

was apparently nicknamed “Mercedes” because he collected Mercedes cars. That is not the hobby you would expect of a lot of spiritual leaders.

Putin likes to pretend that Russia is some kind of defender of the Christian faith, but in reality, Russia is one of the most secular countries in the world.

The Soviet Union, as we know, was an atheist state, so most countries that share a Soviet past have lost much of their religious life. That is doubly true in Russia, where, according to a 2018 Pew Research poll, only 7 percent of the people attend weekly church services, only 18 percent of Russians pray daily, and only 16 percent feel that religion is very important in their lives.

By comparison, in Ukraine, these people are significantly more religious than Russians, with well over twice as many people attending weekly services at 17 percent, with 30 percent of the Ukrainians reportedly praying daily, and with 23 percent saying that religion is a very important part of their lives.

Russia has been designated by our own State Department as a “country of particular concern” and, according to that designation, is “engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom.”

By contrast, Ukraine has religious freedom, and there is no state church, so it is no wonder that Ukrainians are more active in their faith.

I was encouraged by Dr. Rusyn’s account of his own growing ministry. He also said he has contributed chaplains from his seminary to the military since the full-scale invasion—something that was not previously a tradition of Orthodox countries. As a result, evangelicals are particularly well represented as military chaplains. Now, I am sad to say, one of his students has already been lost while serving as a chaplain at the frontlines.

I am going to go back to this report by the Institute for the Study of War that I referenced earlier.

[T]he most common victims of Russian religious persecution after Ukrainian Orthodox are Protestants, particularly evangelical Baptists. Protestants of all denominations were the victims of 34 percent of the reported persecution events that [the Institute on the Study of War] observed. Baptists made up 13 percent of victims—the largest single group after Ukrainian Orthodox. . . . Russian forces’ persecution of Protestants is most intense in southern Ukraine. Protestants were the victims of 35 percent and 48 percent of the reported persecution events in occupied Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts respectively. Protestants suffered two-thirds of the reported repression events in occupied Mariupol City.

The Institute for the Study of War report also cited an incident where Russian troops “commandeered a Kherson-based Ukrainian evangelical Baptist educational institute from March–November of 2022 and established a garrison and crematorium there to cremate killed Russian sol-

diers. The institute’s rector stated that Russian soldiers repeatedly harassed the Baptists, calling them ‘American spies,’ calling them ‘sectarians,’ and [calling them] ‘enemies of the Russian Orthodox people.’ One Russian officer reportedly told workers at the institute, ‘Evangelical believers like you should be completely destroyed . . . a simple shooting would be too easy for you. You need to be buried alive,’ and another Russian soldier reportedly said, ‘We will bury [Baptist] sectarians like you.’ Russian soldiers raided and closed another Baptist Church . . . in September 2022. Congregants reported that armed Russian soldiers interrupted their worship service and stated, ‘Your feet will not be here after referendum. We have only one faith, Orthodoxy.’”

Nearly 500 religious sites and spaces were damaged, destroyed, or looted during the first year of the Russian invasion. People of faith in Ukraine are suffering. Dr. Rusyn’s ask of Americans is a simple thing: “Please hear our cry.”

Toward the end of my meeting with the Russian faith leaders, the rabbi in the group made another ask of me. He said the Ukrainians need our prayers. This was echoed by other Ukrainian faith leaders in my office.

I agreed to keep the Ukrainian people in my prayers. I ask that my fellow Americans of faith also surround the Ukrainian people in prayer at this very difficult time. And I pray that they feel the very real presence of God amidst their suffering.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Alaska.

TRIBUTE TO GENE HORNER

Mr. SULLIVAN. Madam President, it is Thursday afternoon here on the Senate floor. It is one of my favorite times. We have some new pages, so they are going to, I think, at a certain point, consider some of their favorite time on the Senate floor. It is when I get to come out on the floor and talk about the Alaskan of the Week—the Alaskan of the Week.

I have been doing this for several years now. I try to get down here most weeks. I don’t make it every week. I have had a couple of weeks off. There is a lot going on here in the Senate, as many people know. But as we are heading into Veterans Day weekend, I am making sure that we reignite our “Alaskan of the Week” special for this weekend.

There are so many special Alaskans working to make our State the best State in this country. Some Senators might disagree, but, hey, we are all proud of our States.

I will tell you this, when it comes to veterans and patriotism, I am pretty sure my State tops the list of any State in the country. We have more veterans per capita than any State in America. Alaska Natives, a big part of our population, serve at higher rates in the military than any another ethnic

group in the country. Patriotism, military service, it is in our DNA.

