

Keynote Speaker Remarks for the Seabee Ball

Great Lakes Illinois March 3, 2018

Presented by Florissant Missouri Mayor Thomas P. Schneider

I want to thank Lt. Parizek and Lt. JG Hauptman for the honor to speak at this Seabee celebration. To all here who served in the Armed Forces....Thank you for your service and to those here on active or reserve duty, we salute you! You and your supporting families are always in our prayers.

The military and in particular the Navy and Seabees are a big part of who I am and helped prepare me to succeed as the full time Mayor of a city of 52,000 people.

Established by the Spanish Governor of Louisiana territory in 1776, our city of Florissant is older than the Constitution. We share a boundary with Ferguson MO which was the center of worldwide attention due to civil unrest almost four years ago.

Two centuries ago St. Philippine Duchesne told Missionary Jesuit Father DeSmet, the famous "Black Robe" trusted by plains Indians, that she loved Florissant for its hospitality. This 200 year tradition has welcomed newcomers and promotes lasting harmony in our city.

It so happens that the Vietnam Unknown Soldier whose remains were identified by DNA was 1st Lt. Michael Blassie and his remains were returned to Florissant for his 2nd funeral. His name was already engraved along with dozens of other KIA and MIA on our Florissant Vietnam Memorial obelisk.

Being Mayor is tough on family. My wife Rachel is here and this is not her first Seabee Ball as she was the 1972 Guantanamo Bay Seabee Queen on the Seabee's 30th anniversary. She is a very classy lady and I'm lucky she's put up with me. We are blessed with six children and four grandchildren.

Our second son is here too, retired Chief Store Keeper Zach Schneider. He likes Store Keeper (SK) better than the new designation Logistical Specialist (LS). Seabees don't care what the squid rate is as long as we get our supplies right? You know at the time I never imagined having a son who is a lifer Chief wearing that jacket with all the gold on the sleeve. But Wow we are proud parents! When in doubt, "ask the Chief" right?

Zach is third generation Navy. My Dad was a World War II Chief Ship fitter. An expert civilian welder at 28, he earned his anchors fast by repairing ships fast in the Pacific Theater. I hung with Dad at his favorite tavern to overhear veterans quietly talk about their World WAR.

Zach enlisted right out of high school, He pre-commissioned flattop Carrier number 74 (good number) John C. Stennis and later Destroyer Preble DDG88 so he is a two time plank owner. He circumvented the globe in both directions with four tours in the Persian Gulf on three ships and one volunteer tour in Afghanistan where he got his anchors in the desert initiated with Seabee Chief Candidates who were "in country" with Zach.

We all appreciate the Chiefs leadership but they can be crusty and rigid sometimes like Dad and Zach. ...For example, and I'm told this is a true story,

A third class E O unearthed an ancient lamp with a bulldozer working on an excavation. A Builder Chief brought lunch to the construction site to save time and compare notes. Rubbing the lamp clean in between bites out popped the genie who asked what they wished for. The EO wished to be in Hawaii on the beach and poof vanished.

The genie then asked what the Chief wanted.... who insisted "By thunder don't you know this excavation is on the critical path of this job! I wish the EO was back on the job and you were back in the lamp.

So my Dad was a Chief and my Son was a Chief. I was an EA2 surveyor with MCB 74 and at GITMO and didn't have the right stuff to be a Chief. But after my degree in Civil Engineering I was commissioned as a Mustang Ensign in the Naval Civil Engineer Corps Reserve That's how I outrank Dad and Zach.

I was elected to the Florissant City Council in 1979 and asked the Navy for inactive status....They agreed that as long as I was an elected official I could be inactive. With thirty-two straight years on the City Council and now seven years as Mayor I'm still dodging the Navy..... I am the longest continuous office holder in the state of Missouri.

My College freshman year was distracting. I was torn between wanting to serve like Dad and not wanting to get drafted. After freshman year I discovered a combination of Navy and Engineering where I could learn on the job and serve the Navy like Dad.

