

Eulogy for COL George Codrea (USMC, Ret.) *(+ 20 May 2006)*

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He was one of the finest men I've ever known. And certainly the greatest, most honorable Orthodox warrior.

Colonel George Codrea, U.S. Marine Corps (Retired), was always "Colonel" or "sir" to me. I found it virtually impossible to call him by his Christian name, for that would have lowered him to earth, with the rest of us mere mortals, when, in fact, he always walked with other heroes from bygone days and with the saints above. But now that he is no longer with us here, I shall refer to him, albeit with an abiding respect and deep affection, simply as George, a servant of God the Holy Trinity.

George was a U.S. Marine, or, should I say, *is* a U.S. Marine. There's no such thing as an ex-Marine—surely in this life and, I suspect, even in the next. After all, as every "Gi-rene" knows, ARMY—that is, A, R, M, Y—means "Ain't Ready for the Marines Yet"! And as we, all of us, in every military branch, must admit, Marines never retreat: they simply attack in another direction!

When General Douglas MacArthur, bade farewell to the American people in an address to the U.S. Congress on April 19, 1951, he quoted from an old barracks ballad: "Old soldiers never die; they just fade away." That American hero of World War II—and Army general, by the way—may have tried, like the subject of the poem, to "just fade away" from the public eye. But the memory of Colonel George Codrea will *not* fade away.

As long as this church exists, your memory of him will endure—if not the proud, young, tough, gung-ho Marine who stood tall and erect at 6 feet 4 inches, then the hunched over, gentle, humble, senior soul who seemed as harmless and kind as if he had just stepped, gingerly, out of an icon.

As long as this country honors its warriors, our memory of George will endure.

As long as good men and women remember other good men and women, their memory of George will endure.

We may, all of us, take a little comfort that heaven itself may now be a bit more secure with its newest Marine colonel on-site.

George's military exploits and feats of great heroism are displayed in the shadow box in the fellowship room downstairs. Perhaps you've gazed upon the medals and read the several citations and narratives—once, twice, many times. I, for one, never tire of reflecting upon George's finest hour in uniform.

The date: 21 August 1942. The place: the Battle of the Tenaru during the campaign for Guadalcanal in the south Pacific that would begin to turn the tide of war against the Japanese. G Company, 2d Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division had to hold the west bank of the Ilu River at all costs against swarming Japanese attacks that had begun, in the wee hours of that morning, to gain footholds. Here's how Michael Smith, in his recent book *Bloody Ridge: The Battle That Saved Guadalcanal* [pp. 82-83], described the role of then 2nd Lieutenant George Codrea, with not much training and experience beyond the Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps at the University of Akron, Ohio:

[A]t about 0145 Colonel Pollock ordered Company G's 1st Platoon, under Lieutenant Codrea, forward to stave off further breakthroughs and to retake those positions. Bivouacked some 300 yards in the rear, Codrea's platoon rapidly moved out along the coastal trail in a column of squads. About halfway to the [sand] spit, the platoon stopped and deployed after encountering the angry snapping of enemy bullets buzzing all around them. Codrea let one squad forward to Hell's Point, moving on hands and knees to avoid the enemy fire. Sergeant James Hancock led his squad to his right (south) toward the downstream 37mm gun position. Sergeant Charlie Spakes led the remaining squad forward to the sandbar to take up a rear position with orders to engage and stop any Japanese who broke through.

As he approached the sand spit, Lieutenant Codrea was hit in the arm by red-hot fragments from either a hand grenade or mortar round. Two marines bandaged the six-foot, four-inch officer's wounded arm and applied a tourniquet. Later, a lone Japanese soldier lunged at Codrea with his bayonet, hoping to skewer the wounded lieutenant, but Codrea unlimbered his weapon in enough time to drill the enemy soldier through the nose at eight feet. . . .

Codrea deployed the squad he led forward to the sand spit. Since there were no foxholes or protective cover on the spit, the members of the squad burrowed themselves into the sand to avoid the enemy fire. Firing at anything on the sandbar that moved, the squad drew increasing retaliatory fire from enemy snipers and machine gunners.

