



Commander U.S. Pacific Fleet  
Commissioning of USS Makin Island (LHD 8)  
Admiral Patrick M. Walsh  
10/23/2009

Thank you for that kind introduction...veterans of the Pacific campaign, former Marine Raiders, former Sailors, members of the Navy League, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, Marines and Sailors. Thank you; I am grateful to be here, to spend time with you, and join you for the Commissioning ceremony for USS MAKIN ISLAND (LHD-8). You have afforded me a wonderful opportunity to share the rich heritage, tradition, and service of the Navy-Marine Corps team.

The American people have given us this important venue to honor our history...but it is a moment not possible without the professionalism and close collaboration of our industry partners, and strong local support from the Cities of Coronado, San Diego, the great state of California, as well as the continued support of our national representatives and leadership.

Today we recognize many people, and their families, who have been part of the historic journey to bring this great ship, and all that she represents, to life. I am grateful for all who are here...from many diverse occupations, neighborhoods, backgrounds, and careers...veterans of the Pacific campaign, former shipmates, and friends of Sailors and Raiders. My remarks begin with you, friends and family, because the days pass too quickly, our opportunities with each other too fleeting, our reunions too limited, to miss a chance to express our thanks and gratitude for each other. Your presence today not only helps us complete the picture of the heroes associated with this historical name, you help us tell the story of their true measure and greatness as men.

Today, you will witness...what we value. Today we remember, we celebrate, and we reaffirm our commitment to service: to serve our Nation, our Navy, our shipmates, and each other. Whether we realize it, sense it, or recognize it completely, together, we are part of a great circle of community, history, and tradition, where one generation cares for and nurtures the next. The men whom we honor today have done that for us; now it is our charge to carry their example of selfless service and servant leadership forward for those in our trust.



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Our Navy values its traditions -- and few are as significant as the commissioning of a United States warship. Commissioning a ship offers us a rare, unique, and wonderful opportunity to memorialize people and events and bring the enduring elements of their personal experience into sharp focus as the torch of honor, courage, and commitment, symbolically passes from one generation to the next. Today, we will do more than commission a grey hull with a number or simply add another ship to the Navy registry...today we recognize and honor a story...a story of not only campaigns and battles, but of leadership and courage...determination and character...as well as pain, isolation, self-less sacrifice, and service while under fire.

It is the name, MAKIN ISLAND, which conveys our story. It is a story that reveals insights about the qualities we admire and respect, rather than about an adversary, we confronted or fought. Equally important, is that...the name of the ship defines an identity, conveys a unifying theme, describes a spirit, that pulls on the heartstrings of those who join our proud lineage...and assume responsibility for operations at sea. Today's ceremony is an opportunity to bring to life the words of a former warrior, veteran of the Pacific campaign, and Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral George Anderson, who said, 'the Navy has both a tradition and a future...we look with pride and confidence in both directions.'

Makin Island is part of the Gilbert Island chain in the Pacific Ocean straddling the equator, near the International Date Line. Today, this relatively small area of 6.7 square kilometers, is home to 2,385 people who reside in its two villages.

Do not let the size fool you; Makin Island was part of an epic tale in our nation's history in the Pacific campaign. At the dawn of World War II, the nation was under assault and we had lost every battle that we entered. The damage to the nation was more than the physical destruction contained at Pearl Harbor; it was psychological, which according to historians, was far more widespread and debilitating. One author, Craig Nelson, described the country "in a state



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of panic by Christmas 1941. It was a time when most Americans thought the war was over, that the Axis had already won.” By early 1942, imperial forces had moved quickly through the Pacific and controlled most of the Asian land mass and island chain from Manchuria to the Dutch East Indies.

National leaders wanted change – they wanted to fight back and to regain the initiative. The nation, wounded, weak, and recovering, and despite daunting setbacks, wanted to move away from a defensive reactionary crouch to an assertive offensive campaign.

