

NAS KEFLAVIK DISESTABLISHMENT SPEECH – 8 SEP 06

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Ambassador Ingolfsson, Ambassador van Voorst, Admiral Preston, Phil and Allison, Bjarni, Johann, Bjorn Ingi, Jon, Halli, Arni, distinguished guests, fellow Commanders, my Icelandic and American staff, men and women of Naval Air Station Keflavik. I would like to begin by welcoming all of you to the Air Station. And then I would like to state the obvious – that this is the most difficult speech I have ever had to deliver. For the past three years, I have had the great honor of commanding the finest military air field in the world. *Bar none.* Today, it is with a heavy heart that I – and all of us – bid farewell to her.

In just three short weeks, Keflavik will pass into military history. This facility will officially stand down as a functioning naval air station. We will then complete the process of rolling up the base infrastructure and return a magnificent installation and piece of property. And late on that final day, a transport aircraft will roll down Runway 29, bound for Norfolk taking the remaining U.S. Navy military personnel off the island.

That flight will mark the end of a long and proud legacy – a legacy that stretches back to the darkest days of the Second World War. It was early in 1940 that Adolf Hitler ordered his generals to make preparations for the invasion of Iceland. His plan even included the elimination of her citizens. In response to that threat, America and Great Britain joined with this proud island nation to create the first allied pact of the war. That pact turned out to be a testing bed for the broader NATO alliance that soon followed.

During the Second World War, Keflavik became a major ferrying point for aircraft bound for the European theater. But the most important strategic role filled by this base was the defense of a broad stretch of ocean that came to be known as the G-I-UK Gap. Securing that vital sea and air link proved decisive in winning not just World War II – but also the Cold War. In both conflicts, tens of thousands of allied airmen took off from Kef's runways – to keep the Gap open.

Some did not return. I do not exaggerate when I say that those brave airmen helped to save Western civilization.

A professor from the United States Naval War College once said that “strategy has much in common with real estate. In both endeavors, *location is everything.*” I am certain that when historians write the final history of the Cold War, Keflavik’s strategic location will feature heavily in those volumes.

But for me, it wasn’t Kef’s latitude and longitude that made it such a decisive part of our victory. Nor was it the superiority of the platforms stationed on our flight lines – the bombers, the fighters, the patrol aircraft. What made the difference was the tremendous effort of the people who were stationed here. At one time or another, the Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard had a presence in Keflavik. At least four NATO nations have had staff assigned to Keflavik and countless NATO aircrew also maintained detachments here. And many talented and devoted civilian employees labored here to keep this base running.

The aircrews came here from many different countries, and from many different walks of life. On any given day, you could hear them speaking half a dozen languages on our flight lines, and in our mess halls. They were a diverse group, but they all shared one common desire -- the desire to live in

a world free from tyranny -- and they were all willing to put their own lives on the line to achieve that kind of world. I want to spend a few minutes paying tribute to those that served on board this Air Station.

First and foremost, Keflavik's success was a direct result of the resolve and determination of the Icelandic People. As direct descendants of the Vikings – the world's first seafaring race - Icelanders have always been keenly aware of the importance of their island. They have also recognized its strategic vulnerability. Their willingness to host a large, continuous American and allied presence is what made Keflavik possible. And their expertise in living and working in a sometimes harsh environment is what kept this base operational for over six decades.

Of the thousands of Icelanders who have worked on this station, I can think of no finer representatives than Haraldur Stefansson and Gudni Jonsson. Halli's affiliation with this naval air station goes all the way back to the 1950's as a firefighter, and, until his retirement in 2005, he held the position of fire chief for over a quarter of a century. Iceland is known around the world as the Land of Fire and Ice. Both of those elements are the nemesis of aviation. During his tenure, Halli trained scores of naval firefighters in

dealing with this dual threat. Our outstanding safety record is a direct result of his commitment – and of his quiet competence.

Trust me in this - Halli possesses a stack of awards and commendation letters that is thicker than a phone book. But the most significant accolade he received was from his own government – for strengthening defense relations between Iceland and America. In both countries, he is regarded as a fireman’s fireman – and as a true patriot. We were so very fortunate to have employed the services of such an outstanding professional.

