

## **Honoring SMSgt Duane H. Fish,**

### **On the occasion of his retirement from the Active Duty Air Force**

#### **Welcome**

Family, friends, distinguished guests. Welcome. As the past year has taught us, being physically present for milestones in the lives of those we love is a gift. Thank you for giving that gift to the Fish Family today.

Due to COVID regulations, a number of folks who have served with Senior could not be here, but we are grateful to have with us Col Richard “Renzy” Smith and Chief Master Sergeant Jason Farris. Gentlemen, thank you for coming.

We also have a number of proud family members here. Sgt Fish’s wife Ada, and their daughter, Josephine; aunts Sharon Moss, Tia Marcia and Tia Ana, Uncle Tio Freddy, cousin Daniel Garcia, as well as Adam, Veronica, Xierra and Xerenity Provence, and Johann Barajas. And of course, the woman who’s to blame . . . I mean, who is responsible for today’s honoree, Sgt Fish’s mother, Ms. Marjorie Stone.

The relationship between SNCOs and junior officers is a special one. The impact of a good SNCO on a young lieutenant cannot be overstated. It is not hyperbole to say that no good officer is made apart from the guidance and practical wisdom of good NCOs. SMSgt Fish was the flight superintendent for the first operational flight I ever commanded. When I consider my own formation, he looms large in my story, and I count it a privilege to call him a mentor and a friend. Senior, I was flattered when you asked me to officiate today, and it is my great honor to be here. Thank you.

And what a place to do this, huh? It was here, on the USS Battleship Missouri, in 1945, that General MacArthur accepted the unconditional surrender of the Japanese as WWII was drawing to a close. While my rhetoric will not match the significance of that event, it is appropriate to honor Senior and his distinguished career here, in this place.

**I’m speaking of course, of Ada Fish.**

Though no successful career is made alone, we are here today mostly because of the dedication, selflessness, and resilience of one person. Life in the profession of arms, while a noble calling, is frequently unstable, often frustrating, and humbling. But the selfless service of the person we honor first here today, has—directly or indirectly—touched and strengthened each of us in our distinct but shared callings. The faithfulness of this individual has been on display through 18 years, 8 moves, and one deployment in the service of our nation and our Air Force.

I am speaking, of course, of Ada Fish.

[In Spanish] Ada, tu lealtad hacia el Sargento Fish, es de gran admiracion. Pues tu haz hecho a un lado tus deseos y metas por el bienestar de tu esposo, apoyandolo en sus responsabilidades y compromiso con su pais. Gracias por permanecer a su lado, a veces sin estar presente para darle un calido y estable hogar en el cual el puede descansar al final del dia y en el cual tu hija puede crecer y prosperar.

[Translation: Ada, your commitment to Sgt Fish, the years of laying down your own desires and goals regarding some of the most important aspects of life for you and your family for the sake of your husband and the country he serves, are to be highly commended. Thank you for standing with him, and sometimes without him, to provide a stable and warm home into which he can rest at day's end, and in which your daughter can grow and flourish.]

[In English] Homemaking is a vocation that ought to garner the highest respect from all corners of our culture. To quote C.S. Lewis, homemaking “is surely in reality the most important work in the world.” Ada, the men and women of the United States Air Force are in your debt for the great service you have given to Josephine, to Sgt Fish, and through him, to us and to a grateful nation. Thank you. [Applause]

Josephine, perhaps most blest of all, because you did not choose this life, but you were still asked to sacrifice for it. No doubt you have left dear friends, homes, and places you loved for no other reason than the Air Force said it was time to go. Such things are not easy, but I imagine they can be especially bitter for a young woman. But I know from your parents that you did not respond

to the pain of those partings nor the certain knowledge of future ones with anger, but instead built new friendships and loved new places. If you'll permit me to offer a piece of advice, as you continue to grow into a lovely young lady, remember what you learned from the unique way in which you were raised; remember that it is often the unchosen obligations in our lives that, when we bear them with humility and love, yield the sweetest fruits. Thank you for giving your father to our nation and our Air Force. And, if I may say, as junior officer who was shaped and mentored by him, thank you for giving him to me for a time.