By February 1942, national leaders called for a new approach to the Pacific theater, the development of new doctrine, a fresh look at asymmetric operations. Some ideas had historical roots and had experienced success in other countries, other methods were so risky that they never developed beyond the drawing board. One thing was clear; the sea was the only line of approach. It was in this hour of desperation that the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Holcomb said, “We must act...and act quickly.” He called for the formation of the Raiders and a new way to employ the Navy-Marine Corps team.

Next, the Commandant sought volunteers...who ran to the sound of guns rather than run from the fight. The remarkable stories that follow are in the words of those volunteers.

Carl Boles.

“I joined the Corp at age 16. I volunteered for the Raiders out of boot camp after a John Wayne-type pitch, which promised we would train like commandos. Now that sounded neat to me because then I could handle anything and gloat to my high school pals, who, by the way, were surprised I passed the height requirement for the entrance physical. When I stepped on the weight scale with the height bar clearly over my head, the Corpsman asked if I could feel that...and I said ‘feel what?’ I hardly got the words out of my mouth when he hit me with his fist



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and the bar hit my head. He said, “You made it.” At 124 pounds, I thought that I was a man. If I remember correctly, 73 volunteered for Raider duty that day and 21 made it. They worked me hard, but it has paid off all of my life.”

Robert Morton.

“When he finally became old enough, Robert discovered that he needed a birth certificate to enlist in the Marines. Since he did not have one, he worked out a deal with his land-lady, who agreed to sign for him and act as his mother. In return, Robert agreed to sign over his \$10,000 GI insurance policy to her.”

John Abraham.

“After arriving in New Caledonia, they asked for volunteers for the Raider battalions. Those of us who wanted to volunteer lined up in shorts, and a group of officers walked by and interviewed us. It was my bad luck to be behind a real big guy and have a another real big guy in front of me. They picked the big guy in front of me and the big guy behind me (I was 5’6” and 135lbs). I asked the last of the interviewers, ‘how about me? They asked, “Why do you want to join the Raiders?” I blurted out that the guy in front of me owed me \$5. If he was selected and not me, then I would lose my money! The LT could hardly keep a straight face and told me to get a physical...as they walked away one of the platoon leaders said at least I could think fast. I landed at Puritan, Bougainville, Guam, and Okinawa, where I was wounded.

My injuries were severe enough for me to earn a trip back to the United States...I did not want to go to the United States...I wanted to rejoin my unit. So I went AWOL on a ship bound for Okinawa, where it took me three days to find my outfit and report to my company commander. I told him what I had done – he promoted me to Sergeant on the spot and told me to go back to my platoon, not to worry about some AWOL charge. When we were at our final muster at Great Lakes, the corpsmen asked if I was wounded...I said no until they took xrays and I said, well yes.



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After an hour the Shore Patrol came for me and questioned me so they could file a report. After more xrays and a good chewing out by the doctor, they told me I would lose a stripe if I was staying in for screwing up their paperwork.”

Vernon Rustvold.

“At boot camp Vern learned that to become a Raider, you had to be single, 18 years old, and weigh at least 145 pounds. Well, he said, “at least I am single.”

John Ferguson.

“My father was a Sergeant in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army division in World War I, the same division that 5<sup>th</sup> Marines were attached in the Battle of Bellou Wood. A Marine general commanded my father’s Army division...that is why my father was completely opposed to my getting into the Marines even if I had been 21. So, I paid someone to act as my father and sign papers in front of the Notary Public stating I was of legal age. I had quit school several years before that, and had become a welder in a shipyard and as a professional fighter. I was also a sparing partner to Lou Nova, the Argentine who was training to fight Joe Lewis for the world Heavy Weight championship. At 6’2” and 203lbs, I was in good condition for boot camp.”