I am getting on a plane here in about an hour with my wife Julie. We are heading home to celebrate Veterans Day.

Just looking back over several years, a lot of my Alaskans of the Week were veterans—100 percent—so it is not surprising that this one is as well.

As we head into Veterans Day weekend, I want to talk about a special veteran, a really special veteran—people are going to love this story—a Vietnam vet named Gene Horner. He is actually a bugler. He plays the trumpet and the bugle.

If you have gone to a military funeral in Alaska, chances are the man behind the bugle breathing out the 24 notes of “Taps”—the most poignant 24 notes of music ever played—is Gene Horner, our Alaskan of the Week.

Wherever he is and whatever he is doing, if he gets the call to play at a veteran’s funeral in Alaska, he grabs his instrument, jumps into his car, and Gene is there.

So who is Gene Horner, and how did he become known as the best “Taps” player in Alaska, and, I would say, the best “Taps” player in America?

A self-described, unruly teenager from Texas and California, Gene joined the Army when he was 17, in 1967.

It was go in the Army or get into more trouble; one or the other.

That is what Gene said. So he joined the Army.

By the way, many great veterans, many great Americans have started their service to America this way: Hey, join the Marines, join the Army, or you are going to jail. So he did that.

Gene was assigned a regular duty station in Alabama, and it was here that he was given the opportunity to play in his post band at his Army station in Alabama. While he considered himself a very “mediocre trumpet player,” Gene proved to be indispensable.

During the height of the Vietnam war, before he, himself, was deployed to Vietnam, he sounded “Taps” for 187 funerals throughout Alabama and the South in just 3 months. Think about that. That is a big reminder of the service our Vietnam generation did—187 funerals in just 3 months, 1 guy.

When Gene received his own orders to head to Vietnam in 1968, his route stopped through Anchorage, my hometown. It was August 1. The midnight Sun was out. It was sunny, 75 degrees. Anyone who has ever flown into Anchorage—which I highly recommend everybody watching do. Come on up. Visit our great State. You will love it. There is a point when you are coming in, you are flying over the mountains, the engines kind of silence themselves, you head to the ground, and you see the glaciers, the mountains.

Gene said to himself, when he was landing in Anchorage:

This is the last I’ll see of America.

Think about that. It is very poignant: Heading to Vietnam; he did not

think he was coming home. A lot of people didn't come home.

During his 6-hour layover on the ground in Anchorage to refuel before he went to Vietnam, he and his fellow soldiers sat at the airport bar. This is another great story. You can't make this up. After he sat down at the bar, the soon-to-be Alaska U.S. Senator Mike Gravel walked in and told the bartender:

Buy a drink for all these soldiers.

That is pretty cool, Senator for Alaska—about to become a Senator for Alaska, buys a round for the soldiers heading to Vietnam.

Gene thought to himself, If I live through this deployment, I am going to come back to Alaska. It is a pretty cool place; U.S. Senators buying you beers.

When he was in Vietnam and a battlefield memorial was required, Gene would fly out on a helicopter with a chaplain for the service. "Over there," he said, "I didn't know the names of half the people I played Taps for. I seldom knew their names [at all], but those 24 notes [in Taps] pulled on my heart all the same."

When Gene's Vietnam service ended 15 months later, he went to California, he said, in search of a beautiful woman he knew named Priscilla, whom he had met on his way to Vietnam. And like a good soldier, he accomplished the mission because Priscilla would later become his wife. Together, Gene stuck to the promise he had made for himself with Priscilla. They moved to Alaska in 1972. And Alaska, of course, benefited tremendously.

He joined the Carpenters Union and became a pilot driver, and his wife Priscilla was a CPA. They settled in the beautiful Mat-Su Valley. By the way, I will be heading there tomorrow and Saturday for Veterans Day services. They had a son. They had a nice life.

During this whole time, for 20 years, Gene, like so many veterans, did not talk about his service in Vietnam at all. Nobody he knew—he didn't talk to anybody about it. He kept it to himself. He did not want to relive the past.

It was not until 1999, during the funeral of a coworker and a close friend who served in World War II, that Gene took his trumpet back up and played "Taps" in 1999—the first time.

When he arrived at the funeral and asked: Hey, where is the bugler for the service, Gene was directed to a boom box—a boom box, just a recording. But as faith would have it, Gene had just picked up his trumpet from repair that day. He asked: Hey, instead of the boom box, can I sound "Taps" for my friend, the World War II veteran?

They said: Of course, do it.

Gene said this: It just goes against everything when I am at a funeral for a servicemember to leave "Taps" to a recording.

By the way, that is happening more and more as military bands get cut.