### **The high calling of the enlisted man/Sgt Fish's embodiment of Courage and Competence**

Senior and I served together at the USAF Honor Guard. I was a brand new first lieutenant, and had just been given my first operational flight. At that time MSgt Fish, was flight superintendent for Colors flight. He taught me that I was to expect two virtues from SNCOs: courage and competence. I think it fitting that those words should be my theme today.

#### **Courage.**

Together Sgt Fish and I led Airman who were on the marks everyday carrying and guarding the flags of our Air Force and our Nation in ceremonies honoring the POTUS, foreign heads of state, CSAF, and fallen heroes, among others. We were responsible for roughly 50 Airmen, straight out of basic training, getting a regular paycheck for the first time in their lives, in a city that offered plenty of mischief, all with the top brass just a stone's throw away, and very interested in the optics of our unit. It was an intense time to say the least. The intensity was no doubt heightened by our office space, (or lack thereof?) which could not have been much bigger than a closet. What was it, 10' x 20'? We crammed into that room two desks with chairs, two wardrobes, one hanging rack, two ironing boards, mountains of shoe boxes full of sand paper, pledge, heel and sole, hair spray, cotton balls, baby safety pins, and enough duct tape, probably, to rebuild and entire wing of an F-15. We got to know each other very well, and it was one of the best things that could have happened to me as a young O.

I have mentioned that the nature of our mission was demanding, but our unit was challenged in other ways too. The Honor Guard is a historic unit, with many noble traditions, but for some, those traditions were more important even than the mission. Favoritism was rampant at all ranks, and many insisted on holding our Airmen to standards they themselves did not meet. These fundamental issues made leading our flight difficult. But Sgt Fish was dealt a particularly cruel hand. Due to politics at levels well above our pay grades and for reasons I won't explain here, before he even arrived to the HG, Sgt Fish was judged by our front office as a threat and was to be disfavored. As part of his "training" upon entering the unit, he was openly and intentionally disrespected by lower ranking Airmen, in front of troops he would one day be tasked to lead.

A smaller person who have folded under those circumstances, turned inward to nurse wounds and legitimate grievances, and grasped tightly to his bitterness, afraid and too angry to step out and lead in such an unjustifiably hostile environment.

Not this man. Not Senior. Our mission and our Airman mattered more to him than his righteous indignation. Than even his next promotion. He refused to be cowed even by those who held his future in their hands. It is no small thing to throw yourself into your work knowing those above you are ridiculing you unfairly, eager to take the tiniest slip up as confirmation of their pre-conceived judgement. Through this, Senior taught me to expect courage from my NCOs. Courage. **Competence.**

But Sgt Fish's efforts paid off in a big way. For 13 months I watched him propel our Airmen to achieved things that shocked everyone, us included. This despite the harm to his status within our unit. Sgt Fish earned the respect and admiration of our troops. He couldn't and didn't rest on his rank.

It would be too tedious for me to effectively recount the things our Airmen accomplished under senior's guidance, the change he sparked in our flight. But perhaps there's no better evidence of Sgt Fish's impact than the Airmen who are coming after him. I'd like to briefly mention two of them. During our time together, Colors flight had two NCOICs: TSgts Quami King and Zach

Kuns. Each was, for a time, Sgt Fish's right-hand man. And our ops tempo was merciless. No other Airmen in our flight received more of Sgt Fish's . . . mentorship, than Sgts King and Kuns. It is no coincidence that both are now rock star SMSgts, doing great things for our Air Force. As a testament to Sgt Fish's impact and influence, one of them is here today. SMSgt King! Am I right or am I right?

There's a story, probably apocryphal, but it points a good truth, it's about one of General Ulysses S. Grant's responses during an examination at West Point. It was I believe a course in engineering, and the question was, given so many materials, of lumber and rope and tar, etc. etc., how would you build a bridge wide and stable enough to get so many troops across the Hudson River. Grant's answer: "I'd find me an NCO, and I'd tell him to build me a bridge."

That story captures well the virtues of the NCO: realistic, sober, pragmatic, down to earth because his missions are measured by real world results, sometimes deadly serious ones. He earns the respect of his Airmen because his successes or failures are obvious and evident in reality. Sgt Fish was respected by us because he delivered tough, practical results that could not be disputed. He was utterly competent.

