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A Concept of Service

General John W. Vessey, Jr., US Army

For those of you in the Armed Forces of the United States, you leave here at an exciting time from the perspective of your profession. There is more going on in the development of tactical concepts, in equipment modernization, in innovative training, and in genuine cooperation among our Armed Forces than I have seen in the 45 years I have been in uniform. You have read of the recent Army-Air Force announcements about battlefield collaboration, and the work between the Navy and the Air Force on collateral maritime missions. For you, what makes it even more exciting is the fact that we, as a nation and as Armed Forces, are absolutely uninhibited by lack of room in dealing with improvement.

Now, I realize that I am talking to officers from other nations and I think you will see that what I have to say perhaps fits the concepts of your nation. I realize I am talking to some civilian graduates of the college and I think that you will see that perhaps these same general concepts apply to you—if not exactly, then at least generally. You military people have chosen to serve the nation through service in the Armed Forces. The key word is “service.” You serve *in* the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, or Coast Guard. You do not work for them.

The reason for your service is because “We the People” agreed to provide for our common defense. You serve the people, and you do it best by helping preserve the peace by preparing for war. The people of this nation need to have confidence that you do not promote war. You do not advocate war, but war is in fact your *business* and *you are ready for it*.

In April I was in Greece. When in Athens I went to the Acropolis; and while there I could not help but think of that marvelous dialogue that Plato relates in the “Second Book” of the *Republic*. He has Glaucon and Socrates talking about the attributes of the armed forces of the day, which Plato called the “Guardians”—the Guardians of the city. At one point in the dialogue Plato has Socrates saying, “Nothing can be more important than that the work of the Guardians should be well done.” He said, “If shoemakers become

Graduation address for the 1984 Naval War College Class.

General Vessey is Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

inferior and claim to be what they are not, the state is not in peril; but if the Guardians of our city only appear to be Guardians and are *not* Guardians, you surely see that they utterly destroy the city.”

Socrates and Glaucon go on to describe desirable attributes for the Guardians. They said they should be “quick to see, swift to overtake the enemy, and strong.” Socrates adds that they should be brave and that their strength is spiritual as well as physical. Then they went on to decide that “. . . one man cannot practice many arts,” and that war is an art and must be studied and practiced. And Socrates adds that “The higher the duties of the Guardian, the more time and skill and art and application will be needed by him.”

Socrates and Glaucon conclude their description of the Guardians by recognizing, “They ought to be dangerous to their enemies but gentle to their friends,” and by their friends, they mean the citizens of the Republic. Then, they go on to wonder if it is possible to find these conflicting natures in a single person.

Through the years, most civilized countries have wrestled with the same questions about their armed forces: how to have warriors with the necessary skill and ferocity in times of war and not have them be a menace to the society in times of peace. Our Forefathers were very concerned about those issues. The product of their concern is the relationship that exists today between our society and its warriors. That relationship was founded in the *Declaration of Independence* and in the *Constitution*.

The nation has always been skeptical of military power—witness Ben Franklin’s brilliant but unsuccessful pamphlet, “Plain Talk,” asking his fellow colonists in 1747 to do more in their own self defense, and Thomas Jefferson’s initial opposition to a navy. And, in 1784, the Continental Congress declared that standing armies in peace were inconsistent with the principles of the Republic. The Congress reduced the Continental Army to about a hundred officers and men and then stationed them as far away from civilization as they possibly could. As some of you know, we still do that today.

Later, at the Constitutional Convention, one delegate proposed that the *Constitution* prohibit the Army from ever being larger than five thousand men. Now, George Washington was also a delegate to the Convention and it is reported that he said, “That’s fine—as long as we have another provision in the *Constitution* that no enemy will be permitted to attack the Nation with more than three thousand men.”

That skepticism was later developed in the *Federalist Papers*, and it all relates to why our military, springing from the society it serves and is sworn to defend, embodies the principles that govern the society. We, the military, are a part of “We the people.” That is why our military forces have never produced a man on horseback; why the military forces have not been involved in the political affairs of the nation; and why they have not strayed from the

narrow path of defending the *Constitution* as it was originally intended—that is, protecting the society and not policing the society.