I enlisted with a guaranteed Seabee assignment which was great because I had the privilege of going to Vietnam twice instead of only once!!!! Better yet, after two tours I got sent to GITMO. All three generations of Schnieders took basic training at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center.

After boot camp and a Greyhound bus to Gulfport I shared a taxi with Direct Petty Officer Builder Ray Gormley from Pennsylvania reporting to Duty. We remain best friends and Ray and his family is with us tonight. Our battalion MCB 74 had the same number as Zach's first ship the Carrier Stennis.

Ray knows how to be a good friend and the blessing of friendship is always abundant in a room full of Seabees. Ray was an unconventional Builder and never touched concrete preferring to build with sandbags by volunteering for Perimeter Security for the duration of both deployments to protect us. Thank God for all who did that duty right?

Ray wanted to be a Marine but his World War II Can-Do Dad insisted he join the Seabees. Ray explained that he would be mixing cement the rest of his life so no thanks in Vietnam. He even went on night patrols with the Marines. That was authorized wasn't it Ray?

Still looking for adventure as a civilian, Ray worked on dangerous Chimney projects and for added excitement had a history of falling off of those steep Pennsylvania roofs. We're too old now for roof duty Ray. Thanks for being here buddy.

MY first tour with MCB 74 in 1968/1969 took us to Camp Shields in Chu Lai named for Seabee Marvin Shields who was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. We built fuel farms, ammunition storage units, warehouses, aircraft hangers, water systems, and power systems. We worked on Route 1, sent details to support Marine missions and had a *change in command*.

I learned surveying from two smart little guys. Both were tall enough to enlist but needed a box to stand on to look into the transit. John Sergeant was great at surveying and cards but made the wrong gamble during our first tour on the one field promotion we got and opted to use it for E-5. He shrugged it off when guys he taught, including me, made E-5 when he made E-4.

My other diminutive teacher came to St. Louis last year and asked me to join him at the dedication of the beautiful bronze artwork to honor our Seabee Founder Admiral Ben Moreel.

Paul Petretti's a very active Seabee Vet in New York and was an expert, supremely confident surveyor and a swashbuckling direct petty officer when he was recruited for the 1969/70 tour specifically by our new Captain, Joe D'Emidio who *ordered Petretti to buy all new surveying instruments*.

Captain D'Emidio was a great C O and was the only guy I saw in Vietnam with starched greens.

We had some characters of surveyors/card players like my hut mates Mike McGough and Terry Lukanic, a Seabee History author. The Character "Carl" by Billy Bob Thornton in "Slingblade" reminds me of an EA in HQCO. There were some "brown nosers" too like Eddie Haskell in Leave It To Beaver and ouch, I lost big when my Cardinals lost the 1968 World Series after being up 3 games to 1.

I spent two months as a mess cook in Chu Lai working my way up to the acey ducey mess by Christmas day when the Bob Hope Show was there. When the coast was clear I dashed off to the show. When I returned the trays were stacked to the ceiling. The Mess Chief didn't put me on report but gave me the privilege of washing trays till the end of my 60 days of mess duty.

Our second deployment start was interrupted by Hurricane Camille which slammed into Gulfport right after our C-141 took off for Quang Tri leaving half our battalion to help clean up the devastation. We were desperate to know if our loved ones survived the storm.

I couldn't sleep worrying about Rachel who I had just married and our apartment was only two blocks from the beach. During those sleepless nights I heard Marines desperately calling into the night for O negative Blood. I answered their call and hoped to save a life while praying for Rachel's. That week of not knowing was harder than anything else ever thrown my way.

I waited my turn to finally patch a call through to find out that Rachel had packed and went to the base for shelter in a warehouse then drove her damaged Camaro to St. Louis.

When the rest of our battalion arrived we got hit by Typhoon Doris and had to clean that mess up. Months later watching home movies of the Gulfport Hurricane we came under a rocket attack with one exploding just behind the movie screen.

