day Celebration Committee for all of their hard work and effort in making this event such a wonderful tribute to all who have served or are serving in the United States Armed Forces. I have spent 31 years as a submariner in our great Navy, and almost all of my assignments have been in military-centric, navy-friendly communities. I have to admit that as I accepted my orders to command the Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps at Cornell University, I was curious as to what the reception would be here in Ithaca, a region that was rumored to be a small bastion of liberalism in upstate New York. I gotta tell you, the reception here has been exceptional! On occasions when I have worn my uniform out in town, I have had a number of people come up to me and thank me for my service, and I even had one gentleman who approached me in a store and asked if he could hold my packages so that he could shake my hand and thank me for serving in the military. The same holds true for my Midshipmen over at Cornell, and for the ROTC cadets at Cornell and Ithaca College, they are respected and well-received on their campuses. There will always be individuals who disagree with how our nation’s leaders choose to employ our military capabilities. That right to disagree is one of the freedoms we fight to protect. But even those who disagree with the employment of our military might, nevertheless they still respect the men and women who choose to serve our country. Ithaca is a city that appreciates the service and sacrifices of our men and women in uniform. And so, as a Sailor (or Submariner if you prefer), and as a veteran, I can think of no greater place to be on this Veterans Day, than taking part in this ceremony!

 Tomorrow, November 11th, was originally set aside to recognize the end of World War I, and to celebrate the resumption of peaceful relations with the rest of the world’s nations, to rededicate our efforts towards world peace, and to honor those veterans of World War I. Unfortunately, the world did not remain a peaceful place for very long. After World War II and the Korean War, what was once known as Armistice Day, officially became Veterans Day – a day to honor American veterans from all wars.

 Unlike Memorial Day in May, which is a time set aside to remember and honor those brave men and women who gave their final measure in the defense of our nation, Veterans Day is an important day of celebration for our nation to thank and honor all men and women who have worn the uniform of the United States military – both deceased and living; those who have served or are currently serving; and those who served during peacetime, or during war or armed conflict. We honor over 48 million veterans, over half of whom are still living today. We give thanks to all who have contributed to our national security and personal freedom, to all who have sacrificed in service to our great country to protect the American way of life! We pause this Veterans Day to honor those who have exemplified patriotism, love of country and service to others – those who fight on the land, on the sea and in the air. We recognize our veterans – and those veterans are your neighbors, your friends, your family and your colleagues! People all around you that you interact with every day!

 America was engaged in the Cold War for about the first third of my naval career; and while I’ve never gone toe-to-toe in combat with our enemies, my time in the Navy has been the defining event in my life. And for millions of others who have spent more or less time in the military; those who have served our nation in peacetime, striving to make this world a better place to live; as well as in wartime, doing their best to defend liberty -whether peacetime or wartime, their time in uniform marks a defining period in their lives as well. The military has provided many men and women with a great start in life, and a great career for many others. The training and camaraderie, the dedication of purpose, the confidence and leadership, the personal commitment to a greater cause – whether as enlisted, or as a non-commissioned officer or as a commissioned officer; whether in the Army, Navy, Marine Corps or Air Force or the Coast Guard; service in the military provides the foundation for a universal bond that holds veterans together!

 While it’s easy to remember and honor those who served in World War I, and it’s tough to forget the sacrifices of the “greatest generation” who served during World War II, we must never forget those who served so valiantly in the Korean War and Viet Nam War – veterans who suffered the worst that war could ever be – characterized by massive casualty rates; merciless enemies; and long, brutal periods of captivity as Prisoners of War. These veterans also deserve our utmost admiration for the courage they demonstrated under unbelievably arduous circumstances. And to the veterans of those wars still listed as Missing in Action, as a nation we must remain committed to achieving a full accounting for their status. We owe nothing short of a complete resolution determining what happened to them to their families, to the members themselves, and to future generations of service members. Those still listed as MIA did not give up on their country, and we must not give up on them.

 And to our servicemen and women who have fought over in the Middle East, or are fighting to establish peace there today – those engaged in Operations Desert Storm, Enduring Freedom or Iraqi Freedom – they are employed in a manner entirely different from previous generations of war fighters. It is a tall, tall task to establish security, civility and peace in a nation, and to win the hearts and minds of its countrymen, when terrorists who blend in naturally with the populace are attempting to target your every move and thwart all your efforts. We face an enemy over there that is hard to identify, tough to pin down, and difficult to engage. We are not at war with a nation state, but against a coalition of terrorists who flourish in pockets of lawlessness in troubled spots around the world. Yet the veterans of this war share a legacy of service which binds us together and crosses cultural and generational lines. They continue to uphold the values upon which our country was founded – service to a cause greater than self. They strive to be peace makers, working cross-language and cross-culture, helping desolated regions of Afghanistan establish their communities; setting up systems for justice; building schools; and providing essential water, electrical and transportation infrastructure. It is difficult and dangerous, and I can’t think of any organization that could even attempt this - other than the United States military.

 However, there are some unique consequences associated with fighting today’s war. The good news is that we have made tremendous advances in dealing with traumatic battlefield injuries that has saved many lives. The bad news is that the lives of some of those individuals are completely disrupted from the extremely serious injuries that they sustain. This presents our Veterans Administration with the daunting task of providing the best medical treatment for those wounded in service to our nation. We owe them no less than the very best care possible, and I know the Veterans Administration is working hard to achieve the changes necessary to provide the required level of service.

