

BERGEN COUNTY
VETERANS APPRECIATION CEREMONY

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When I was growing up just a few miles from here, across the weeds in Palisades Park, I never dreamed that I would be here someday, **on the outside of the County Jail Complex**, addressing a gathering of veterans, patriots & loyal supporters of our military. I am truly honored & humbled to be with you today.

I have been a life long resident of **Bergen County**, born in Holy Name Hospital, where Sister Canise was the mid-wife who performed all the deliveries. I attended elementary school in Palisade Park & was in the last class to graduate from LHS in 1959, where I played football, wrestled & ran track. I am honored to have classmates here w/me today (Joe & Marilyn)

I am the proud first generation of hardworking, loving parents, from Italy. (Well my father was born in Sicily & my mother was from Rome, so she always told me I was ½ Italian). Growing up in Bergen County in the 50's, as

many of us did, was a **different, simpler, kinder time.**

My dad was a strict but loving father, who made **his** expectations and **my** boundaries clear; which in retrospect probably did make growing up easier. While I hope that I've lived up to his expectations, the boundaries, however, may be a different story; probably followed more in their breach than observation. But my Dad's guidance, love & example has probably been the major factor in who I am today.

When I was very young, he or my cousin Sal Cascio, (who many of you may remember from Bergenfield & was voted Wrestling Coach of the Century by the Bergen Record,) would take me hunting, fishing & crabbing in the swamps along the Overpeck Creek. In truth I have never shot at anything that couldn't shoot back, but those experiences, & in the Scouts, not only fostered a love for the outdoors & appreciation of nature, but also became valuable

in the military & in day to day life, helping to build strong character, integrity & commitment.

When I was old enough to carry my own rifle, fishing pole or crab net, I would go alone, just for the adventure & enjoyment. In those days the sight of a 12 or 13 year old carrying a .22 rifle didn't strike fear in the hearts of the public, but rather brought a knowing smile, even admiration & sometimes suggestions on where to find the best catch. Chief Leonard Cottrell, who was just a patrolman at that time, would occasionally offer me a ride home, & instead of arresting me as a juvenile delinquent, or my parents for child abuse, would ask about each of my extensive family by name, ask how the hunting or fishing was, & give me the lowdown on some of his favorite spots. He was followed by his son Lenny, who I went all the way through school with, who also later became Chief of Police.

At school we began each day w/The Flag Salute & a Prayer. Everyone participated because that's the way we were brought up. We had respect for our elders, our Country & our God.

Bergen County was a wonderful place to grow up. We would drive all the way up to Crestwood Lake in Allendale, where my cousin Sal taught me to swim by throwing me off the dock, & then refined that skill to an art, just up Main Street here at the YMCA. We did our shopping locally, & our big shopping once a week as a family at Packards, which is now Target, or Valley Fair at the Little Ferry circle. Now they have been overshadowed by the Shopping Malls & Big Box Stores. Family, Friends & neighbors were an integral part of shaping our lives in ways that were yet unfathomable.

My Uncle Henry, (is w/us today) who at 94, still lives next door to my childhood home on Homestead Ave. in Pal .Pk., was a master mechanic, a true mechanical magician, having busted his knuckles working on hot rods & then in Army Motor Transport, on the Beaches of Anzio & with Gen. Patton through the Sicily Campaign. He knew everything there was about cars & trucks, & could fix anything that moved, & tried to pass it on to me, as I sat in awe listening to his stories & wanting to be just like him.

When I was 13, he took me out in a vacant lot down by the lumber yard & proceeded to teach me how to drive in an old Austin, 4-speed floor shift. Being completely frustrated by my inability to coordinate the clutch & gas pedals, resulting in low speed stall conditions, we stopped for a moment, & he said these words which I have carried with me to this day. "This is only a machine. You drive it, don't let it drive you. Make it do what you want it to do. Let it become an extension of your mind & body." Now that was pretty profound for 1954; but I have carried those words with me throughout my life. I've handed them down to my students & co-pilots. They've, played a major part in not only making me a better pilot, but were directly instrumental in saving my life on more than one occasion.