“I was in the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Raider Battalion, when my amphibious tractor hit a large mine. I never knew what hit us, because of the three grenades that followed in quick succession. I guess that I looked like I was dead, because they cut off my dog tags and reported me killed in action. Marine Corps headquarters never knew that I was alive and at the Navy Hospital. After my folks were awarded my Purple Heart, gotten the GI insurance papers, and received all kinds of letters of regret from the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Governor of Oregon, District Naval Chaplain, it came to someone’s attention that they had a Marine at the San Diego Naval Hospital who wanted to get paid. So the Marines got the word and the Commandant, District Chaplain, and



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Governor agreed that I was alive and should get paid. My folks returned the Purple Heart, returned the insurance money, and the Marine Corps put me back on payroll.”

The attack on Pearl Harbor unleashed the most powerful force known to modern man...the American volunteer. These men took the fight to the enemy in the early, uncertain, days of the Pacific War. Launched from the submarines NAUTILUS and ARGONAUT, the Marines of the 2nd Raider Battalion went ashore on Makin Atoll to destroy the garrison, collect intelligence, and divert Japanese reinforcements from Guadalcanal. Challenged not only by the enemy, but also by the fog of war and the hazards of the sea, they completed their mission and returned as heroes.

The legacy of distinguished service in this island chain did not end with Carlson's Raiders. In late 1943, men of the 27<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, transported and supported by ships of the Pacific Fleet's Task Force 52, set out to capture Makin. Again, sacrifice did not stop at the waterline. While supporting troops on Makin, an enemy submarine torpedoed the escort carrier USS LISCOME BAY, resulting in a catastrophic explosion of ordnance. The ship sank in twenty-three minutes, taking with it 644 souls. Among them: the Task Group Commander, the Captain, and Cook Third Class "Dorie" Miller, who had received the Navy Cross for his actions during the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The amphibious assaults in the island chain now known as Kiribati (KEER-uh-buss), came at a time early in the war, when the Pacific Fleet was still recovering and growing, still gaining experience. The bold landings proved to be critically important:

- Important to advance new technologies and techniques, from bombardment patterns and methods of assault to better protection of landing forces and improved communications.
- Important because we advanced against the enemy.



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In their book *Victory at Sea*, Dunnigan and Nofi write: “In eleven months, the U.S. Navy advanced 4,200 statute miles, from Hawaii to Peleliu. This was unheard of in military history...These operations in the Gilberts, Marshalls, Marianas and Palaus completed the encirclement, and neutralization” of the Imperial Japanese Navy.

The first USS MAKIN ISLAND, CVE-93, commemorated the courage and sacrifice of Marine Raiders and Navy Sailors...laid-down, launched and commissioned all in the first five months of 1944! CVE-93 and her crew performed superbly in many of the most important engagements of the Pacific War. Serving as the flagship of the Escort Carrier Force, Makin Island took part in the Leyte operations. In February of 1945 she participated in the invasion of Iwo Jima and in March, she was sending her planes over the beaches of Okinawa flying thousands of sorties in support of the invasion force while fending off continuous of Kamikaze attacks. What began in the coral of Makin and Tarawa eventually led to victory across the entire Pacific.

So, today, we join together – shipmates past and present, to pay tribute to the men who served, and especially to those who made the ultimate sacrifice in the name of freedom and justice. COL Evans Carlson eulogized the memory of the Second Battalion Raiders who gave their lives at Makin, with simple eloquence. Words that seem especially moving, powerful, and appropriate in view of the deeds honored, remembered, and represented by the man of war and ship of steel standing silently behind us “...today [we honor] the memory of our comrades who remain at Makin. We miss them. Each had his special place among us, and that place is imperishably his...It behooves us who remain...to rededicate ourselves to the task that lies ahead. The convictions of these comrades are our convictions. With the memory of their sacrifice in mind, let us here dedicate ourselves to the task of bringing into reality the ideals for which they died; that their sacrifice will not have been in vain.”



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It is with a deep sense of history and that same warrior spirit that the USS MAKIN ISLAND, LHD-8, is bridled, spurred, and ready for action; she is a marvelous example of what our Nation can build. The scientists, engineers, program managers and shipbuilders who made her, join a proud legacy and have the gratitude of the Navy and Marine Corps team. USS MAKIN ISLAND possesses the capacity to undertake the missions that are important to us NOW and will help us to – “Rededicate ourselves to the task that lies ahead... bringing into reality the ideals” of our nation.