 When I was stationed over in Bahrain prior to the commencement of Operation Iraqi Freedom, I remember watching some of the young Marines there as they trained for the ensuing battle to take control of Baghdad. Two things struck me about those men. The first was just how young they all were. Most were fresh out of high school – no older than the freshmen or sophomores you see here at Ithaca College or over at Cornell. They were all clean cut, with short hair, and their varied accents told of a melting pot of young Marines from all across the country. The second thing I noticed was how committed they all were – totally dedicated to improving their personal fighting ability, and even more dedicated to their fellow Marines! I am certain that those men have matured tremendously from those days in 2003, and I would love to meet those veterans today to see how the Marine Corps has transformed their lives!

 I have noticed similar traits in the men who man our Submarine Force today. When I was actually assigned to a submarine myself, and fully a part of the process to get the ship ready and the crew trained for sustained operations at sea, I sort of took everything for granted. It was part of my job, and we were all busy making certain that everything proceeded smoothly. We made it look pretty easy, but only because of all the hard work, training and dedication. As I moved on to assignments beyond command of a submarine, and especially as I had opportunities to ride submarines in my last assignment as Director of Operations for the Submarine Force, I gained a new perspective - now that I was on the outside looking back in. I had the opportunity to ride almost every fast attack and guided missile submarine in the Atlantic Fleet in order to certify them to deploy to the far reaches of the world’s oceans. As I rode each submarine, I was amazed at the outstanding men who made up the crew; at their hard work and dedication; at the sacrifices they and their families were making in order for them to serve; and at how they all pulled together as a team. I was humbled and inspired at the same time. The rest of our men and women serving in all branches of the military today are no different than the submariners I observed – and they are amongst the veterans we honor this Veterans Day!

 I have always marveled at our military technology! We provide the greatest ships, subs, aircraft, combat vehicles and weapon systems to our fighting men and women that the world has ever known! Speaking from my perspective as a nuclear submariner, I can recall lying in my bunk when I was Commanding Officer of USS MIAMI and we were transiting across the ocean at flank speed. I would think about that 14 foot diameter screw, or propeller, back there turning over about three times every second and propelling 7000 tons of submarine through the water submerged at speeds in excess of 25 knots! And that nuclear reactor, operating at very high pressure and temperature would just keep cranking out the heat necessary to provide steam to the propulsion and electrical generation turbines hour after hour, day after day, week after week, for months on end – without fail! It is truly a marvel of American ingenuity and American engineering. Other nations work hard to keep one or two submarines operational off their own coast for a couple of weeks at a time. On any given day, we have ten attack submarines deployed to the far corners of the earth for six or more months at a time, and four or so ballistic missile subs on patrol and two guided missile submarines which are gone from homeport for a year or more. And similar statements can be made regarding our ground vehicles, ships, aircraft and weapon systems. We have the greatest Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force that the world has ever known!

 However, as advanced, robust and revolutionary as our military technology is, that’s not what makes America’s military the best in the world. It always comes down to the men and women in uniform – those who drive the vehicles, operate the ships and subs, and fly the planes. It is our service men and women and their character, daring and resourcefulness who make the difference in winning the battle and winning the war – they are the ones who bring signs of hope to countries threatened by aggression and enmeshed in turmoil around the globe. Millions of people the world over still look to America with a hope for something better – for freedom. Our love for freedom is not just for ourselves, but extends to our friends and allies as well. And to secure freedom for them, the conditions our troops face today are just as daunting as ever, if not more so. Yet I am convinced there is no organization more capable of securing hope of a better life for many than the United States military, and we will certainly rely upon our veterans as we face the challenges in front of us, just as past veterans have risen to the challenges of their day.

 All those who serve take an oath. But we don’t swear an oath to the President of the United States, or to Congress, or to the flag of our nation - we swear an oath to a piece of paper, to a document, to uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States of America - the constitution that defines who we are as a nation. And the veterans we honor each Veterans Day are symbols of what America values and honors – honesty, integrity, hard work, personal responsibility, patriotism, perseverance, and love of country.

 On Veterans Day of 1961, President John F. Kennedy stood before the nation to honor Veterans and commemorate a historic day of peace saying:

“In an age that threatens the survival of freedom, we join together to honor those who made our freedom possible. We celebrate this Veterans Day for a very few minutes, a few seconds of silence and then this country’s life goes on.”

 And so, on this Veterans Day, we remember our veterans of wars past and present. We honor them for their spirit which has guided our nation for more than 200 years. Our freedom is very precious to each and every one of us, and it continues under attack every day. Let us never forget the sacrifices of the men and women who have dedicated a portion of their lives in defending our liberty and securing a lasting freedom for our country. Whether our country is at war or peace, our veterans will continue to make vital contributions both in uniform and as civilians. Before I close, to those of you in the audience who are Marines - Happy Birthday and Semper Fi! The United States Marine Corps celebrates its 234th anniversary today! Thank you for coming today and thanks again for inviting me to participate. God bless you all; God bless our veterans; and God bless the United States of America!