

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

## Veteran's Day Speech to the Semper Fi Society of St. Louis

JOHN F. KELLY

Page | 1

*In this (excerpted) speech to the Semper Fi Society of St. Louis—an organization supporting US Marines and their families—Lieutenant General John F. Kelly, US Marine Corps (b. 1950), commander of the Multinational Force-West in Iraq from 2008 to 2009, pays a moving tribute to the heroism of our warriors. He makes clear the debt of gratitude that the rest of us owe these dedicated men and women, whose sacrifices make it possible for us to enjoy peace, freedom, and the pursuit of private happiness. He concludes with an account of a most remarkable display of self-sacrifice on the part of two Marines. (Four days before this speech was given, General Kelly's own son, Robert, was killed in action on a mission in Afghanistan during his third tour of duty; another son remained in combat with the Marines.)*

*What is—and what should be—the relation between the warriors and the larger community, especially when only a tiny minority of the population serves? Some might say that this speech is tragic, showing that superior men and women sacrifice and die for people less worthy, people whose patriotism amounts to little more than “a plastic flag in their car window.” Do you agree with this judgment? Why or why not? What can the rest of us learn from these heroic examples? What is the best way to honor their service and sacrifice?*

Nine years ago, four commercial aircraft took off from Boston, Newark, and Washington. Took off fully loaded with men, women, and children—all innocent, and all soon to die. These aircraft were targeted at the World Trade Towers in New York, the Pentagon, and likely the Capitol in Washington, D.C. Three found their mark. No American alive old enough to remember will ever forget exactly where they were, exactly what they were doing, and exactly who they were with at the moment they watched the aircraft dive into the World Trade Towers on what was, until then, a beautiful morning in New York City. Within the hour three thousand blameless human beings would be vaporized, incinerated, or crushed in the most agonizing ways imaginable. The most wretched among them—over two hundred—driven mad by heat, hopelessness, and utter desperation, leapt to their deaths from a thousand feet above lower Manhattan. We soon learned hundreds more were murdered at the Pentagon, and in a Pennsylvania farmer’s field.

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

Once the buildings had collapsed and the immensity of the attack began to register, most of us had no idea of what to do, or where to turn. As a nation, we were scared like we had not been scared for generations. Parents hugged their children to gain as much as to give comfort. Strangers embraced in the streets, stunned and crying on one another's shoulders, seeking solace, as much as to give it. . . .

Page | 2

There was, however, a small segment of America that made very different choices that day—actions the rest of America stood in awe of on 9/11 and every day since. The first were our firefighters and police, their ranks decimated that day as they ran towards—not away from—danger and certain death. They were doing what they'd sworn to do—“protect and serve”—and went to their graves having fulfilled their sacred oath. Then there was you armed forces, and I know I am a little biased in my opinion here, but the best of them are Marines. Most wearing the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor today joined the unbroken ranks of American heroes after that fateful day not for money, or promises of bonuses or travel to exotic liberty ports, but for one reason and one reason alone: because of the terrible assault on our way of life by men they knew must be killed and extremist ideology that must be destroyed. A plastic flag in their car window was not their response to the murderous assault on our country. No, their response was a commitment to protect the nation, swearing an oath to their God to do so, to their deaths. When future generations ask why America is still free and the heyday of al-Qaeda and their terrorist allies was counted in days rather than in centuries as the extremists themselves predicted, our hometown heroes—soldiers, sailors, airmen, Coast Guardsmen, and Marines—can say, “Because of me and people like me who risked all to protect millions who will never know my name.” . . .

America's civilian and military protectors both here at home and overseas have for nearly nine years fought this enemy to a standstill and have never for a second “wondered why.” They know, and are not afraid. Their struggle is your struggle. . . . If anyone thinks you can somehow thank them for their service, and not support the cause for which they fight—America's survival—then they are lying to themselves and rationalizing away something in their lives, but, more importantly, they are slighting our warriors and mocking their commitment to the nation. . . .