We were in Quang Tri to finish up some road building, bridge construction and several other projects before getting orders to move MCB74 by air, sea and land to Da Nang, Vietnam 2nd city.

Our surveying team traveled alone by stake truck down Hwy 1 past the ancient capital city of Hue. I remember being scared of ambush or road mine and fascinated at the same time by the beauty of the hilly country near the sea.

We lucked out in Da Nang with camp Hoover right next to Freedom Hill, the in country R&R center with an air conditioned movie theater. That is where I had one of my most startling moments "in country" I jumped out of my seat when Allen Arkin leaped to attack Natalie Wood in "Wait until Dark".

We worked six and a half long days every week on a large variety of projects. Ray was happily renovating his new Da Nang security bunker while the battalion had a wide variety of projects. The biggest, and the one I was proud to be part of was the 750 foot long Cau Do River Bridge.

I loved working on that bridge from start to finish including logging the records of the H beam pile driving blows per inch. I reported serious surveying errors on the approach ramp and bridge centerline control to engineering and then was shocked to hear I was going to be reassigned to another project.

I took a risk and talked directly with the C Company CO Lt. Project Engineer who demanded HQ CO to assign me in charge of bridge surveying control until project completion. That was my best moment in the country for my self- confidence. It taught me that, if my gut tells me I'm in the right, not to fear speaking up. That lesson served me well as a city legislator and as Chief Executive.

I made another fateful decision on that bridge. One day I used profanity in a dispute with a steelworker who dressed me down in perfectly formed sentences with meaningful words.

I vowed never to be at a loss for words again, JN Allen Tabe gave me a pocket dictionary to double my vocabulary and a refresher course in grammar to help me strive for eloquence. Those exercises continue to serve me more than any engineering or financial courses I took.

Two weeks before the end of my second tour, in line waiting for Marines to clear the road of mines, I talked the driver out of going around them, a moment later we heard "boom" and a jeep bumper landed on the hood of our stake truck! Had we went around I wouldn't be here tonight....*I would be on the wall with over 58,000 good men and women from my generation.*

The Mayor's office is full of memories that mark layers of time connecting the past with the present. The artifacts remind me where I come from and help point out where to go next.

My Great Lakes Boot Camp Company picture includes me and Jim Barry, the manager of Bunkers Tavern down the street from City Hall who was in company 586 with me.

The late Florissant Judge Tim Kelly, a Navy Jag Officer appears in a picture of us when elected together on the same day 32 years before he died in office a month after I became Mayor. His Dad was a World War II PT boat Captain & close friend of John F. Kennedy, the 1st of 5 straight navy presidents followed by Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Carter and then later G. H. W. Bush.

There is a commemorative replica of the Seabee Memorial next to a shadow box to honor my naval service both gifts from Chief Schneider. Nearby those are my 3 honorable discharges and letters of appreciation from Nixon and Carter, the 3rd & 5th Navy Presidents.

In 1992 I was inducted into the MO University of S&T Athletic Hall of fame for founding intercollegiate, intramural soccer and helping Kiwanis form a Rolla youth soccer league. Promoting Soccer in GITMO & Rolla created the politician and taught me how to sell myself.

My Bachelor's Degree in Civil Engineering allowed me to get interviewed by 37 year Florissant Mayor Eagan who was not only a soccer guy he was also a World War II Navy guy and that combination got me the fateful job as City Engineer with the city I am now Mayor of. I sit at the same desk Eagan interviewed me at in 1976. I keep his outdated desk is a symbol of continued leadership.

I acquired the Certified Financial Planner designation in 1993 succeeding in that career for 30 years till I was elected Mayor telling voters that I could use both a scientific and a financial calculator.

One of my Hole in One golf balls is framed near the Dudley Wysong player tag I wore when I caddied for the 8th place finisher in the 1965 US Open. Next to a High School golf medal for 5th place in State Qualifying are my High School and College Varsity Letters in Golf. Although Zach can outdrive me now, he cannot beat my score yet.