What Smith neglects to include in his account is how long the wounded Lt. Codrea and his battered squad held their position until they were finally relieved by fresh Marines: more than seven hours. George once mentioned reluctantly that he himself was quite shot-up, his arm a bloody mess and rendered virtually useless. But still he held his ground and returned fire through the night.

For that singular act of courage, duty, and leadership, George was awarded the Navy Cross, second only to the Congressional Medal of Honor in our country's military

awards. The citation was signed by the Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox, on March 18, 1943. For any active-duty military officers here today, “Attention to Orders!”:

The Navy Cross is presented to George Codrea, Second Lieutenant, U.S. Marine Corps (Reserve), for extraordinary heroism and courage as Platoon Commander in the Second Battalion, First Marines, First Marine Division, during action against enemy Japanese forces in the Solomon Islands, August 21, 1942. When it became necessary to reinforce the firing line during the heaviest fighting against a Japanese landing force of about 700 men, Second Lieutenant Codrea, coolly and with complete disregard for his own safety, placed each man, individually, in a position to deliver the most effective fire. Though wounded twice during the battle, he remained on duty with his platoon until ordered to retire to the aid stations. His outstanding leadership, determination and inspiring fortitude throughout the engagement were largely instrumental in stopping the most serious enemy threat.

George would continue to serve with distinction as a U.S. Marine officer throughout World War II, including General Douglas MacArthur’s celebrated New Guinea campaign. George remained on active-duty with the Corps, leading men in combat once again during the Korean War in the early 1950s and rising to the rank of full colonel, until his retirement in 1969 after commanding the Marine Expeditionary Force in the Mediterranean Sea during the Vietnam War—the third major war during his illustrious military career.

Every moment of his nearly thirty years of service with the U.S. Marine Corps bore testimony to his unflinching loyalty to his Corps and his country. *Semper Fidelis*—“always faithful”—or *Semper Fi*, for short: that’s the U.S. Marine Corps’ motto, and **that** describes George’s character: *Semper Fi*.

It was with profound humility that I asked George to pin on one of my eagles—right here in the parish fellowship room downstairs—when the U.S. Army saw fit to promote me to his final rank. Colonel Codrea was the most honorable colonel I have ever known: I am still awed by his distinction as a virtuous American warrior and ever conscious that **my** eagles will always bow to **his** in supreme deference.

George was noble and good not only in the military, but also with his family and his church.

In his renowned “Funeral Oration,” the great orator Pericles of ancient Athens proclaimed, “The whole earth is the tomb of heroic men, and their story is not given only on stone over their clay but abides everywhere without visible symbol woven into the stuff of other men’s lives.” George truly had a profound effect on everyone he met throughout his 88 years of life.

Who among the members of St. Mary Orthodox Church does not recall George's omnipresence in the life of the community? Since the purchase and refurbishing of the current temple in summer 1996 until his precarious health began to fade more rapidly a year or so ago, George and his beloved wife Martha were human fixtures in the building—cleaning, taking out the trash, replenishing the “paper” in the bathrooms, tidying the kitchen area. In the early years of the congregation, after George and Martha transferred from Holy Cross Romanian Orthodox Church on Route 7, joining the original nucleus formed by Armand, Tina, Marie, Sarah, Elaine, and a dozen or so others, George became a living embodiment of the Episcopate By-Laws and Parish Regulations—the original “green Bible” (now light blue), which I'm still convinced he had memorized word-for-word in both English *and* Romanian! In addition, he took meticulous notes in that fine script of his as secretary of the parish council and was the official guarantor each year of Cherry Hill Park as the site of the annual parish picnic in September—in fact, he usually secured the place for the following year only a week or so after each picnic.

Then there was Martha frequently calling out to George, whose hearing had begun to fail long ago—and George's hearing aid going awry and whistling during the Divine Liturgy on Sunday. I could hear it in the altar!

And who can forget how George and Martha so loved preparing the Romanian *pasti* together each year on Holy Saturday in time for the Paschal breakfast later that night? I have to confess to you, Martha—and to the entire church—that the Colonel's *pasti* (that white wine and prosofphora bread mixture) was always a bit rough going down my throat, especially on an empty stomach after fasting all day and night. But I dutifully accepted my cup from George each year with gratitude and admiration for his steadfast fidelity to the same Romanian Orthodox custom that his parents had instilled in him and for which he was the sole custodian for our community.

