

Major General Arnold Punaro
CAUSE Gala Speech
November 10, 2017

Thank you for your overly generous introduction and for the privilege of receiving the Dr. Jennifer and Dr. Jack London Medal. The Londons are both icons in our industry and icons for their philanthropic activities, particularly CAUSE—a truly indispensable organization. I commend all of you here for your dedication to taking care of our troops and our veterans. What a better way to celebrate Veterans Day than here with all of you tonight and to take time to thank and honor all the veterans of this country, past and present, including the many here tonight. One in particular continues to serve our country at the highest levels – Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg, Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff at the NSC. We have some of the finest national security professionals that I have ever seen in over 40 years working in this arena, contrary to what you may hear from some. We have come a very long way from the days of Vietnam, when we were spit upon in the airports and treated with disdain. I am thankful that today's troops never have to know that feeling or experience that rejection.

But our military and their families still face monumental challenges, from repeated deployments in our country's longest wars, to responsive healthcare, dealing with an unpredictable and controversial budget environment that has led to decreases in readiness, to helping military spouses find meaningful careers when they are relocated. And we live in a world with growing threats and instability while at home we have a long-term fiscal challenge as our outgo continues to exceed our income. But these problems are not insurmountable. I truly believe that we can come together and apply the lessons we've learned from our mentors, teachers, families, friends, and colleagues in arms over the years, we can find common sense solutions. Over the course of my military and civilian career, I have come up with a few "lessons learned," outlined in my recently published book, *On War and Politics: The Battlefield Inside Washington's Beltway*. The key ones are:

First, lead from the front—the motto at Marine Corps Officer Candidate School is "lead by example" and that is exactly what leaders need to do. This can only be done when you are at the front of the action. The West Point Class of 1967 saw our troops needed help and took decisive action in nearly _____ – leading from the front.

Second, take the objective—we need to have a bipartisan strategy for solving our long-term problems and not just lurch from crisis to crisis and defer taking decisive action. No one person and no single party can solve today's problems.

Third, be willing to take a bullet—in combat, every Marine, soldier, sailor, and airman knows there is a chance he or she might sustain serious injury or may not make it out alive. They accept the risk to protect one another and take the objective. In day-to-day life, we too need to have the courage to make hard choices.

Fourth, follow your moral compass—in combat, a good compass is necessary to keep you going in the right direction. In our lives, we need to make the right ethical choices, lead in the right direction, and not drift aimlessly with the tides of public opinion.

Fifth, the next vote is always the most important—in combat, we always knew that no matter how intense the current firefight may be, there was another one just over the next hill. It is the same in life; there is always another challenge coming and your fiercest foe on this issue could be your biggest ally on the next, so it is important to never burn any bridges, and treat everyone with dignity and respect.

Sixth, take the long view—our founding fathers did not have the benefit of modern-day technology, yet so much of what they established endures to this day, from the Constitution to the fundamental framework of our freedoms. We must always consider the long-term consequences of our actions not just right now, but for the next generation, and the next, and strive to build or do something meaningful with our lives that will endure for decades to come. These lessons are not just for our leaders, but for each and every one of us. As we face the challenges of our world today, we should learn from our veterans, who in turn had the great benefit of the veterans of yesterday as their role models, and who themselves are role models for our service members today and in the future.

And now, I would like to shift the focus to those veterans of yesterday—the Marines I served with in Vietnam almost 50 years ago. More people should know their stories, their incredible dedication and courage, and the sacrifices they made in a war few supported, and even fewer thanked. Life as an infantry rifleman in Vietnam was not easy—slogging through free fire zones for weeks and months, seeking an elusive but ever-present lethal enemy, never

knowing if someone was an enemy or a friend, a war without a front line. We were constantly cold, wet, hungry, and tired—resupply would rarely arrive on time and we had to ration food, ammo, and water. We never had any heat tabs to warm the awful C-ration meals or even any dry socks. Every day was pretty much the same—up at the crack of dawn, trudge for miles to our nighttime position, clear areas en route, set up ambushes, and stay up half the night on watch, with many a firefight in between. That is the life of a rifleman in combat.

I would like to tell you about one of those infantry rifleman, a young Marine Corporal who, 47 years ago in a jungle stream in the Que Son Mountains of Vietnam, dashed from a totally safe position to help a seriously wounded Second Lieutenant.

Cpl. Roy Lee Hammonds had been in Vietnam over 12 months and was within weeks of going home. What made Cpl. Hammonds choose danger over safety? Choose his fellow Marine over his personal welfare?

Perhaps Cpl. Hammonds possessed the raw courage of the Marines at Belleau Wood who stormed into withering German machine gun fire. When dusk came, the Marines had captured the objective, taking more casualties than suffered in the first 143 years of Marine Corps history combined.

Perhaps Cpl. Hammonds recalled a pork-chop shaped island in the Pacific that was the nastiest death trap ever prepared by the Japanese. This epic of human bravery translated into Nimitz's legendary quote that on Iwo Jima "uncommon valor was a common virtue."

Perhaps Cpl. Hammonds looked back to the "attack in another direction" of the 7th Marines who faced devastating cold and 100,000 Chinese in Korea's fiercest fighting. The Chosin Reservoir withdrawal remains one of those military masterpieces that occur when skill and bravery fuse to defy rational explanation.

Perhaps Cpl. Hammonds looked ahead to the liberation of Grenada and Panama; to the lightning-fast breach of minefields, barbed wire, and fire trenches to free Kuwait; or to the alleviation of human suffering in Northern Iraq, Bangladesh or Somalia—or to the Marines and soldiers who have spent the last sixteen years in Iraq and Afghanistan, or who stand watch tonight around the globe.

But not far from here on the hallowed grounds of the Vietnam Memorial, you will find Cpl. Hammonds' name chiseled in stone along with 14,800 of his fellow Marines, 38,000 soldiers, and 5,000 sailors and airmen. Cpl. Hammonds died in that jungle stream 47 years ago helping the wounded Second Lieutenant.

I was that Second Lieutenant who Cpl. Hammonds shielded from additional bullets and harm, and I stand before you tonight deeply grateful for this recognition but fully realizing that no one wins on their own. Whatever any of us do is made possible by Marines like Cpl. Hammonds who choose danger over safety and who put their fellow servicemembers first and their own personal welfare second.

I dedicated my book to Cpl. Hammonds. I wanted to tell his story and that of all the other young Marines who fought with me in Vietnam. Just this past Memorial Day, I heard from Cpl. Hammonds' sister, younger brother, and a few other relatives who still remember him, miss him, and honor him. I told them a grateful nation will never forget what he did.

Tomorrow on Veterans Day, today on this, the 242nd birthday of the United States Marine Corps, God bless our troops and our country. Semper Fidelis Cpl. Hammonds and thank you to CAUSE and everyone here tonight for your generosity in supporting and honoring our troops.

Thank you, and happy birthday Marines. Oorah!