

## *In Memoriam*

**General Robert H. Barrow, USMC (Ret.)**

**Colonel John W. Ripley, USMC (Ret.)**

In the fall of 2008 the Center for Military Readiness mourned the passing of two heroes of the Marine Corps, General Robert H. Barrow, the 29th Commandant, and Colonel John W. Ripley, a hero of the Vietnam War. An article I wrote for National Review Online, titled “The Commandant, the Colonel, and ‘Making Marines,’” describes some of the reasons why these two heroes, whose names have graced our letterhead Board of Advisors, were so special to CMR and to everyone who knew them.

On November 7, 2008, I attended the funeral of Colonel Ripley, which took place at the U.S. Naval Academy. The following account and photos will convey a sense of why the event was a fitting tribute, and why I felt privileged to attend.

CMR Executive Director Tommy Sears and I arrived early enough to tour Memorial Hall, where we studied and took photos of the famous diorama of “Ripley at the Bridge.” Above it is a Vietnamese flag, with some writing on it. Just before we left I noticed a small group of men at the diorama, one of them Vietnamese. It was Lt. Col. Le Ba Binh, Vietnamese Marine (Ret.), who was one of the Honorary Pall Bearers. I asked Col. Binh to describe where he was on that Easter Day in 1972, and with gestures and pretty good English he described many details of Ripley’s ordeal. It took about 7-8 trips to jam the dynamite boxes between the I-beams under the bridge, totaling at least 500 pounds. (You can see them in the first photo of the diorama.) The signature on the flag displayed above was written by Col. Binh—he told me that he gave the flag to Ripley as a souvenir. It was an honor to meet him. Later I purchased a copy of the book “The Bridge at Dong Ha” from the gift shop, and both Col. Binh and author John Grider Miller signed it for me.

The grounds were beautiful—warm and golden with fall leaves. Everything about the funeral was executed perfectly, and the chapel was filled to overflowing. Fr. McGeary did not talk about “Ripley at the Bridge,” since everyone knew that story, but he talked about “Ripley at Church,” and his personal devotion as a Catholic layman. He also talked about “Ripley with his Family,” describing how much he admired John when he saw him and Moline at a public event. Ripley was off to the side and down on his knee, gently feeding Moline, who was in a wheelchair. (She was not present at the funeral.)

Fr. McGeary also told a story about how he saw John at church one day, and asked him to talk to a young mid there who was always getting in trouble and messing up his career. Ripley told the young man about all of his misadventures as a mid, and he had lots to tell. Only later did the astonished young man find out that he had been talking to the great Col. John Ripley.

One of the speakers noted that other heroes of the Marine Corps were in the past, but Ripley was in the present—everyone knew him, and admiration was universal. As I wrote in my article for NRO last week, we know that former Commandant Gen. Jim Jones personally intervened to save his life by using Marine helicopters to rush a liver for transplant to what would have been Ripley’s deathbed—just in time. One of the speakers said the Marines saved his life a second time, during his difficult recovery. He was told that a color guard would stay posted at his hospital bed until he became strong enough to leave. That inspiration made all the difference—after that, he resumed a life of more service to the Marines and the history of the Corps.

The funeral mass was magnificent, and the combined choirs sang like angels. The domed chapel was filled to overflowing, and the Commandant gave a eulogy. The newspaper *Capital* quoted Gen. Conway saying “There are sheep and there are wolves, and in the end the wolves always win.” But reporter Earl Kelly did not mention the context of that quote. Gen. Conway was quoting Ripley in a conversation about women in combat—an idea that Ripley opposed without apology. Gen. Conway also mentioned that Ripley had great respect for women in the military. As I wrote before, in 2003 he made the physically demanding effort to serve as a member of the congressional commission that reviewed the issue of sexual assault at the Air Force Academy. His concern about harassment of women at the military service academies was sincere and entirely consistent with his views on women in combat.

During the recessional the combined Men’s and Women’s Glee Clubs and the Catholic Midshipmen Choir sang one of the most beautiful hymns of the Catholic Church, *In Paradisum*, in Latin. It translates, “May angels guide you and bring you into paradise....you shall have everlasting rest.” I have not heard the Requiem sung that way in many years. Hundreds of people walked from the chapel, over the river to the small burial ground. Four Harrier jets flew over, and there was a bugler and gun salute.

After the burial service I met Ripley’s trim, silver-haired older sister, who referred to John as the “baby of the family.” She reminded me a lot of John McCain’s mother, Roberta. Many luminaries and old friends were there and at the reception at Alumni Hall, including Gen. Carl Mundy, Lt. Gen. William Keys, Gen. Walt Boomer, current and former *Proceedings* editors Robert Timberg and Fred Rainbow, scores of Ripley’s colleagues and young midshipmen who walked in formation to the gravesite. I’m very glad that I was able to attend what was a very special tribute to a faithful Marine. All of us benefited from his life and friendship, and will miss him very much.

Elaine Donnelly