Already, this fine Navy ship has proven herself ready to accept the challenges that lie ahead. Her facilities are impressive: from her flight deck to the well deck; from her medical center to her command-and-control architecture, she is a ship of the future.

Perhaps no aspect of the MAKIN ISLAND represents the future as much as her propulsion system. The first-of-its-kind hybrid gas turbine-diesel electric propulsion system will save hundreds of millions of dollars in fuel costs over the life of this ship. Additionally, this innovative system will reduce wear on the gas-turbine engines and provide valuable data for follow-on ship design. Ultimately, hybrid drive and other Navy initiatives will help reduce our reliance on fossil fuels and improve our ability to accomplish the mission.

General Hagee described the employment of Marine Raiders as a transformational event, and their raid was the Navy-Marine Corps Team’s first foray into modern special operations. What they achieved in the dark days of World War II put hope in the heart of one nation, put doubt in the mind of another, led to victory for our nation in World War II, and proved in combat that anything is possible.

When USS Makin Island returns to station, she will stand watch over the stability and security of these same historic waters, ready to serve as the first to fight, and give the nation a force in readiness for the most difficult and challenging missions of our time. We will employ



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her unique qualities as a flexible, amphibious platform for missions that range from humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, to building partner capacity in our region, to amphibious assault for major combat as well as support for irregular warfare operations over the course of the expected service life of this ship – more than 30 years.

The story of MAKIN ISLAND is that the nation will call...because it needs us. She will expect us to be ready for any contingency, with leaders who are smart, adaptable, and flexible and who can build a team that will run to crisis and the sound of guns. History tells us that equally important is our commitment to the development of technology to extend the effectiveness of fleet operations in the Pacific theater – LHD-8 represents the best the nation has to offer, multi-mission, deep water, shallow water, and full spectrum, with a propulsion plant that will ultimately give us more time on station.

What moves the ship forward is new...what motivates the team, however, is a proud legacy and passion that connects one generation to the next...and it is our job to ensure that we never let it falter.

Marine Raider Ervin Kaplan wrote, “Were we to best characterize the attitude of those of us who served as United States Marine Raiders, it would be an overwhelming pride, proud to be Marines, prouder yet to be Marine Raiders; and finally, proud to have served in a legendary unit that was more than able to participate in avenging the treachery that left Pearl Harbor a smoldering wound on the American psyche. As our remaining years dwindle down, we simply want to be remembered. We want to be the beacon of military excellence and inspiration to the Marine Corps, the nation, and to the world.

This story, the navy story, is incomplete without mention of where it began. Our story begins in the American school that shapes and molds the minds of engineers. Engineers and manufacturers build the platforms that we use; families provide us their sons and daughters, the national



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treasures, who become Sailors and Marines. Sailors and Marines use these remarkable machines with strength of conviction and valor...but that is not the end of the story...our story is about strength but it is also about generosity and humanity...it is about what we must destroy in war and what we can build in peace as a reliable partner and a force of last resort.

Collectively, the contributions of those involved with Makin Island, afloat and ashore, represent a remarkable team, at a remarkable time in history, when together, they turned a page in history.

This team represents the pride of a generation comprised of Sailors and Marines who have given more than they received and positively affected the lives of more people than they will ever know...and that, ladies and gentlemen, is our heritage and tradition. It is our job to remember the goals, ambitions, pride, and performance of MAKIN ISLAND in our history...these dreams live within us now.

Today, we remember. We remember the distinguished accomplishments of Sailors and Marines...we remember the honor that they have brought the nation, we remember those who serve and continue to serve...and we remember those who have supported us. Mr Kaplan and other Raiders and Sailors present...‘the soul of your great crews live on each day in a mission that goes forward, on a course that endures, in a team that still lives, and in memories that will never die.’

God bless you and your families, our country and all who stand with us.

Gung Ho!