Gudni Jonsson likewise has a long history with Naval Air Station Keflavik. His service to our people goes all the way back to 1954. If I were asked what made Gudni’s service so unique I would say it was his loyalty to our mission and to his Commanders. In today’s society loyalty is sometimes thought of as a dying virtue, but not with Gudni. A few years ago in the Washington Post magazine, a short article focused on loyalty in modern America. The point of the article was that Americans are considered to be less loyal to any part of their lives today versus times past. According to the writer, and I quote: “loyalty is a fading value...truth is...Americans prefer it that way” unquote. That is certainly not the case at NAS Keflavik and

certainly not with Gudni Jonsson. His tenure at NAS Keflavik spanned five decades and 24 commanding officers, in case you were wondering that is every CO of NASKEF.

When I think of the aviators who flew out of Keflavik, I think of a young officer by the name of Lieutenant Junior Grade Tom Hall. As a member of Patrol Squadron Eight, Lieutenant Hall made his first visit to Iceland back in June 1965 with the initial deployment of the first P-3 squadron. The Keflavik Area of Responsibility was a proving ground for our pilots, a place that challenged their airmanship as well as their ability to lead combat aircrews. Tom Hall excelled at both, and he would later return to Iceland as VP-8's commanding officer. He led the Tigers through one of the most demanding and successful deployments in their colorful history. Later he returned to be Chief of Staff and then he came back as Commander Iceland Defense Force.

Just two weeks ago it was my distinct honor to welcome Assistant Secretary of Defense Tom Hall back to Keflavik. As commanding officer, it has been my great fortune to have someone of his caliber working with the Government of Iceland over the last several months. But on a personal

level, it was just great to welcome back one of the true legends of the VP community.

I may have forgotten to mention that our own Air Force held stewardship over this base until 1961 when the Navy assumed responsibility. Like our naval aviators, many outstanding interceptor pilots have launched their careers from our runways. And I know that the silhouette of the F-15 Eagle is going to be sorely missed over the skies of Iceland. That is why I would also like to recognize those who we shared this great base with for many years. General Tom Hobbins, Commander United States Air Forces Europe is an example of those that served here. He came from a long line of distinguished professionals who have guarded the skies of this precious nation. The Air Force also has an honor roll here – of common airmen who made the most uncommon of sacrifices. We are proud to have shared this base with such patriots. And we wish all of our Air Force friends the best of luck.

Finally – if I may be so bold – I would like to talk about my own experience on this station. Like Secretary Hall, I first came here many years ago as a young lieutenant junior grade. That was 1983 during the Cold War – when a

very different strategic reality ruled this place. All of my squadron mates were fully aware of Keflavik's importance to Western security. We also knew that this station would be the first to go into Harm's Way.

As I mentioned earlier, location is everything.

That's why deploying to Keflavik was always such a big deal for the P-3 community. The operational tempo was higher here. And the amount of responsibility placed upon individual aviators, flight officers, aircrew, maintainers, and support professionals was also greater. I don't have any statistics to back this up. But I am certain that – within my own community – this naval air station produced more officer and enlisted leaders than anywhere else.

As Commanding Officer of the station, I am honored to be one of those leaders to return to this place where we learned so much, to have the opportunity to build upon the reputation of this fine Air Station, and to work hand-in-hand with Iceland's current day heroes like Bjorn Ingi Knutsson, Jon Bodvarsson and Jonhann Benediktsson. These are the professionals of today that are building a solid future for this airfield and Iceland's security

interests. But, I returned to this place recognizing that the strategic reality that brought Keflavik into being had dramatically changed. The threat to the peace and stability of this region – the threat that kept us here - no longer existed. As stated in the original security pact, we promised to stay here only as long as we were needed.

As Americans, we believe in keeping our promises. Today, we keep that promise.

Although it is difficult for us to say goodbye to this great Air Station, we recognize that our mission here is complete. We leave here with a sense of pride, and a feeling of great accomplishment. However, in no way does our departure signal a change in our commitment to Iceland – or to the people of this wonderful nation. We leave here knowing that the bond between our two nations is strong. And we remain as committed as ever to the core obligation of our alliance – that a strike against any one of us is a strike against us all.

As for this Commanding Officer, it is time for me to close this base – and to return back to my own family, and to my own country. It is therefore fitting

that I close with a favorite nautical verse – one that some of my sailors have heard before. It was written over a century ago by an American mariner who longed to return back home. I think it says it all:

Home again, and home again,

America for me!

I want a ship that's westward bound

to plough the rolling sea.

To the blessed land of Room Enough

beyond the ocean bars,

Where the air is full of sunlight

and the flag is full of stars.

Fair winds and following seas to all of you. Bless, Bless and thank you.