Photos remind me of our extended military family. My first cousin Mike Schneider is Mayor of another city in St. Louis County. His Dad Tom was a Marine at Iwo Jima and Mike a Marine in Vietnam, two other of Dad's brothers and two sisters were World War II Army. Mike and I are proud that all six male Schneider cousins served including my late Brother, Army 1st Cavalry Sgt. Jim Schneider, the 1st Schneider to see Germany since our Great Grampa Jacob and brother left to join the Union Army 1862. *Mom's brother, Uncle Pat was a Navy Shelback.*

Zach gave his cousin, Army 1st Lt. Matt Dawson, his first officer salute and my Godson Army lifer, Major Nick Dawson, is at Fort Bragg. Rachel's Dad, Ben Samel flew the Burma Hump in World War II and her brothers were both Army with Jim going to Vietnam and Greg to Germany.

I am proud of my military service. The Navy and Seabee Heritage are rich in traditions and full of symbolism in the names of bases and ships. When Zach's second ship, the USS Preble DDG88 was commissioned in 2002 our family attended and Boston rolled out a Red White & Blue carpet.

Commodore Preble's flagship, the USS Constitution defeated the Barbary Coast Pirates with his Marines at Tripoli in 1799 establishing the first use of US Naval Power on offense.

Old Iron Sides, the oldest ship in any fleet, often repaired lovingly by Seabee hands, was brought up next to the Preble and the spirit of Commodore Preble was ceremoniously rang off the Constitution and onto the USS Preble. This was very moving and meaningful. I try to keep my Navy spirit alive as I fight for what I believe is right in my city, county, State and Nation.

I have adopted a Seabee CAN DO attitude in life which has braced me to meet the challenges of elective office. Politics is difficult and getting more so all the time. When faced with a challenge I am inspired by Can Do Seabee Spirit; when asked if a difficult job can be done the Seabee confident reply is "the difficult we do at once, the impossible may take a bit longer"

We are the Seabees of the Navy, We can build, we can fight, we pave the way to victory and guard it day and night. Founded by St. Louisan Ben Moreell shortly after Pearl Harbor we promised to remember the 7th of December and shortly after the turn of this century we promised to remember the 11th of September. Patriotic Florissant always does.

We are the Can Do Bees of the seven seas and for 76 years have served with pride, dedication, sweat, blood and some gave the ultimate sacrifice as five did from my battalion, MCB 74, in Vietnam and one in the Gulf War. We have engaged globally in every theater of war or any mission of peace where our skills and fighting spirit made a difference.

We build..... anything on land or underwater that our Navy, Marines or sister branches need.

We Fight..... for a Nation governed as a Republic and for the noble idea that self-governance has changed the world from perpetual subjugation to one with the hope of freedom.

We prevent conflict by promoting Democratic ideals with humanitarian projects. When people of other Nations cry out for disaster help the Seabee Patch lets them know they are in skillful, hardworking and caring hands.

The gentle touch of those calloused hands worldwide can spread more American good will than hundreds of ambassadors. When Hurricanes and other disasters strike.... who you gonna call who's more agile, adaptive, skillful or confident than the Can Do Seabees to stabilize a crisis and relieve human suffering?

There is a flag in a triangular case in my office that was once an ensign flown from the USS Cape St. George during Zach's deployment with her to the Persian Gulf. The "Cape" was with the Carrier Lincoln when it sailed through the Straits of Hormuz in defiance of threats from Iran.

Zach also loaned me a large US Navy flag gifted by a Master Chief. It's draped prominently across my large office couch. These two flags are hoisted at City Hall each October 13th for the Navy Birthday and every March 5th for the birthday of the Seabees. I am a Seabee of the Navy and I promise to remember all of YOU!

A press release has already been sent by the Mayor's office; "In Honor of the Birthday of the Seabees the Navy flag will be flying this Monday March 5 under the United States Ensign from the USS Cape St. George at Florissant City Hall." Thank you for this great honor.

May you have fair winds to reach your goals, calm seas with those you love, and until we meet again may God hold you in the palm of his hand.