If not here:

It's taken me 60 years to say this, but Thank You Uncle Henry.

OR, If present:

It's taken me 60 years, but I wanted to take this opportunity to acknowledge him in public, & finally say - thank you Uncle Henry.

My mother, being the typical loving Italian housewife, also taught me the practical things of life. Before I left home at 16, she made sure that I knew how to cook, clean, iron and sew, with the hopes that I would make someone a good husband, or at least be able to fend for myself if nobody wanted me. For a simple, uneducated woman, she had great instincts and gave me advice that I have carried to this day. Besides telling me to Marry Rich and Never Eat Anything Blue, neither of which I followed, the one thing I remember, and try to live up to everyday is: **"Wherever you go, leave it better than when you got there."**

My wonderful family formed the base & structure of my life. I have also been blessed to walk in the footsteps of giants, shoulder to shoulder with great warriors and true heroes, and to literally - fly with the eagles; but it was God who put them there for me. They were his hands, & I placed myself in them, as I walked on my journey through life. Just as he has put the people in your lives there for you.

I flew 850 combat missions in 12 months in VN for the Marines, as

an H-34 helicopter pilot, & was shot down 4 times. The last flight was made while completely blind. What I did, and how I survived, was not an individual act of heroism in any way, nor a testament to myself, but as I realized & reluctantly admitted later, to those whom God had placed in my life to guide and watch over me.

A major factor in saving my life was an African-American teenager from Youngstown, Ohio. Cpl. Bob Bush was a tall, shy, laid back, Aw Shucks kind-a-guy, who looked just like Tiger Woods (to give you a visual image). Most crew chiefs were Sergeants, but despite Bob's age & being only an E-4, he maintained the best helicopter in the squadron. When my parents were sending me salamis, his parents were sending him Simonize Car Wax. He had the only waxed & shined helicopter in combat. He literally slept in his helicopter, and the pilots would fight to fly with him, because they knew his aircraft was so well maintained & ran like a clock.

One day when we had finished flying for the day, and he was getting ready to keep working through the night, I remember

asking him: "Bob, what are you going to do when your tour is over?" His words struck me like a bolt of lightning; I will never forget them, he said: "**Aw Shucks Cap'n, I aint goin back. If I go home, I'm just another ----- (& he used that derogatory term). I'll either wind up in jail or dead. I'm staying here, because people respect me for what I do and don't care about the color of my skin.**"

Those words made a tremendous impact on me, because even though I had traveled the world, I had never come in close contact with prejudice of this sort. When I grew up there was only one African-American family in town and Gerald and I were friends. I never looked at him as being different. We went to school, played sports and hung around together. He joined the Air Force and then became a Baptist Minister. He and his husband Patrick stay with us whenever they come to visit here in New Jersey. **He is my Brother by another Mother.**

Is it not ironic that this young 19 year old kid from Youngstown, Ohio would end up saving my life? That

fateful day in 1968 I was blessed to have Bob as my crew chief. It was during the Tet Offensive. At 3 a.m. on April 30, 1968, we landed near the village of Dai Do, to rescue 5 critically wounded Marines. As Bob helped to load the wounded, all hell broke loose. The enemy was everywhere, shooting in all directions. The helicopter was riddled with bullets, every Marine was wounded, or wounded a second time. I was hit in the face, arms and legs.

I thought I had gotten some dirt in my eyes from the explosions, but after trying to wipe them with my gloves, I still couldn't see. I tried to contact my co-pilot, but he didn't respond, and when I reached over to get his attention, he was slumped over. I knew we were being overrun and had to get out of there. I called Bob & told him that Larry had been hit & I couldn't see, & he was going to have to guide us out. **So here's this 19 year old kid, in charge of a million dollar aircraft, loading medivacs, returning defensive fire on his M-60 machine gun, and giving me directions, all at the same time. And yes, he was also wounded.**

With his guidance I was able to fly that helicopter blind, by listening to the engine & sensing the power & direction based on all my hours flying as a Maintenance pilot, and in the words of my Uncle Henry: **I became one with the aircraft.** I broke some of the glass with my survival knife to feel the instruments with my fingers, & with Bob's protection (credited w/12 KIA's w/in 25yds of the a/c), and his guidance out of the zone, and then my wingman shielding me from & suppressing the ground fire, Bob guided us out & my wingman talked me down to a landing about 10 miles south, on the beach near the mouth of the Cua Viet River.

