

Maritime Gala Celebrates the Sea Services

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. – An Irish Tenor, country star Lee Greenwood and all four of the sea service chiefs helped the Navy League celebrate the sea services and their families during the inaugural Maritime Gala at the Sea-Air-Space Exposition April 10.

The event featured remarks from Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Robert B. Neller and was highlighted by the presentation of awards to honor service and business leaders whose devotion to duty deserved special recognition.

“We are so excited to have you here in celebration of all our sea services and their families,” said Navy League National President Alan Kaplan in his opening remarks.

John McDermott, founder of the Irish Tenors, sang the national anthem after the U.S. Navy Ceremonial Guard presented the colors, and Greenwood performed “Wind Beneath My Wings” prior to the gala dinner. He concluded the event with an encore performance of patriotic songs, including his signature “God Bless the U.S.A.”

Prior to introducing Neller as the keynote speaker, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson offered a few words of thanks to the Navy League for the gala and the exposition as a whole.

“What a fantastic event, Sea-Air-Space in 2018, the biggest, the best, the most attended ... people fighting for the opportunity to come and join this team here at Sea-Air-Space,” he said. “That wouldn’t happen without the Navy League, just one of the so many things they do for the sea services.”

In introducing Neller, Richardson described the commandant as

“an innovative thinker; he is moving the Marine Corps into new territory to make sure that they continue to be relevant in this new era that we’re moving into with smart machines, digital communications, everything. He’s leading the way intellectually. Far more than that is you would never, ever hope for anybody else to go into a fight with you.”

Neller prefaced his remarks by noting, “This is an interesting year; there is a lot to talk about.”

Specifically, he addressed the theme of this year’s Sea-Air-Space: “learn, compete, win.”

“That speaks to the heart of our naval force,” Neller said. “As Marines, we like to think of ourselves as innovative. Innovation is a hallmark of our Corps and it remains so today. Your Marines are learning through testing and evaluation of new technology to gain advantages over our competitors, our rivals. And there is competition; we are in a competition right now.

“We are not at war; we’re competing below the level of conflict, but make no mistake about it – we’re competing every single day, whether it be in cyber, information or electronic warfare, command and control, engineering, manned and unmanned teaming, robotics, additive manufacturing, trying to figure out how to leverage artificial intelligence. Those competitions go on every single day.

“Advancements in those areas that many of you are involved in, and can help us with, will help propel us into the future, enabling us to compete,” Neller said, addressing the gala attendees from industry. “We don’t want to compete on the battlefield –we want to dominate the battlefield.”

At the same time, Neller noted, the nation’s competitors have evolved and are increasing their capabilities.

“They are not standing by and watching us,” he said. “They

want to dominate the battlespace, so it is essential that we, our military, our civilians, our leadership, our political leaders, our business community, all work together to keep our capability at a competitive advantage that we must have. We don't know when the next fight is coming, but we have to be prepared in case it does.

"We need to drive innovation and come up with new advanced equipment where we can continue to dominate the battlefield. ... So this is an exciting time. We are always in continuous competition. We always must be ready to compete, learn and win. We have to win."

Following Neller's remarks, the Navy League honored several service and business leaders who Kaplan noted, "exemplify what it means to be a leader in their field."

Outgoing Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Paul F. Zukunft received the new Semper Paratus Leader Award for his more than 40 years of service to the country. He was presented the award by retired Vice Adm. Jay Donnelly, who called the commandant "a Sailor's Sailor." Zukunft will be retiring next month.

Coast Guard Capt. Holly R. Harrison was presented with the U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps Distinguished Alumni Award. "She is a shining example of how the Sea Cadet program introduces young people to a lifetime of exemplary service," said gala co-chair Bruce Mosler of Cushman & Wakefield.

Harrison was the first woman to command a Coast Guard cutter in a combat zone and the first to be awarded the Bronze Star. "I can trace the beginning of my Coast Guard career to when I joined the Naval Sea Cadet Corps in the fall of 1986," she said after accepting the award.

Frank Bisignano, chairman and CEO of First Data Corp. received the Teddy Roosevelt Award. "He epitomizes steadfast business leadership," said gala co-chair Tom Higgins of First Data.

Bisignano is the founder of the 100,000 Jobs Mission, a coalition of 170 firms that have hired nearly 450,000 veterans. As chairman and CEO of First Data, he is a steward of the First Data Salutes Program, providing opportunities and support for returning military and their families.

In a special presentation, Kaplan also honored Navy League Staff Vice President for External & Governmental Affairs Sara Fuentes with the Navy League National President's Award for her legislative affairs work on behalf of the organization.