

GAMEWARDENS SPEECH (BY CAPT. KENNETH MEEK, USN (RET.))

IN THINKING ABOUT WHAT I MIGHT SAY TODAY I REALIZED THAT IT WAS EXACTLY 40 YEARS AGO THIS MONTH THAT I RECEIVED A PHONE CALL FROM MY DETAILER SAYING HE HAD A GREAT JOB FOR ME LINED UP. I HAD JUST MADE COMMANDER AND WAS LOOKING FORWARD TO WHAT MY NEXT ASSIGNMENT WOULD BE. HE SAID I WAS BEING ORDERED AS COMMANDER TASK GROUP 116.1 IN VIETNAM. AFTER A PAUSE I ASKED WHAT TASK GROUP 116 DID AND WHERE WAS IT LOCATED. AFTER ANOTHER PAUSE THE DETAILER SAID HE DIDN'T REALLY KNOW OTHER THAN IT WAS A VERY IMPORTANT AND HIGH PRIORITY JOB. IT WASN'T UNTIL I GOT INTO PREDEPLOYMENT TRAINING IN SAN DIEGO AND SOUSON SLEWS IN SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA THAT I BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND WHAT I WAS HEADED INTO. I TELL YOU THIS BECAUSE I THINK IT SHOWS HOW LITTLE THE NAVY KNEW ABOUT RIVERINE WARFARE AND HOW FAR WE CAME IN THE 4 YEARS WE WERE IN VIETNAM. WE WERE A BLUE WATER NAVY WHERE RIVERS WERE VIEWED AS SOMEPLACE YOU COULD RUN AGROUND IN. THE IRONY OF THIS IS, HERE WE ARE TODAY STARTING OVER AGAIN. THE DIFFERENCE BEING THAT THERE IS A VAST AMOUNT OF EXPERIENCE FROM 35 TO 40 YEARS AGO THAT CAN BE CALLED ON SO THAT THE LEARNING CURVE DOES NOT HAVE TO START FROM BOTTOM AGAIN. INTERESTINGLY I WAS A PART OF A SMALL GROUP OF OFFICERS ON CNO'S STAFF IN 1970/71 WHO ARGUED THAT IT WAS ESSENTIAL THAT THE NAVY RETAIN ITS BROWNWATER/RIVERINE CAPABILITY AND TRAINING FOR FUTURE OPERATIONS. WE WERE ALMOST SUCCESSFUL, SINCE ADM ZUMWALT AGREED WITH US, BUT THE BIG SHIP NAVY SUPPORTERS FINALLY WON OUT, AS USUAL, BASED ON BUDGET ISSUES.

THERE HAS BEEN A LOT WRITTEN ABOUT THE NAVY RIVERINE OPERATIONS IN VIETNAM OVER THE YEARS. MOST OF IT IS GOOD, A FEW NOT SO GOOD AND SOME EVEN WRITTEN BY PEOPLE THAT WEREN'T THERE. ALL OF THE WRITINGS ADDRESSED THE COMBAT ACTIONS THAT OCCURRED, AND THERE WERE HUNDREDS OF THEM, THAT IS WHAT MADE FOR GOOD STORIES, BUT FEW TOOK THE TIME OR EFFORT TO LOOK AT WHAT MADE IT ALL POSSIBLE. IF YOU TAKE A LOOK AT THE MONUMENT BEHIND ME, AND I HOPE YOU ALL WILL BEFORE YOU LEAVE, YOU WILL SEE A LISTING OF ALL THE DIFFERENT ACTIVITIES THAT SUPPORTED THE GAMEWARDEN OPERATIONS. WHILE THE SAILORS IN THE PBR'S, SEAWOLF HELICOPTERS, BLACK PONY FIXED WING AIRCRAFT AND THE SEAL TEAMS WERE OUT FRONT CARRYING THE FIGHT TO WHEREVER THE VC/NVA COULD BE FOUND THEY WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN AN EFFECTIVE FIGHTING UNIT WITHOUT ALL THE BASE SUPPORT, BOTH ASHORE AND AFLOAT THAT WAS PUT IN PLACE TO SUPPORT THE OPERATION. CAPT BOB FRED, IN THE AUDIENCE TODAY, WAS THE CO OF AN LST THAT OPERATED AT THE MOUTH OF THE BASAC RIVER SUPPORTING PBR'S, SEAWOLH HELO'S