My wingman later said that the fire in the area was so intense, the tracers looked like the spokes of a wheel, & I was in the center. He never expected us to come out of that zone; but through God's Hands providing me w/outstanding teamwork, WE were able to make a successful, although maybe not necessarily a graceful, landing. We were all immediately picked up by my wingman & other helicopters & taken to the hospital ship with the rest of the medivacs, where I

was on the operating table within the hour. My Corpsman Bob Jones, bless his Soul, who flew over 1,000 medivac missions in VN, was so skilled that that he was able to get an IV in my arm on the first try, in the pitch dark, on a shaking helicopter, & saved me from bleeding out. I say Bless his soul, because he died on May 12, 2000, the day after I was inducted into the Aviation Hall of Fame. After all he had gone through, he had chocked on a piece of corn.

Although we had been fragged to pick up five critically wounded Marines, the wounded were so numerous that eight Marines had been loaded aboard. Twenty years later, I got to meet five of those men and their families, & learned that all eight had survived.

As Medivac pilots, we always wondered what ever happened to the thousands of men who we rescued, but we never knew. Did they survive? And if so, did we do them any favors? Did they go on to lead normal lives, or did they continue to exist in wheelchairs, bedridden or worse? Those were questions that always haunted us, and were rarely if ever answered. In the medevac business we have a saying: **“The best Medal is a**

live man’s smile.” That day I not only received an answer, that all eight had survived, but also received the best medal in those five men’s smiles, surrounded by their families, who might not have otherwise existed.

I remain close and communicate with them regularly, and reunite with them every year at the Battalion Reunion, where they have made me an Honorary Member. The 2d Battalion 4th Marines are known as The Magnificent Bastards, & my squadron (HMM-362) is known as the Ugly Angels, so when they made me an honorary member of 2/4 they gave me the nickname **The One Eyed Ugly Bastard**, & placed a Brick in my honor with that inscription next to the 2/4 Memorial at Quantico. It’s is hard to explain to people that that nick name is really an honor, but that Brick means more to me than the MOH..

In 2002, I finally linked up again with Bob Bush. I asked him where he had been for the last 35 years. “Well shucks Cap’n (still won’t call me by my first name), after patching me upon the hospital ship, I went back & saw that my helicopter had been destroyed and would never fly

again. I stopped counting at 500 bullet holes. I went into such a severe state of depression, left the Marine Corps, went back to Youngstown to work in the steel mills. I was going nowhere.

One day I got up and said: **“today I’m either going to kill myself or turn my life around.”** Bob went to college and law school and became the Chief Counsel for Youngstown, Ohio. When I visited him a few years ago, he was the Chief of Police and running for Mayor.

We have seen so many changes in our lives, just here in Bergen County, as life goes on. Society has changed; people have become so self absorbed that they no longer walk down the street & greet each other.

Our Veterans have experienced, & even been a part of, the many changes we have seen during our lives. What I don’t think they would understand, & what dishonors their sacrifice, is what we have allowed to develop out of the very freedoms we all fought for & they died to protect. The conflicting messages we bestow upon our children, in attempting to instill a semblance of honor, integrity & pride for God,

Country & family, on the one hand, has been allowed to be undermined in the name of expediency, mediocrity & political correctness.

How could you possibly explain to them, or our children, that in the guise of the very Constitutional Rights that they died to preserve, we no longer allow our children to pray or salute the flag in school? I don’t think they would understand that, because I don’t. I challenge you today, to go home & sit down with your children, & explain this dichotomy to them: How come, every town meeting, every public gathering or assembly, (as we did today) is always started with a flag salute & prayer; yet our children are not **ALLOWED** to pray or salute our flag in school? I challenge you to explain that to them; & then I would like you to call me & explain it to me – because I don’t understand it, as I believe those who have died to protect that very freedom, would not understand what we have allowed to happen.

