

Remarks by General Charles G. Boyd, USAF (Ret.)
BENS Eisenhower Award Dinner
Wednesday, May 19, 2010

Thank you. Wow, what an evening. I want to clarify a couple of points though, right at the outset. The Boyd Motorcycle Gang, while we may not be as good-looking or have all the same social graces as Hell's Angels, with the exception of Bovin, we have better bikes.

And the second thing, when I was the CEO of BENS, we reserved the Eisenhower Award for important people. You might mention to the current leadership they ought to raise their standards in the future.

I think it was Faulkner, William Faulkner – another fighter pilot, by the way, although a couple of eras ahead of me – who said, 'the reason for living is to get ready for being dead for a long time...and, in the final moments, to remember it all.' Well, I'm not ready yet, but I've been getting ready for a long time and collecting memories and the one from tonight will, I think, go in the front rank of my bulging file cabinet of memories.

The people that came tonight that are important to me in my life and that I admire and respect and love, that's really important to me. There's a guy here from my kindergarten class and I went to kindergarten a long time ago. There's a guy here tonight that was with me the day that I was shot down outside of Hanoi. There are colleagues, my Motorcycle Gang is here – you've already been introduced to them. You've been introduced to men with whom I shared a prison cell for years, and forged the kind of depth of friendship that I can't begin to tell you. Military colleagues of mine - there's a lot of firepower out there tonight, and I appreciate it.

Dave Petraeus filled in for Mike Mullen tonight. I would draw your attention to the fact that this is the first time in 65 years when this nation was at conflict where we have the quality in our theater commander and our chairman of Eisenhower and Marshall with Dave Petraeus and Mike Mullen.

Gary Hart and I labored for three years... Warren Redmon was with us and I'm sorry he is not here; he's fighting a terrible battle, as I'm sure many of you know. Forming friendships and respect for one another that will last as long as we live.

Henry Kissinger has graced our event tonight. What he means to me and what he did for us in Paris is, I think, almost beyond understanding for anybody who wasn't in our own circumstances as prisoners and what he forged for us in way of an agreement that would allow us to come home with our dignity. I love to sit with Henry and listen to him; he speaks his mind with the rhythms and the moves of geostrategy, I think, in the same way that Shakespeare's mind thought in iambic pentameter. It just is in a different dimension and all I ever do is listen.

There's more and I could go on all night, but those who came tonight for me, I really, I really appreciate it.

Tom in his very gracious way used a word that makes me uncomfortable and he explained that, but I'm going to give you a better word. A word that I think is appropriate and more accurate. He used the word too.

Many years ago in the back of a Suburban, Newt Gingrich and I were – it was late at night and our blood alcohol content was probably more than .08 – and in that relentlessly curious mind of his always searching for something that he doesn't know, and he wanted to pin me down on what was the binding characteristic, the common thread, of the fighter pilot. I didn't know how to answer that. Who are they? These guys with the big, stupid sunglasses, loud noises in the bar, and flight suits unzipped – is that who they are? What are the characteristics?

I said if you want to know what the common thread is, you have to understand how they behave in combat – and the creed that binds them – that's the common thread. Let me explain that to you; let me give you a depiction. These are the days, in my war, before precision guided munitions. There weren't any fire and forget. We carried the ordnance in and took it into the jaws of the enemy and stuffed it down his throat. The way we did that – we came in low and fast, and the leader was charged with finding the target and the wingman to cover the flanks and the rear. And when he saw the target he called it, and he turned 30 degrees left or right and he pulled, he popped, as we called it, to 7,000 feet or 8,000 he rolled in and then four things had to come together in space and time precisely.

Dive angle – nominally 45 degrees, but it could be anything as long as you calculated it and on the ground you set your bomb site for it.

Air speed – coming down the chute, accelerating to arrive at a particular airspeed at a particular altitude at a particular dive angle with your pipper - your bomb site on a predetermined offset point and those things had to come together all at once.

Now, that's not a trivial task. You can ask any pilot in the audience. But it wasn't what we had to do that is the point of my tale; it's what we couldn't do if we were to be successful on that pass. What we couldn't do was take evasive action – to jink and to make ourselves a more difficult target for those shooting at us, and there were a lot of people shooting at us. And so we said, and this is the creed, this is the binding: we said – and we said it with a fighter pilot nonchalance cavalier way – and we even maybe used coarse language – but you'll forgive me, I hope.

But what we said was, “from the top of the pop to bomb release, son, your ass belongs to Uncle Sam.”

Now that's not heroism, but it is commitment. It's total commitment to a morally significant enterprise and it was not only common, but it was universal. And I would

further tell you that if you ask Dave Petraeus or if you ask Marine Gunnery Sergeant Dennis Sauer, or any Naval Officer, they'll tell you in their own particular form of military application that exactly the same creed. They could tell you a story exactly like mine.

Now when that soaks in, all the way to your soul, it stays because this is an enterprise that is worthy of total commitment to this nation's security. In the 70s I used to tell people when they asked me what my profession was, 'what do you do for a living,' and I said, 'I'm a social worker.' 'Really? What kind of social work do you do?' 'I'm in the military.' When they would look at me perplexed, I would say, 'the most important social service that any nation provides for its citizenry is security and that's what I do.'

I think to one degree or another, everybody here tonight – it's the reason you're here, the reasons you think are important – you've all got commitment. And I'm telling you that the commitment to the nation's security is the most important one you can possibly have.

Thank you for this wonderful evening you've given for me, but hang this label on me, not the hero: If you want to say the way Boyd lived his life, when it came to matters of national security, he reckoned that his ass belonged to Uncle Sam.