



**Remarks made by Anthony Principi, Honorary Member of the DFC Society
To The Distinguished Flying Cross Society & San Diego Air & Space Museum attendees
San Diego, California
May 22, 2008**

I'm proud to be here today ... in this fabulous museum... in this great town – filled with aviation history. It was here in San Diego that the vision and dreams of a young airmail pilot and Army Air Corps Reserve Lieutenant, Charles Lindbergh, were shaped and crafted into the lovely silver lines of the Ryan Aeronautical Company's "Spirit of St. Louis."

The Lone Eagle and his plane – a partnership he referred to as "We" – vaulted the Atlantic Ocean 81 years ago yesterday, and, in doing so, Lindbergh not only won the coveted Orteig Prize ... he became the recipient of the very first Distinguished Flying Cross medal.

From that day on, the DFC was imbued with the integrity, courage, and spirit of a great airman – a standard by which all who have received the DFC have been measure and found deserving.

San Diego is also the home of the Distinguished Flying Cross Society, whose members represent the heroism and skilled airmanship of Freedom's winged patriots. It is fitting that the San Diego Air and Space Museum be selected by the DFC Society for its Permanent Display. Over the decades, as aviation literally 'took wing,' San Diego hosted a proud lineage of aircraft manufactures, and many of whose winged wonders are on display here.

As a Naval Academy alumnus – and the father of two Air Force Academy graduates and pilots – I try to find some common ground between my experiences in the Navy, and my sons' experiences in the Air Force. It is not always easy. The cultures of the services, including the Army and Marine Corps and Coast Guard, sometimes seem more disconnected than connected.

Certainly the missions are the same – protect America and defend her against all enemies, foreign and domestic. It was an oath I took many years ago ... an oath my sons took not that long ago ... and an oath every soldier, sailor, airman, Marine and Coast Guardsman takes when they agree to set aside their civilian clothes for the uniform of the United States Armed Forces.

Beyond that noble oath, what binds us as a fighting force? What experience links warriors to one another in those moments when the pulsating glow of anti-aircraft- and missile- fire defines the fine line between life and death? What medallions proclaim commitment to a cause ... faith in a principle ... and fidelity to brothers-in-arms?

Medals of Honor ... yes. Silver and Bronze Stars ... unquestionably. Purple Hearts ... of course. And when it comes to valor in the skies ... when it comes to recognizing the men and women who hurl themselves into the cauldron of aerial combat ... the Distinguished Flying Cross is an honor unlike any other.

Its recipients are American legends. Luminaries like Chuck Yeager, Amelia Earhart, Robin Olds, John McCain, John Glenn, Jackie Cochran, George HW Bush ... the list of those who earned the right to wear the DFC is impressive indeed.

The American novelist, Herman Melville, once wrote, "We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibers connect us with our fellow men; and among those fibers, as sympathetic threads, our actions run as causes, and they come back to us as effects."

The actions of the men and woman who wear the Distinguished Flying Cross were caused by their selflessness in the face of personal peril ... the effects of their actions were no less than the saving of lives and the protection of freedom.

During my service in Vietnam, I witnessed the heroic acts of aviators –rotary and fixed-wing pilots alike—risking their live to save lives, to bring supplies to embattled outposts, to rescue downed pilots, to fly mercy missions to villages deep in enemy-held countryside.

I watched vulnerable FACs in O-1s and O-2s work down to the treetops to mark targets for the fast-movers—who themselves often took such pains to be on target that they left themselves exposed to ground-fire and SAMS.

Bob Frantz [President of the DFC Society] was among that band of aerial brothers who, back in 1969, swept down from the sky over Vietnam in his Marine F-4 to support the emergency extraction of a surrounded Marine reconnaissance team. He put himself in harm’s way to protect his follow Marines – but I know he would have done the same thing for a River Rat like me, or a downed Air Force pilot a long way from home.

I was on the receiving end of support from slicks and Sandys and gunships, and I saw first-hand the compassion and gutsiness of aircrews flying into the fires of hell itself to snatch victory from defeat at great personal peril.

Their courage reminds me of a quote by John F. Kennedy, from his book, Profiles in Courage, “For without belittling the courage with which men have died, we should not forget those acts of courage with which men have lived ... A man does what he must – in spite of personal consequences, in spite of obstacles and dangers and pressures – and that is the basis of all human morality.”