It was this experience that ignited Gene's passion for sounding "Taps" at

military funerals. Twenty years after his Vietnam service, 20 years since he had even talked about "Taps" and what he did in Vietnam, Gene began performing at veterans' funerals in Alaska and recruiting other trumpet players to join the ranks.

"It wasn't until I started playing Taps locally that I realized, you're never really out of the military," Gene said, "You are just one breath away from it. And every veteran deserves a live breath coming from a bugle [at his or her funeral]."

Playing "Taps" is emotional work, he said. You are not just sending off an individual veteran; you are sounding the call that has sent millions of veterans off to be buried for hundreds of years. You are sounding the mystic chords of memory that Abraham Lincoln spoke of:

[S]tretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this [great] land.

That is Abraham Lincoln.

Because of this, many buglers who have taken up this honor has said that "Taps" is the hardest 24 notes they will ever play, the hardest 24 notes you can play as a trumpeter. Gene has likely played them more times than anyone else in Alaska and—who knows—many more times than most people in America.

He said this:

Playing at Carnegie Hall would be nice. But for a trumpet player, I don't think there is a greater honor than sounding "Taps" for a soldier's final farewell.

Gene plays at dozens, sometimes hundreds, of funerals a year. He has logged in over 10,000 volunteer hours with the VA in Alaska. Let me repeat that, as we go into Veterans Day weekend: over 10,000 volunteer hours for the VA in Alaska. That is patriotism. That is patriotism.

He remembers all of them, but he has a distinct memory of sounding "Taps" at the funeral for a beloved young marine named Grant Fraser, one of the first Alaskans to be killed in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

LCpl. Grant Fraser was an actor who loved the works of Homer and Shakespeare. He was a mountain biker, a skier, a pianist, a SCUBA diver, a rock climber, a tennis player. He was a light-hearted, mischievous U.S. marine. After the Marines, he was planning on coming back to Anchorage, his hometown, to work as a paramedic with the fire department.

Shortly after 9/11, like so many patriotic young Americans across our Nation, Grant surprised his family and friends when he announced he was joining the Marines. He served with Echo Company, 4th Reconnaissance Battalion, in Anchorage, my old unit.

The battalion was later deployed to Iraq in 2005, and it was there, on a mission in Anbar Province on August 3, 2005, that Grant Fraser was killed in action and made the ultimate sacrifice for our Nation. He was 22 years old, not much older than the pages right here.

I went to LCpl Grant Fraser's burial here at Arlington National Cemetery, and, I will tell you, it was the most moving burial I have ever been to. Everybody from the Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps on down and many, many Alaskans came to that funeral.

But there was also a funeral service for Grant in Anchorage, and this is the funeral that Gene Horner said was the most moving funeral he had ever been to, of the hundreds that he has played "Taps" for. He said that, first of all, the funeral was packed. It was like the entire town of Anchorage showed up.

And, for him, it brought back memories of young men and women sacrificing their lives in foreign lands. It brought back all of those battlefield funerals he had done in Vietnam, that he had played for, and all the funerals he had played in Alabama and all the funerals he would play for in Anchorage. It brought back battlefields and violence and heroism and sacrifice.

But on that August day in Anchorage, like he did in Vietnam, like he had done for so many others in Alaska and in Vietnam and in Alabama, Gene was there for one man: the young marine hero LCpl Grant Fraser. So he got that feeling in his stomach as he was sounding "Taps," the one he always gets at funerals and burials when he is sounding "Taps," the one that travels to his chest and makes it swell. He picked up his American Heritage Field Trumpet, took a breath, and sounded "Taps" for this young marine.

So, Gene, as we are coming into Veterans Day in Alaska, I want to thank you for your great service; I want to thank you for being there for literally hundreds, if not thousands, of veterans in Alaska and across our Nation. I am going to actually see you tomorrow at an event in the valley. And, of course, congratulations on one of the biggest honors anyone can achieve: being our Alaskan of the Week. Semper fi, Gene. Happy Veterans Day. See you tomorrow.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. BOOKER). The Senator from Virginia.

Mr. KAINÉ. Mr. President, I first ask unanimous consent to use three easels rather than the two prescribed in Senate rules.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUESTS—EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. KAINÉ. Mr. President, I am glad that I am rising after my colleague from Alaska because I am rising on behalf of a group of very special people and also in commemoration of three very special dates. The group of people are 364 nominations for military appointments who have been pending for months and months and months on the floor of the U.S. Senate; and I rise in their honor with the intention, in a few minutes, to begin offering unanimous consent motions so that they may finally be confirmed to the positions they have earned through their sacrifice in the uniform of this country.