It is a fact that our country today is in a life-and-death struggle against an evil enemy, but America as a whole is certainly not at war. Not as a country. Not as a people. Today, only a tiny fraction—less than a percent—shoulders the burden of fear and sacrifice, and they shoulder it for the rest of us. Their sons and daughters who serve are men and

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

women of character who continue to believe in this country enough to put life and limb on the line without qualification, and without thought of personal gain, and they serve so that the sons and daughters of the other 99 percent don't have to. No big deal, though, as Marines have always been "the first to fight," paying in full the bill that comes with being free—for everyone else.

Page | 3

The comforting news for every American is that our men and women in uniform, and every Marine, is as good today as any in our history. . . . They have the same steel in their backs and have made their own mark, etching forever places like Ramadi, Fallujah, and Baghdad, Iraq, and Helmand and Sagin, Afghanistan, that are now part of the legend and stand just as proudly alongside Belleau Wood, Iwo Jima, Inchon, Hue City, Khe Sanh, and Ashau Valley, Vietnam. None of them has ever asked what their country could do for them, but always and with their lives asked what they could do for America. . . .

We can also take comfort in the fact that these young Americans are not born killers, but are good and decent young men and women who for going on ten years have performed remarkable acts of bravery and selflessness to a cause they have decided is bigger and more important than themselves. Only a few months ago they were delivering your paper, stocking shelves in the local grocery store, worshiping in church on Sunday, or playing hockey on local ice. Like my own two sons who are Marines and have fought in Iraq, and today in Sagin, Afghanistan, they are also the same kids that drove their cars too fast for your liking, and played the God-awful music of their generation too loud, but have no doubt they are the finest of their generation. Like those who went before them in uniform, we owe them everything. We owe them our safety. We owe them our prosperity. We owe them our freedom. We owe them our lives. Any one of them could have done something more self-serving with their lives as the vast majority of their age group elected to do after high school and college, but no, they chose to serve knowing full well a brutal war was in their future. They did not avoid the basic and cherished responsibility of a citizen—the defense of country—they welcomed it. They are the very best this country produces, and have put every one of us ahead of themselves. All are heroes for simply stepping forward, and we as a people owe a debt we can never fully pay. . . .

Over five thousand have died thus far in this war—eight thousand if you include the innocents murdered on 9/11. They are overwhelmingly working-class kids, the children of cops and firefighters, city and factory workers, schoolteachers and small business owners. With some exceptions they are from families short on stock portfolios and

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

Page | 4

futures, but long on love of country and service to the nation. Just yesterday, too many were lost and a knock on the door late last night brought their families to their knees in a grief that will never, ever go away. Thousands more have suffered wounds since it all started, but like anyone who loses life or limb while serving others—including our firefighters and law enforcement personnel who on 9/11 were the first casualties of this war—they are not victims, as they knew what they were about, and were doing what they wanted to do. . . . Those with less of a sense of service to the nation never understand it when men and women of character step forward to look danger and adversity straight in the eye, refusing to blink, or give ground, even to their own deaths. The protected can't begin to understand the price paid so they and their families can sleep safe and free at night. No, they are not victims, but are warriors, your warriors, and warriors are never victims, regardless of how and where they fall. Death, or fear of death, has no power over them. Their paths are paved by sacrifice, sacrifices they gladly make—for you. . . .

Two years ago . . . [on] the 22nd of April 2008, two Marine infantry battalions. . . were switching out in Ramadi. . . . Two Marines, Corporal Jonathan Yale and Lance Corporal Jordan Haerter, twenty-two and twenty years old, respectively, one from each battalion, were assuming the watch together at the entrance gate of an outpost that contained a makeshift barracks housing fifty Marines. The same broken-down ramshackle building was also home to one hundred Iraqi police, also my men and our allies in the fight against the terrorists in Ramadi, a city until recently the most dangerous city on earth and owned by al-Qaeda. Yale was a dirt-poor mixed-race kid from Virginia with a wife and daughter, and a mother and sister who lived with him and he supported as well. He did this on a yearly salary of less than \$23,000. Haerter, on the other hand, was a middle-class white kid from Long Island. They were from two completely different worlds. . . . But they were Marines, combat Marines, forged in the same crucible of Marine training, and because of this bond they were brothers as close, or closer, than if they were born of the same woman.

