



DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY
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IN REPLY REFER TO

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Dear Colleagues:

The conversation during our staff devotional time on Tuesday turned to the subject of courage, a timely and humbling topic. Over the past month, we have heard countless stories of courage from the reporters traveling with our troops. We've seen courageous men and women come home to heroes' welcomes. It seems as though Admiral Chester Nimitz's classic tribute to the Marines who fought at Iwo Jima—"Uncommon valor was a common virtue"—could be just as easily ascribed to those involved in *Operation Iraqi Freedom*. The pictures flashing across our TV sets and our computer screens certainly made the courage of our people seem commonplace.

But if their courage was commonplace, it wasn't automatic. It wasn't guaranteed. Every act of courage resulted from a critical decision to do the hard thing when some young man or woman wanted for all the world to do the easy thing. Courage was what happened when somebody chose the dangerous and disagreeable when every human instinct—every normal impulse—urged the safe and comfortable alternative.

Their courage seemed so common that many of us got used to seeing it—expected to see it. When you see so much of it, you run the risk of taking it for granted. But we must not do that. Every act of courage is a miracle. The campaign for courage is an individual battle that everyone must fight within. Your family, friends, and comrades can support and encourage, but it is your battle to fight, alone. And it is a harder battle for some than for others, just as it is a harder battle at one time than it will be at another.

The cost of courage may be difficult to appreciate when we sit in our comfortable easy chairs far from the danger zone but close to the refrigerator and the pantry. When we imagine ourselves choosing courage, we imagine ourselves at our best. Yet the question of courage most often confronts us at our worst. The courage we have observed in our troops, and in the chaplains and RPs who have served with them, came from folks who were thousands of miles from home and dozens of days from a

shower. They were often short of sleep and occasionally short of food. They did not know their unit's future or their personal fate. And in those few weeks, hundreds of thousands of them—and hundreds of you—made dozens of decisions for courage every day. Almost every decision seems to have been made for courage. The exceptions are so few that *they* were the news.

The incredible courage was rewarded. Most of our people came through the fire unscathed. So, too, did most of the Iraqis, again because of the courage of our forces, this time to take greater risks in order to spare the innocent wherever possible. But courage did exact a cost. Some have come home to lie forever in places of honor. Others will bear the marks of their courage every day of their lives. All will remember the moments of personal decision and what happened as a result.

And that truth will call upon all of us to choose courage in the days ahead. We must not be so afraid of the pain or sorrow someone brings back from the battlefield that we cannot minister to that need. We must choose courageous ministry. Our heroes deserve—and our God desires—no less. Pray with me that this courageous ministry will continue to be a commonplace throughout our Corps.

Sincerely,

Barry C. Black

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