You, the officers, the men and women of the Armed Forces of today, are the nation's Guardians, Guardians of today. You are the warrior class of the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. You have chosen to give up some of the benefits of your own personal liberty so that the citizens of the nation may enjoy those benefits in full. You have chosen to serve the nation; but, it is also important that you recognize that the nation has chosen you to serve. That is a unique relationship. As with Socrates' Guardians, your higher duties will require more of your time, skill, art and application. And that is the reason for your attendance here at the Naval War College. As with the Guardians of Plato's *Republic*, *nothing* is more important than that your work be well done.

As you go on to your assignments, your skill and your concept of service and your values and your loyalties to the nation and to your service will carry you through the years ahead. The skills you learned here, the issues that were exposed, are all important; and you need to develop them and hone them through the years ahead. But you also need to continue to hone the concept of service. The concept of selfless service is essential for the Armed Forces as an institution; it is essential for you as members of the Guardian class; and it is essential for the security of the nation.

You do not choose the wars you fight or the places you serve, whether it is fighting a war or preserving the peace. You do not go home until the job is done. And, in doing the job you may well have to put life and limb at risk. Sir John Hackett called it the military's "unlimited liability contract." That is a good name for it. Many years ago a great sailor, Lord Nelson, said, "Duty is the great business of a sea-officer; all private considerations must give way to it, however painful it may be." Petty considerations just do not apply.

The ultimate test for the Armed Forces is the survival of the nation; but the service of every sailor, soldier, airman, Marine or Coast Guardsman is tested in less awesome ways every day. It is the sum of the performance of all its members that defines the success of the Armed Forces. Each member of our military forces is accountable for his or her compliance with orders under law; but for the Guardian, compliance with orders alone is not enough. The security of the nation requires that you comply with orders and laws and regulations but it also requires that you comply with the unique sense of service to your fellow Guardians, the fellow members of your class. Matt Dillon used to say on *Gunsmoke*, "It's a chancy job and a little lonely."

There are no degrees of importance in the service you perform. Some of you will go from here to command ships and squadrons; others will be working in logistic outfits supplying weapons and equipment or doing research and development. Some of you will be buried in the anonymity of staff work. Some of you will go to faraway places that your mother-in-law will not be able to find on the map. One thing that I want to emphasize to you

is that whatever the duty, it is important. Under the code of the Guardians, there is no unimportant duty. Under that code, the sailor who died in insignificant sorties against pirates some place was as important as the crewmen who saved the remnants of the ill-fated Greeley expedition on the Arctic ice a hundred years ago, or as important as those Rangers who scaled Pointe du Hoc at Normandy 40 years ago, or as important as the naval officers who directed the gunfire to support that operation.

There is no Service that is more important than the other in our scheme of Armed Services and there is no duty that is more important than the other under the code of the Guardian. Once in a while we aviators like to think that when we are up in the air—free—that we have mastery over all. How many times have you sat on the ramp, waiting for a maintenance man to show up when the airplane was broken? You were not going anywhere until that maintenance man showed up. We, the fighters, sometimes think it all belongs to us. But, when we are wounded and picked up by some obscure medic to ease our pain, then we realize that we are no more important than he is.

The fighter pilots often think that recce guys do not do anything important. Yet, when you read the history of the battle of the Coral Sea, you will see that the Japanese lost the battle because a recce pilot did not do his duty correctly. The fighter pilot who was picked up out of the jungle or out of the water by a helicopter pilot knows that his duty is not more important than the other fellow's duty.

Recently, I was in Italy for the 40th anniversary of the Liberation of Rome—visiting some of the battlefields of my youth. At the ceremonies, I think I was the last of the World War II veterans on active duty; but I want to tell you I was only a drummer boy. A young television reporter cornered me and asked me if I was not disappointed about what had happened 40 years ago when Rome was liberated and then overshadowed by the D-day events in Normandy a couple of days later. He asked me if I was not disappointed to have participated in great battles which some historians later had characterized as unimportant? And I told him that if he was not a member of the warrior class, if he was not a Guardian, he would not understand the answer so there was no point in my telling him.

