

A Tribute to Ambassador Cunningham and U.S. Diplomats from Commandant of the Marine Corps Joseph F. Dunford Jr.

Excerpted from remarks delivered on May 29 at an Evening Parade at Marine Barracks in Washington, D.C., in honor of Ambassador James B. Cunningham, former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan. Gen. Dunford served as commander of the International Security Assistance Force and the U.S. Forces–Afghanistan from 2013 to 2014.

U.S. Marines with the Silent Drill Platoon perform during the May 29 Evening Parade at Marine Barracks in Washington, D.C.

Sgt. Melissa Marnell / U.S. Marine Corps

Tonight, the Marine Corps is honoring Jim Cunningham for his extraordinary service as a diplomat. But we're also recognizing the special relationship between the Marine Corps and the State Department.

In 1778, a Marine detachment accompanied our diplomatic mission to the French royal court. Today, Marines proudly serve at 173 of our embassies and consulates. Since 9/11, Marines have served side by side with the brave men and women of our diplomatic corps in places like Baghdad, Ramadi, Fallujah, Lashkar Gah, Sangin and Kabul. Most recently, Marines assisted our mission in Yemen with an orderly departure.

The American people have at least some understanding of the sacrifice of military service. But few appreciate the extraordinary contribution and sacrifice made by our diplomatic corps.

When those of us in uniform come home, we'll frequently have people thank us for our service. There might even be a band or a parade. Most often, our diplomats simply move from one difficult posting to another without fanfare.

I want all of you who serve or have served in the State Department to know that your Marines recognize and appreciate your extraordinary contribution in advancing America's interests, and the sacrifices you have made to do that. You all have the absolute admiration, appreciation and affection of your Marines.

Ambassador Jim Cunningham recently retired after over 40 years of service. In Marine terms, he has served in every clime and place—from Hong Kong, the United States Mission to the United Nations in New York, Brussels and Rome to Israel and, most recently, Kabul.

I had the honor of serving with Jim Cunningham during his last posting. I watched him deal with a wide range of challenges—from the difficult relationship with President [Hamid] Karzai; the loss of a bright, young diplomat, Anne Smedinghoff; an attack on our consulate in Herat and negotiation of the Bilateral Security Agreement to the elections of 2014.

He tirelessly and at great personal risk traveled all over Afghanistan to advance our interests and help the Afghan people rebuild their country. I can say with confidence that no

single American did more to secure a bilateral agreement with Afghanistan or to support the transition to post-Karzai government than Jim Cunningham.

Those of use fortunate to have a front-row seat learned to appreciate Amb. Cunningham's keen intellect, strong leadership and unwavering commitment to the mission and to our people. His endurance and resilience over three years in Kabul was truly extraordinary.

We also learned to appreciate his compassion. Amb. Cunningham stood with us many times in the middle of a cold night with a tear in his eye as we conducted a dignified transfer of a Marine, soldier, sailor or airman.

Amb. Cunningham, tonight I want you to know that your Marines are very proud to have served with you.

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