Courage and Competence

### **Especially needed now: We Practice/Encourage Fear**

If our military can be compared to man, who is one part spiritual or head, and one part animal or belly, then NCOs are the heart of the American military. And the bedrock virtues of our NCO corp.—and therefore of our military as a whole—are courage and competence. The importance of these two virtues cannot be overstated. Our aim should be always to inculcate and foster them.

But I fear we aren't. In fact, I am afraid we are simultaneously breeding their opposites: incompetence and cowardice.

The Air Force and the wider DoD are under threat, not only from without, but from within. Over the last decade, the totalizing claims of a radical political faction within our wider culture have broken into our military. This faction, time and again, has brought the culture war inside the

DoD, knowing that if it can capture our top brass, the lower ranks will salute smartly and follow. Over the past 10-15 years, we have seen our service take sides on the most controversial issues of our times. Our service has been politicized. This, I fear, is a death knell for courage and competence.

This faction of which I am speaking, embodies a militant disregard for truth enforced through threats of professional and social excommunication. What matters to these culture warriors is not objective reality, but compliance with the party message. We have seen their enforcement tactics; they cow their opponents into participation in their dishonesty through fear of professional and social retribution. This tactic is so common and consistent that we've given it a name: "cancel culture." Ordinary Americans, including our Airmen, are at risk of losing their livelihoods for saying things that, until yesterday, were matters of basic common sense and wisdom. Things like, "men can't birth babies," and "boys should not be allowed in the girls locker room."

These are intuitive, basic facts about the world. They cannot be avoided in everyday life, by everyday Americans. Denying them requires constant, maybe even continuous, self-deception. What is worse, this deception is induced by fear; when we submit to it, we are cowards. When we keep silent about the lies we see (whether to keep our jobs or merely to avoid uncomfortable situations), we bury the lie inside ourselves; we habituate ourselves to dishonesty. Our grip on objective reality slips and we are less capable and less effective in our world. By making the lie a part of ourselves, we become incompetent.

As I have said, this awful dynamic is not limited to our wider society, but has become a part of the DoD's culture. Going through the recent DOD-wide extremism training confirmed this for me. I was relieved to see that my teammates recognized that training for what it was, a thinly veiled flex of political power. I think often about one comment from a senior non-commissioned officer regarding this training. He said, "It's weird. Usually the generals and colonels would discuss this sort of issue and resolve it at that level. This feels strange that it's being pushed down to the Airmen. It's almost like they're

sending us a warning.” “Warning,” is the appropriate word, and it is unsurprising to me that it came from the practical wisdom of a no-BS SNCO. The message from that training, though veiled, got through: if you are on the wrong side of political questions, we will label you an extremist and give you the option of conforming, or being “rooted out.”

So, what is to be done? Alexander Solzhenitsyn was soviet dissident and author. During his service in the Red Army, he was sentenced to 8 years hard labor in the gulag and internal exile for life in Kazakhstan for criticizing Joseph Stalin in private letters to a friend. While in the gulag, he came to understand that he was responsible for his abject condition. Not because he had been critical of Stalin, but because he had gone along with falsehoods and euphemisms that made such a brutal society as the Soviet Union possible.

These are his words from “A Candle in the Wind,” a play he authored:

“To stand up for truth is nothing. For truth, you must sit in jail. You can resolve to live your life with integrity. Let your credo be this: Let the lie come into the world, let it even triumph. But not through me. The simple step of a courageous individual is not to take part in the lie. One word of truth outweighs the world. In keeping silent about evil, in burying it so deep within us that no sign of it appears on the surface, we are *implanting* it, and it will rise up a thousand fold in the future.”

For those Airman, and especially those NCOs, who will continue the mission once Senior moves on, decide now, today, what you will do when given the choice. Will you continue the work he started? Will you have the fortitude to insist on competence, or will you fold? If we are to get through this time of, and I know no better word for it, insanity, it will be because a critical mass of Airmen said, let the lie come, but not through me. And, God willing, when we look back on this period in our national history, we will see that many, perhaps most of those Airmen came from the ranks of our NCOs.

Senior, I wish I could say that by leaving the DoD and joining Microsoft, you would not have to live with the risk of being “canceled” for voicing unapproved ideas. Quite the contrary. The

choice will come to you too, and perhaps sooner than we think. I have know doubt you'll meet it with courage and competence.

So, let's do this, shall we?