On Memorial Day, my present squad, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, fell in; and marched in step the six miles from the Capitol to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier for the burial of the Vietnam Unknown. We did that as sort of a sign to all present and future members of the Guardians, a confirmation of our belief in the code. That is that there are no unimportant duties, that whoever has fallen serving his country, wherever he is, even if he is unknown, has died performing important duty.

But I want to emphasize to you that whatever the tasks assigned, they are all important. None can be left undone without peril to the nation. Twenty years or so from now, one of you, by the Grace of God and through the

confidence of your fellow members of the Guardian Class, may be serving as Chief of Naval Operations or as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. For whomever that is, I want to tell you today it is important for you to recognize your service is no more important than that of your classmates here who will not have risen to such rank.

Inseparable from the concept of service is the concept of integrity. The citizens of this great nation place great trust in their military Services. They will continue to judge us by stricter rules than they apply to themselves. And they *should* do that because, ultimately, their security rests with us and the way we perform our duties. The people of this nation have entrusted their Armed Forces with the most awesome weapons the world has ever seen, but they have also placed the lives of their sons and daughters who serve, and the safety of their own families for now and in the future in the hands of the Armed Forces.

Do not confuse integrity with infallibility. There is a great tendency to do that. As Gary Cooper said in *High Noon*, you should "aim to be high-regarded"; but you should remember that you are human and fallible. Those who serve with you and under you are also human and fallible. Those who will lead you are also human and fallible. The code of the Guardian has room for fallibility. Certainly, the higher up the flagpole you go, the more of your fallible backside will show. There is room for that; but, there is *no room* for a lack of integrity or for those who place self before duty or self before comrades or self before country. Careerism is the *one great sin*, and it has no place among you.

Now, you may sit there and say, "Well, that's pretty well for you to say that when you are high on the lofty perch as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff but we all want to get ahead." And I know you want to get ahead. I understand that. I applaud it. But if you get there over the bodies of careers and your comrades, you have served your nation poorly and you have violated the code of the Guardians.

There will not be any tribunal to judge your actions at the height of battle; there are only the hopes of the citizenry who are relying upon your integrity and skill. They may well criticize you later amid the relative calm of victory or defeat. But, there is a crucial moment in crisis or battle when those you lead and the citizens of the nation can only trust that you are doing what is right. And you develop that concept through integrity.

There is a marvelous passage in the last pages of Field Marshal Montgomery's book. He said, "But there are times in war when men must do hazardous jobs, and when success and the Nation's fate depend upon the courage, determination and tenacity of officers and men. When those who set duty before self give of themselves to see the task committed to them through to its completion, they win the day and the highest honor that mortal man can give."

To the international students here today, let me say, "Thank you for attending." I hope that your attendance here was as valuable for you as it was for us. I am sure that the United States students and the staff and faculty have enjoyed your company and profited from your presence. It is my firm belief that nurturing contacts among the military forces of the nations of the world will help reduce the risk of war.

I would like to say just a word to the families here. Your husbands or wives, as the case may be, have reached a point in their careers that is very important to them, and it is important to you obviously. It is also important to the institutions they serve and important to the nation. They needed your support as they went through this school and they need your support now as they go on to new duties. I realize that lecture is not necessary for your families because if you had not supported them, they probably would not be here in the first place.

But I just want to tell you that I acknowledge that the family serves as surely as does the member of the family who wears the uniform, and I acknowledge your great importance to the military community. So, as you leave here tomorrow, know that you have my thanks and the thanks of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and best wishes for the exciting days ahead.

In the liturgy for morning prayer in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, there is a prayer which is a good prayer for the Guardians and their families. It goes like this:

"Lord God, You have called Your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that Your hand is leading us and Your love is supporting us."

I want you to know that that is my prayer for you and I give you my congratulations. Best wishes to all of you. It has been a pleasure to be here.