Today, American aircrews in every service continue the noble tradition of aerial bravery, performing with courage, heroism, and sacrifice:

Navy and Marine Carrier pilots are patrolling the oceans – protecting our fleet – and flying countless sorties in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom;

Our Air Force Pilots are on the tip of Democracy's strategic spear – ready at a moment's notice to project our Nation's airpower to the far reaches of the globe; and they are also guardian angels flying wounded troops home from the battlefield to Germany and then the States for care in the operating rooms at Walter Reed, Bethesda, and other fine military and VA hospitals across the country;

Our Army pilots take the fight to the enemy at 100-feet or less – often at night, under fire, in every terrain imaginable; but they also fly missions of mercy, carrying their wounded colleagues to field hospitals in life-saving time.

Coast Guard aircrews brave incredible forces of nature to rescue hapless sailors; and they are tireless in their around-the-clock vigil over the security of our shores.

The Distinguished Flying Cross is bestowed on the best of the best – aviators whose aerial skills and indomitable courage propel them to the windswept heights of glory.

With so many women now in the cockpits of everything from B-52s to B-1s, from KC-10s to A-10s to C-17s and a variety of helicopters, let us not forget that women have long been part of the legacy of the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Five years ago, Captain Kim Reed Campbell – an Air Force Academy graduate, and daughter of an Air Force Academy graduate, and fellow Californian, Chuck Reed, mayor of San Jose – took heavy ground fire while on a mission over Bagdad in her A-10 Warthog. With virtually all of her hydraulics shot out, Captain Campbell continued to evade enemy fire and brought her heavily damaged jet back to Kuwait. That's the kind of courage and skill under extreme pressure that reflect on every recipient of the DFC.

As a former VA Secretary, I'm particularly aware of the contributions of one woman in particular – Lt. Aleda Lutz, an Army flight nurse whose compassion for others placed her in the line of fire during World War II.

On nearly 200 missions in Europe, Lt. Lutz flew into the heat of battle to help care for and evacuate wounded soldiers. She was only 29 when, on her 196th mission, her plane was shot down over Italy. In December, 1944, Lt. Aleda Lutz became the first woman awarded the DFC, posthumously, for her bravery in the face of mortal danger. In 1990, in her honor, the only time such an honor has been

bestowed on a woman veteran, the Department of Veterans Affairs named its hospital in Saginaw, Michigan, the Aleda E. Lutz Medical Center.

This afternoon, we are in presence of a great work of art ... Ruth Mayer's inspiring vision of the DFC's history, and her moving depictions of the men and women who have earned the right to wear that honored medal.

I am not an art critic – I just know what I like ... and I like this painting for so many reasons. To begin with, it's simply beautiful, with inspiring lines, color, and detail that is breathtaking.

But on a much more personal level ... from the perspective of my own experiences, those of my sons, and those of the millions of America's veterans I was proud to serve when I was Secretary of Veterans Affairs ... this painting evokes the spirit of service and sacrifice by generations of our Nation's winged defenders. To quote John Kennedy again, "...art establishes the basic human truths which must serve as the touchstone of our judgment."

This moving picture – a picture that moves us to admire the men and women profiled with great dignity – is just such a work of art as Kennedy had in mind -- it is, on one canvas, a story of basic human truths that allow us to see the Distinguished Flying Cross as a touchstone of honor and pride and courage.

All of us here today can relate to the portraits that Ruth Mayer has painted ... generations of pilots representing grandfathers, fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, and spouses who were born with wings on their hearts.

This is a magnificent work of art, Ms. Mayer, and I thank you for sharing your heartfelt gift with us, and with the millions of visitors who will enjoy the painting when it is the centerpiece of the DFC Society's Permanent Display.

I would like to close with one more quote – from an early 20th Century aviator who was as elegant with his pen as he was graceful with an airplane – Antoine St. Exupery. In his book, *Night Flight*, he wrote, "Although human life is priceless, we always act as if something had an even greater price than life ... But what is that something?"

I believe the answer is in this room – and in every house where there lives a man or woman who has earned the DFC, and in every final resting place of a hero who gave his or her life in one final moment of flight:

The Distinguished Flying Cross is not just about saving a life – it is about saving the way of life that we know as Democracy, a way of life blessed with the rights and freedoms that make our Nation great.

If you are here tonight to share in this wonderful cause – the first steps toward the DFC Society’s Permanent Display – you are here because courageous men and women, by their selfless acts of aerial bravery, secured the clear air of freedom through which they flew for all of us.

They are our heroes, and I thank them.

Thank you.