Our Veterans had the courage to put their life on the line for what they believed in, but we do not have the courage to honor their sacrifices by standing up for what

is right, & what they died for, because we may be criticized as being insensitive to the current trends of political correctness?

We have seen history re-written as we lived it, under the same guise of sensitivity. References to the Holocaust have been removed from many history books, because it may upset one segment or be too sensitive for the young. The history of our wars have been re-written from a factually historical perspective to a more socially acceptable fairy tale.

What is particularly egregious to me, & which does such dishonor to those who served & died, is the current trend to portray the Vietnam War as having been lost. And it is being conveniently & self-servingly re-written by many of those who not only weren't there, but in many cases were in opposition & protesting the war. These are the people who are now teaching our children & writing our history books, as well as many of those who are now in political office continuing their quest for what they perceive as social change.

When someone comes up to me in a well meaning gesture of acknowledgement & sympathy &

says: "Isn't it a shame that we lost the Vietnam War after having lost so many soldiers." I take the opportunity to both thank them for their concerns & also correct the record. As everyone of us who has been there knows, & never fails to say: "We were winning when I left." When was the War lost? It wasn't. The US troops never lost a major battle during the entire time we were there defending the people of South Vietnam from Northern & communist aggression. The Tet Offensive in 1968 (& I was there) was the last major defeat of the North Vietnamese, as they were repelled back across the DMZ.

As General Giap wrote in his memoirs, he believed the war was lost, & they were ready to give up, having lost so many soldiers. But seeing the changing attitude of our country, led by the protesters & radicals, led by Jane Fonda & John Kerry & the SDS, he believed that if he could hold on a little longer, we would withdraw. Ultimately the resumption of the bombings & blockage of Haiphong Harbor finally drove the North Vietnamese to the Peace Table & the Paris Peace Accords were signed. That was technically the end of the War. It was over & won.

Once the majority of US troops were withdrawn, the North broke the Treaty & re-invaded the South. That was when the war was lost - not by the military, but by the politicians & congress in DC who refused to fund the defense of what was now a completely defenseless country. Just like Old men make war & young men die; our military wins wars & our politicians lose them.

We owe it to our veterans, especially our Brothers & Sisters who have made the supreme sacrifice for our country, to stand & be counted. The motto of the Marine Corps is Semper Fidelis (Always Faithful). If you are a Marine it is not just a motto, it's a way of life, once earned, you carry it forever. When you joined, every veteran raised their hand & took an oath to defend our Country against all enemies foreign & domestic. That oath & obligation does not expire when you take off your uniform. It is yours forever, until the day you die. It is our obligation to our country, & especially to the memory of every veteran who has died to protect the constitution & our rights as citizens of this country to continue to stand for what is right

& correct what is wrong in any way within our means.

We owe it to our veterans to never allow their sacrifices to be ignored or denigrated, & to set the record straight, whenever we see it massaged or maligned. We owe it to them to continue their commitment to make this a better country & a better world in whatever way we can, no matter how significant or small. Every morning when I get up, I first check to see that the grass is on the right side, and then I try to live each day by my sainted mother's advice: "To leave everywhere I go better than when I arrived". I have found that the satisfaction I receive from doing the smallest good, even just a friendly greeting, is returned so exponentially, that I almost feel selfish. And I hope it does a small part in making the world of each person I meet just a little better. If we all do our own small part it can only get better for everyone in our lives.

Be mindful daily of the virtues imbued in all of us of - Duty, Honor & Country. Remember the veterans, their courage & commitment to these virtues. Their friendships, hardships, and memories will always be a part of

us. The comrades we lost, the opportunities we missed, and the sacrifices we made are all part of our own private “walls”. I do not fear death, for I have looked death in the eye more than once, and smiled back. What I look forward to is reuniting with all those whom I’ve known, loved and lost, and knowing we will be together again. For now, we

honor them by just simply remembering them. For all of us, “Duty, Honor and Country” is a common heritage that we have proudly shared & which never can be forgotten.

God Bless The United States of
America