The mission orders they received from the sergeant squad leader I am sure went something like: "Okay, you two clowns, stand this post and let no unauthorized personnel or vehicles pass. You clear?" I am also sure Yale and Haerter then rolled their eyes and said in unison something like: "Yes, Sergeant," with just enough attitude that made the point without saying the words, "No kidding, sweetheart, we know what we're doing." They then relieved two other Marines on watch and took up their post at the entry control point of Joint Security Station Nasser, in the Sophia section of Ramadi, al Anbar, Iraq.

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

A few minutes later a large blue truck turned down the alleyway—perhaps sixty to seventy yards in length—and sped its way through the serpentine of concrete jersey walls. The truck stopped just short of where the two were posted and detonated, killing them both catastrophically. Twenty-four brick masonry houses were damaged or destroyed. A mosque one hundred yards away collapsed. The truck's engine came to rest two hundred yards away, knocking most of a house down before it stopped. Our explosive experts reckoned the blast was made of two thousand pounds of explosives. Two died, and because these two young infantrymen didn't have it in their DNA to run from danger, they saved 150 of their Iraqi and American brothers-in-arms. . . .

Page | 5

I traveled to Ramadi the next day and spoke individually to a half-dozen Iraqi police [who witnessed the event], all of whom told the same story. The blue truck turned down into the alley and immediately sped up as it made its way through the serpentine. They all said, "We knew immediately what was going on as soon as the two Marines began firing." The Iraqi police then related that some of them also fired, and then, to a man, ran for safety just prior to the explosion. All survived. Many were injured, some seriously. One of the Iraqis elaborated and with tears welling up said, "They'd run like any normal man would to save his life." "What he didn't know until then," he said, "and what he learned that very instant, was that Marines are not normal." Choking past the emotion, he said, "Sir, in the name of God no sane man would have stood there and done what they did." "No sane man." "They saved us all."

What we didn't know at the time, and only learned a couple of days later after I wrote a summary and submitted both Yale and Haerter for posthumous Navy Crosses, was that one of our security cameras, damaged initially in the blast, recorded some of the suicide attack. It happened exactly as the Iraqis had described it. It took exactly six seconds from when the truck entered the alley until it detonated.

You can watch the last six seconds of their young lives. Putting myself in their heads, I supposed it took about a second for the two Marines to separately come to the same conclusion about what was going on once the truck came into their view at the far end of the alley. Exactly no time to talk it over, or call the sergeant to ask what they should do. Only enough time to take half an instant and think about what the sergeant told them to do only a few minutes before: ". . . let no unauthorized personnel or vehicles pass." The two Marines had about five seconds left to live.

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

It took maybe another two seconds for them to present their weapons, take aim, and open up. By this time the truck was halfway through the barriers and gaining speed the whole time. Here, the recording shows a number of Iraqi police, some of whom had fired their AKs, now scattering like the normal and rational men they were—some running right past the Marines. They had three seconds left to live.

Page | 6

For about two seconds more, the recording shows the Marines' weapons firing nonstop, the truck's windshield exploding into shards of glass as their rounds take it apart and tore in to the body of the son of a b[] who is trying to get past them to kill their brothers—American and Iraqi—bedded down in the barracks totally unaware of the fact that their lives at that moment depended entirely on two Marines standing their ground. If they had been aware, they would have known they were safe—because two Marines stood between them and a crazed suicide bomber. The recording shows the truck careening to a stop immediately in front of the two Marines. In all of the instantaneous violence, Yale and Haerter never hesitated. By all reports and by the recording, they never stepped back. They never even started to step aside. They never even shifted their weight. With their feet spread shoulder-width apart, they leaned into the danger, firing as fast as they could work their weapons. They had only one second left to live.

The truck explodes. The camera goes blank. Two young men go to their God. Six seconds. Not enough time to think about their families, their country, their flag, or about their lives or their deaths, but more than enough time for two very brave young men to do their duty—into eternity. That is the kind of people who are on watch all over the world tonight—for you. . . .