

Remarks of Chief James Schwartz at U.S.S. Arlington Christening Ceremony, Pascagoula Mississippi, March 26, 2011

Mrs. Rumsfeld, Secretary Rumsfeld, Secretary Stackley, Admiral Greenert, General Keesler, Commander Nelson, distinguished guests, shipbuilders of the world's greatest Naval force, thank you for the opportunity to share in this historic event honoring Arlington and commemorating the events of 9-11. It is a privilege to participate in a ceremony so rich in Navy tradition and American history. I stand here today on behalf of Arlington County to celebrate the christening of the USS Arlington. I also represent the men and women of our nation's public safety institutions who stood beside you and other dedicated members of the United States military in response to one of our nation's greatest tragedies almost 10 years ago, and remain standing there today.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge the members of the Arlington County Fire Department, the greatest fire and EMS organization anywhere. I want to thank them for their service and dedication and I want those of you here today to understand that while 9-11 was an historic event, the images of which are etched in the minds of people all over the world, it is not 9-11 that defines us as an organization. Who we are comes from the caring and excellent service that our members provide to those in need every single day and I am most proud to wear their uniform and count myself among their ranks.

The United States Navy and the American fire service have deep roots in the history of our nation. Both were organized as an infant nation struggled for survival and both have been protecting our nation every single day since. Both institutions along with emergency medical services and law enforcement have enjoyed long standing support and even admiration from our communities and our nation. On 9-11 the domestic defenders of local public safety stood shoulder to shoulder with our brothers and sisters in the military in a unified effort to save the Pentagon. Today both institutions stand together in the defense and protection of our nation.

The USS Arlington is dedicated to the heroes of the September 11 attacks. To set the record straight, in the response to the Pentagon the word hero applies to two sets of people. The first is the men and women who went to the Pentagon on that clear late summer morning to do the important job of serving their country. When American Airlines flight 77 pierced that bright September sky and tore through the outer three rings the building it was those dedicated public servants who became the first responders. The first Arlington fire units arrived just minutes after the crash and were met with massive rescue effort already underway; military and civilian members of the Pentagon community assisting the injured and in some instances returning to the burning building to find comrades lost in the smoke, fire and rubble. They risked their lives in ways that, for them, are normally associated with a battlefield. Through the extraordinary efforts of these selfless heroes, many that might otherwise have been lost were saved.

Just as important are the acts of bravery and heroism displayed by those who lost someone they loved on that horrific day. The nation mourns each year on the anniversary; those who lost a spouse, a parent, a child, or a sibling are reminded each and everyday. We have a responsibility to remember their lives and never forget their loss.

In that remembrance 9-11 taught us all that life is precious. So too is the American way of life. Today we christen a navy vessel whose chief responsibility is to preserve that way of life, and to enable us as Americans to pursue our hopes and dreams in freedom. This way of life is only possible because of the sacrifice of men and women in uniform who defend and protect our nation both here and around the world. We honor their sacrifice and that of their families.

The 9-11 attack was especially poignant for the Navy. When the Boeing 757 broke through the outer three rings of the Pentagon it took with it the Navy Command Center killing all but one who were working there. The memory of those losses is foremost in our minds today.

The successful response to the Pentagon on 9-11 and the lesson of trusted partnerships is now well known. We have told our story so many times and to so many people in the last 10 years that I regularly hear my own words repeated back to me as if the speaker lived it as we did. And I have to remind myself that in some way, all Americas lived it as we did.

As the USS Arlington is made ready for service I am inspired by the Coats of Arms and its message of strength, honor and fortitude. I believe these same values are part of intend to place a copy of this important symbol in each fire station in Arlington as a constant reminder of the direct connection between what we do domestically and what the Arlington does globally.

In 1961 Admiral George Anderson then Chief of Naval Operations said "The Navy has both a tradition and a future - and we look with pride and confidence in both directions". I can think of no better sentiment as we christen the USS Arlington here today.

To Commander Nelson and the crew of the Arlington, I thank you for your service, for your love of country and for the sacrifice of service that you and your families are making. We look forward to the ships commissioning in 2012 when all the hearts of Arlington will sail with you as you support the cause of freedom.

Thank you all very much.