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Perseverance and Innovation

Thank you.

It's truly an honor for me to be here tonight and celebrate our Navy's 240th Birthday with you.

One of the things I love most about this time of year is how it focuses our attention on the Navy's history and heritage. The more I read and learn about our Navy, the more it inspires me and reaffirms my love for this great institution and for the people who have shaped us into who we are today.

Our heritage has been shaped and molded by courageous leaders who demonstrated that perseverance in the face of great danger and uncertainty, along with a culture of innovation, can make the difference between success or failure; life or death.

1812, Part 1

Isaac Hull was in command of USS Constitution and was taking the ship from Annapolis to New York to link up with Commodore John Rodgers, his flagship USS President, and the other ships in his squadron.

Captain Hull trained his crews nearly non-stop as he sailed down the Potomac. He tested new cannons and conducted gun exercise after gun exercise. By the time they reached the Atlantic, he was pleased with his crew's proficiency.

Off the coast of what is today Atlantic City, New Jersey, a lookout aboard Constitution saw sails off in the distance. Expecting to link up with Rodgers and his task force, Captain Hull ordered his ship to tack East and head toward those sails.

Around 10 p.m. that night, Constitution had closed in and signaled to the other ships.

No response.

An hour goes by and still
no response.

Something is wrong.

Hull orders his crew to battle stations and
they wait.

At first light they see they're in a bad situation.

They had sailed right into an enemy squadron of seven Royal Navy ships that included four frigates and a 64-gun battleship.

Perspective

It was 1812 and one month earlier, the U.S. had declared war against Great Britain -- in large part to end their practice of impressing American merchant mariners into service on Royal Navy vessels.

The Royal Navy was a beast of an organization. It was respected and feared around the world. It had been operating for centuries and had five hundred active warships. Eighty-five of these ships were sailing in American waters at the time war broke out.

The U.S. Navy, by contrast, had been operating blue-water vessels for only eighteen years, had barely a dozen ships and a host of small coastal gunboats to its name.

The numerical superiority of the Royal Navy was demoralizing and their crews were well trained and proficient Sailors and gunners. They had an almost supernatural aura of invincibility.

That aura shaped public opinion about the *need* for a U.S. Navy since the beginnings of the Revolutionary War nearly 40 years earlier. Much of the population and most of the political leaders believed the United States **could not** compete against the British Navy.

That aura of invincibility was only bolstered during the Revolutionary War when seven of the 13 frigates built for the Continental Navy were captured by the British and another four had to be destroyed to prevent them from falling into enemy hands.

At the end of the War for Independence, the United States had no Navy and for more than a decade, Congress only invested in small coastal gunboats for harbor defense.

Congress finally authorized the building of six blue-water Frigates in 1794 – to take on the Barbary Pirates in the Mediterranean. Supporters of a standing Navy recognized that those ships and their future successes or failures would have a major influence on the Navy's future.

1812, Part 2

USS Constitution was one of those six-blue water frigates and Isaac Hull was well-aware of the importance of his ship to the Navy and the United States.

He quickly defined their mission: Run from this overwhelming force and save their ship to fight another day.

He ordered all hands to make all sail.
And then the breeze vanished.

And the ship
sat helpless in the water.

Innovative Thinking

I think the U.S. Navy is different from all the other services -- and, I suspect, from a lot of other Navies around the world, because we place such a high premium on freethinkers.

We value Freedom of Navigation on the seas and *also* in the mind.

We encourage critical thinking and both advanced general *and* technical education.

Our best leaders encourage the development and growth of their teams and listen to and trust their ideas and recommendations.

We are not afraid to innovate. We are not afraid to try something new: To tack this way for a while or that way to see what gains we can make. If it doesn't quite work out: Tack a different direction to get back on course.

And that's what Isaac Hull did to try to save Constitution from that massive Royal Navy squadron. He thought differently. He dropped his boats in the water and had his Sailors put the 44-gun Frigate under tow. It worked for a while and Constitution was able remain out of enemy cannon range as they slowly headed towards the coastline.

The Royal Navy of course saw how Constitution was able to move in such a dead calm and one of the British frigates -- the HMS Shannon -- copied the technique. When the Commodore of the Royal Navy squadron saw this, he ordered all his ships to drop their boats in the water and send them to Shannon to help tow the ship and give it more speed. With many more boats towing the British Frigate, it started closing the distance quickly.

The crew aboard Constitution started to feel that the ship was doomed. If HMS Shannon got within cannon range, it would probably detain the American ship long enough for the other British warships to close the distance. And that, would be the end.

Captain Hull though, wasn't going to surrender under any circumstance and, if needed, intended to go down fighting. The enlisted men aboard let him know they were also determined to fight to the end. The only way the flag would ever be brought down aboard Constitution was if it were sinking.

Purpose

This attitude,
this determination of the officers and crew,
provided the U.S. Navy a distinct advantage over the Royal Navy in the War of 1812.

United States Navy ships were manned by volunteer crews. They were paid, fed and treated better than their counterparts on Royal Navy ships. They also served a predetermined amount of time -- a cruise or two -- and were let go when that time was up.

In contrast, the Royal Navy almost had to imprison their enlisted crews. Conditions were bad. Treatment was poor. There was no compelling reason for an enlisted Sailor aboard a British warship to stick around. So they deserted at any chance. This caused a shortage of able seaman. That created a need to impress more and more Sailors from other countries -- especially the United States. Impressed Sailors tried to desert more often. And the cycle continued.

The other advantage U.S. Sailors had over the Royal Navy is a bigger sense of purpose. Sailors aboard U.S. ships abhorred the practice of impressment. And many felt they were fighting to free their fellow brothers-in-arms from a vanquished life aboard a British vessel.