George Codrea's unshakable identity as a Romanian-American, as well as a Romanian Orthodox Christian—particularly his decades of dedicated membership in the Union and League of Romanian Societies based in Cleveland, Ohio, and the Romanian American Heritage Center at the Vatra Romaneasca (the Episcopate's headquarters in Grass Lake, Michigan)—eventually led to a special recognition by the post-Communist government of Romania, of which few parishioners here may be aware. In a decree by President Ion Iliescu on February 4, 2002, George was awarded the National Order of Merit in the grade of Officer.

There can be no doubt that George and Martha were together, like another, more famous George and Martha in our nation's history, but no less venerable, the grandfather and grandmother of the spiritual family of St. Mary Orthodox Church.

To his own natural family, George was beloved by one and all—an all-too-rare phenomenon in today's society.

I always enjoyed visiting your home at 1206 Offutt Drive, Martha, whether it was the annual blessing for Theophany in January or on some other occasion or for no particular reason at all. It's a home full of personal history—and I do mean history, because George, like yours truly, seemed to save all manner of stuff—or, should I say, he couldn't throw anything away! He was a true collector—of books, magazines, newspaper clippings, that magnificent vintage 1956 Pontiac in the garage, and, of course, of fond memories of days gone by, of a long, mutually fulfilling marriage to you, Martha, of a son raised the old fashioned way and who—G.R.—is a credit to both his parents, of a daughter-in-law—Stephanie—who added a younger feminine touch to Martha's sometimes brusque Marine-wife exterior.

But you haven't fooled us, Martha! You may have earned your "eagles" on the homefront, while George gallivanted all over the world with his band of brothers in the Corps, and you may sometimes complain about this or that with the volume turned up. But we who love you and loved George know that you're an old softie at heart. And so was George. In fact, I cannot quite picture the gentle George I knew later in his life issuing commands to anyone in the Corps, much less his Marine wife!

Yours, Martha, was a home that was spiritually sound, nurtured by a deep familial love, and grounded firmly in virtue and mutual respect. And I am quite confident that George would concur with the sentiments expressed in the 1916 poem by the Welsh poet William Henry Davies titled "Truly Great":

*My walls outside must have some flowers,
My walls within must have some books;
A house that's small; a garden large,
And in it leafy nooks.*

*A little gold that's sure each week;
That comes not from my living kind,
But from a dead man in his grave,
Who cannot change his mind.*

*A lovely wife, and gentle too;
Contented that no eyes but mine
Can see her many charms, nor voice
To call her beauty fine.*

*Where she would in that stone cage live,
A self-made prisoner, with me;
While many a wild bird sang around,
On gate, on bush, on tree.*

*And she sometimes to answer them,
In her far sweeter voice than all;
Till birds, that loved to look on leaves,
Will doat on a stone wall.*

*With this small house, this garden large,
This little gold, this lovely mate,
With health in body, peace in heart--
Show me a man more great.*

George's death last Saturday, only a week before Memorial Day, is, at once, ironic and fitting. For many years, on the Sunday on the eve of this national holiday, George would present his brief narrative history of Eastern Orthodox warriors in America's wars, beginning with the War Between the States—or, for the Yankees among us, the "Civil War." Do you remember? And now, although he would surely eschew the honor, he takes his rightful place in that glorious cavalcade of heroes.

This is also, of course, the Paschal season, when we Orthodox Christians rejoice in our risen Savior's conquest of death by His death and resurrection. There could not be a more poignant yet hopeful time to fall asleep in the Lord.

For Christ is risen! And His servant's physical death is not the end of Colonel George Codrea's exemplary existence.

Christ is risen! And we have a firm hope in the Lord's vindication of George for a life of faith and love well-lived.

Christ is risen! And we, all of us, together with George, will rise on the Last Day and will, by the grace of Almighty God the Holy Trinity, meet again in the Kingdom without end.

Until then, brothers and sisters in Christ, we can cling to that fervent hope and hold dear in our hearts and minds the cherished memory of the Lord's good and faithful servant, George.

May his memory be eternal! *Vesnica pomenire!*

Semper Fi, George!

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