

BATH IRON WORKS, Maine — Mast stepping, or the process of putting coins in the mast of a newly constructed ship, is a tradition dating back to the ancient Greek civilizations.

Legend has it that in the times of the ancient Greeks, enough money was placed in the mast to make sure that each of the crew could afford the trip into the afterlife should the ship sink, said Lt. Cmdr. Tim Phelps, the executive officer of the USS Jason Dunham, as he started the July 11 mast stepping ceremony for the USS Jason Dunham.

The U.S. Navy, steeped in customs and traditions, continues the ritual to this day, he explained. However, the coins now symbolize aspects of the ship's heritage and remain forever welded in the iron masts of today's warships.

The USS Jason Dunham is no different.

The guided missile destroyer bears the name of the only Marine to receive the Medal of Honor in the Global War on Terrorism and carries with it the legacy of the man who gave his life to save the lives of his fellow Marines.

Cmdr. Scott Sciretta, the ship's commanding officer, continued the ceremony, speaking about the significance of the name, Jason Dunham, each member of the destroyer's crew will wear as part of their uniform.

"I received a call from my detailer telling me I was being offered to take command of the USS Jason Dunham," he said. "I had heard the story behind the man, but didn't know the details. When I looked it up, and saw the significance of the name, I told him I'd do it. He asked me if I needed to talk to my wife, and I told him no, I was going to do it."

He then called his wife, Sharon Sciretta, and directed her to the Jason Dunham memorial website and when she asked why he was showing her the site; he told her he was offered to command the ship bearing his name.

She asked him when they would start packing.

Maj. Trent A. Gibson, the executive officer of 2nd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, and Cpl. Dunham's former company commander with Company K, 3 Bn., 7th Marines, followed Sciretta's speech with one of his own. Gibson stressed to each of the members of the crew they should feel honored to be working on a ship bearing his Marine's name.

“This ship represents the man who laid down his life for his fellow Marines,” said the Piedmont, Okla., native. “Remember that selfless devotion to duty as you work and live on this ship.”

He then showed the audience the scrap of Dunham’s Kevlar helmet that is now forever encapsulated in the ship’s mast, reminding the sailors the history is real — it lives on with them.

Deb Dunham also spoke, sharing with the audience how significant it was to have everyone attend the ceremony for the destroyer named after her son.

A small group, including Sciretta and his family, Dan and Deb Dunham, Gibson and Phelps then made their way to the ship’s mast where they placed a small package containing items such as the last letter Cpl. Dunham wrote home, a set of his dog tags, his purple heart and the guidon for Company K, 3rd Bn., 7th Marines into a small medal box inside of the warship’s mast.

Aided by a master welder, Deb, Dan, Sciretta and his two sons, James and Adam, and Gibson welded the box closed, sealing the items in the mast of the ship permanently.

Cpl. Dunham’s dress blue uniform will be displayed in a case on the destroyer’s quarterdeck for the crew to see. The warship’s seal also represents Cpl. Dunham's legacy.

The USS Jason Dunham is slated to be christened Aug. 1 and commissioned in 2010.