1812, Part 4

A sense of purpose brings out the best in people. And right when Constitution and its crew needed the best, First Lieutenant Charles Morris came up with an ingenious idea.

He proposed Constitution “Kedge” ahead -- to put an anchor on one of their boats and row it out as far as they could and drop anchor. The ship would then use its capstan and pull the ship to the position of the anchor. If you were skilled enough, you could use two boats and create an almost-seamless advance.

This technique was generally used only in harbors and other inland waterways and to kedge at sea was virtually unheard of. But, First Lieutenant Morris knew the water underneath them was shallow enough to attempt this.

Captain Hull listened and agreed to give it a try.

Cables were made. Boats were readied and the kedge anchors lowered. The first boat rowed out a half mile ahead and dropped anchor. The capstans then started pulling the Constitution forward through the water – away from enemy ships.

It was hard work but they were making progress. The Royal Navy soon saw what was happening and even though they called it a “Yankee Trick”, they once again copied Constitution’s ingenuity.

Constitution rowed, kedged and when there was wind, sailed, for three days before the Royal Navy stopped their pursuit. Captain Hull and his crew’s innovative thinking saved not only the Constitution, but also what could have been a devastating blow to the Nation’s confidence and morale so early in the war.

Ian Toll writes in his book “Six Frigates” that even though it wasn’t a victory, the escape against heavy odds showed that the Royal Navy had no inherent advantage over the Americans in the mastery of seamanship.

Lieutenant Morris wrote many years later that over those three days, he learned to keep faith in “the advantages to be expected from perseverance... so long as any chance for success may remain.”

Perseverance and Success

One of the reasons I believe Captain Hull’s mission was successful is he quickly defined their objective: Escape the British squadron. The crew was then able to put everything else out of their mind and focus all their energy and ingenuity to that single objective. Every decision they made supported it.

Providing clear direction and an understanding of THE objective is important to get the most out of your people and even yourself.

We see examples of this throughout Navy history. One of my favorites involves Naval Aviator and astronaut Jim Lovell -- mission commander aboard Apollo 13 in 1970. After an explosion in space damaged his spacecraft he -- and his NASA support crews -- realized that the new objective was to get back to home.

In space with Jim Lovell was another Naval Aviator, Fred Haise and Air Force pilot Jack Swigert. They persevered for four days in a near-freezing lunar module that had become their liferaft after that explosion crippled the main spacecraft resulting in the loss of needed oxygen and power.

The entire story is recounted in Jim Lovell’s book, “Lost Moon” and in a 1995 Ron Howard movie starring Tom Hanks.

The Astronauts and NASA kept faith that an advantage would come from perseverance.

They worked problems as they came up. They focused on one objective after another with the singular mission of getting the Astronauts home safely.

Ken Mattingly, another Naval Aviator, worked an intricate and innovative start-up sequence to get the reentry computers and systems running without overloading what remained of the spacecraft’s batteries. NASA ground crews developed a makeshift carbon dioxide removal system to give the astronauts enough breathable air in the lunar module to survive until they reached Earth.

They were motivated by purpose and forced by situation to be innovative.

Lovell and the Carrier

This wasn't the first time Jim Lovell had faced adversity or life or death danger.

He wrote in his book about a time when he was flying over the Sea of Japan during the Vietnam War and he lost a homing signal that was supposed to guide him back to his aircraft carrier.

It was dark and because they were in a war zone, his ship had turned off all its lights.

Lovell was a bit of an innovator at the time and had figured out a way to create a make-shift light that he could plug into the aircraft's electrical panel and help him read his knee board better. Knee boards are where the pilots have all the mission data --- like where the ship is located --- written out.

As he plugged in his homemade light and turned it on, there was a brilliant flash and then everything went black. Lovell had overloaded the circuits and every bulb in the instrument panel was out.

He took out a tiny flashlight and looked things over. He realized he was in a lot of trouble and thought he might have to ditch his aircraft in the ocean.

After a few seconds he switched his flashlight off and thought about what he could do next.

That's when he saw, far below, a faint greenish glow that formed a visible trail in the water. The aircraft carrier had disturbed some phosphorescent algae in the water creating that faint green glow. Lovell followed this trail and soon found the carrier.

He later said that if his cockpit lights had not have shorted out, he never would have seen the phosphorescent trail, it could only be seen in the pitch dark. The shorting out of his instrument lights had actually saved him.

There is power in perseverance. As long as you can persevere, a chance for success remains.

Keep working the problem.

Keep finding a new way.

Keep innovating.

Keep focused.

Keep the objective -- the desired end state -- in mind.

Our history -- from its very beginning -- is forged by courageous leaders able to persevere in the face of great danger and uncertainty.

They find a way to success because they foster a culture of innovation.

You -- the future leaders of this great institution -- of this great Navy -- will continue to build our legacy as you embody our values and ethos.

Closing

As we reflect on our Navy's Birthday tonight and on our theme "Ready Then, Ready Now, Ready Always," I would like to read a few lines from the Ethos of the U.S. Navy SEALs.

When I hear these lines, I think not only of the SEALs, but, also of the entire history of the U.S. Navy. These lines, to me, truly represent **WHO** we are.

We demand discipline.

We expect innovation.

The lives of my teammates and the success of our mission depend on me - my technical skill, tactical proficiency, and attention to detail.

My training is never complete. We train for war and fight to win.

I will never quit.

I persevere and thrive on adversity.

My Nation expects me to be physically harder and mentally stronger than my enemies.

If knocked down, I will get back up,
every time.

I will draw on every remaining ounce of strength to protect my teammates and to accomplish our mission.

I am never out of the fight.

Happy 240th Birthday U.S. Navy.

Thank you.