AND EVEN PROVIDING GUNFIRE SUPPORT TO BASES ASHORE THAT WOULD COME UNDER ATTACK. ALL OF THIS ORGANIZATION AND SUPPORT CAME ABOUT IN A VERY SHORT TIME, IN NAVY TERMS, A YEAR OR SO. THIS PBR IS REPRESENTATIVE OF OPERATION GAMEWARDEN BUT WE WOULD LIKE TO SEE A SEAWOLF HELICOPTER AND A SEAL TACTICAL ASSAULT BOAT ALONGSIDE IT BECAUSE, WITHOUT THEM, GAMEWARDEN WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN THE OUTSTANDING SUCCESS IT WAS AND THE LIST OF OUR OWN KIA NAMES ON THE MONUMENT WOULD BE A LOT LONGER. MAYBE CAPT WES CAN DIG AROUND IN HIS BAG OF TRICKS AND FIND A USED SEAWOLF. IT MIGHT ALSO HELP REMIND EVERYONE JUST HOW IMPORTANT AND NECESSARY ORGANIC AIR SUPPORT WAS AND ARGUABLE IS TODAY TO A SUCCESSFUL BROWNWATER OPERATION.

THE SAILOR HEROS OF GAME WARDEN ARE LEGENDARY, HUNDREDS OF PERSONAL DECORATIONS AND PURPLE HEARTS INCLUDING 2 MOH AND 14 NAVY CROSSES. FIREFIGHTS WERE A DAILY EVENT. PATROLLING THE RIVERS AND CANALS OF THE MEKONG DELTA WAS NOT UNLIKE THE OPERATIONS ON THE HIGHWAYS AND RIVERS OF IRAQ TODAY. THE ROADS OF THE DELTA WERE THE RIVERS AND CANALS. ALSO WE NOW HEAR A LOT ABOUT IED'S. THE GAMEWARDEN SAILORS KNEW ALL ABOUT IED'S 40 YEARS AGO, WE JUST CALLED THEM HOMEMADE CLAYMORES.

PROBABLY THE MOST FAMOUS GAMEWARDEN SAILOR IS MEDAL OF HONOR WINNER BM1 JAMES WILLIAMS, THE MOST DECORATED SAILOR IN NAVAL HISTORY. THE USS JAMES WILLIAMS DDG-95 HAS JUST RECENTLY DEPLOYED TO THE MIDDLE EAST. WHEN THEY ARE UNDERWAY ONE MEMBER OF THE CREW WILL ALWAYS BE WEARING A BLACK BERET SO THAT NO ONE IN THE CREW FORGETS WHO THEIR SHIP NAMESAKE WAS. THEY ALSO HAVE A MURAL, PAINTED BY A CREWMEMBER, ON THE BULKHEAD IN THE CREWS MESS DEPICTING THE BATTLE THAT OCCURRED. WE HAVE OUR OWN LIVE NAVY CROSS RECIPIENT WITH US TODAY CAPT WESELESKEY, ALONG WITH ALL THE BLACK BERET HEROES YOU SEE HERE. EVERY SAILOR IN TASK FORCE 116 WAS A HERO IN THEIR OWN RIGHT. ANYONE OF THEM WOULD HAVE GIVEN THEIR LIFE FOR THEIR SHIPMATES AND A LOT DID.

THIS LEADS US TO A MORE SOMBER NOTE. WE ARE HERE TODAY TO REDEDICATE THE MEMORIAL BEHIND ME TO THE 290 MEN WHO'S NAMES ARE ETCHED ON THIS MEMORIAL, AS WELL AS ON THE BLACK GRANITE WALL ON THE MALL IN WASH DC. THESE MEN GAVE THEIR LIVES IN SUPPORT OF OUR NATIONS COMMITMENT TO A FREE WORLD. IT WOULD SEEM THAT THIS IS BECOMING A NEVER-ENDING TASK SINCE 40 YEARS LATER WE ARE AGAIN SENDING OUR YOUNG SAILORS INTO HARMS WAY IN A WAR ON TERROR THAT SEEMS NOT TO HAVE AND END

IN SIGHT. TIMES MAY CHANGE, NATIONAL POLICY MAY CHANGE, EQUIPMENT MAY CHANGE BUT THE DEDICATED SAILOR'S, CARRYING THE WAR TO THE ENEMY, WILL NEVER CHANGE, FROM THE RIVERS OF THE MEKONG DELTA TO RIVERS OF IRAQ, AFRICA, SOUTH AMERICA, PHILLIPPINES OR WHEREVER THE FIGHT TAKES US.

ADM BULLARD, COMMODORE JORDAN, WE PASS THE TORCH TO YOU AND YOUR MEN. TAKE CARE OF THEM AS I KNOW YOU WILL. MAY YOU HAVE FAIR WINDS AND FOLLOWING SEAS, EVEN ON THE BROWNWATER OF THE RIVERS WORLDWIDE AND MAY YOU ALSO WIN A FEW BATTLES IN THE PENTAGON.

THANK YOU FOR ATTENDING TODAY