

A Sailor's Perspective on the United States Army

Admiral William H. McRaven, Address to Class of 2015, 500th Night

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Good evening. General and Mrs. Caslen, General and Mrs. Clarke, General Trainor, Col Brazil, Command Sergeants Major Duane and Byers, distinguished guests and most importantly Class of 2015.

I am truly honored to be here tonight to address the future leaders of the United States Army. But, as a graduate of a state school in Texas, who majored in journalism because I couldn't do math, or science, or engineering or accounting, I am somewhat intimidated by the thought of giving any advice, to any cadet, on anything.

Nevertheless, after almost 37 years in the service, much of that time with the Army, there may be something I can offer. So tonight, as you begin the final 500 days of your time at the United States Military Academy, I would like to give you a Sailor's Perspective on the Army; not the Army of the Hudson, not the Army of the history books, not the Army portrayed in the countless murals across campus, but the Army you will enter in 500 days—the Army upon which the future of the Nation rests; the Army that you will shape and the Army that you will lead.

So, if you will humor this old sailor, I will tell you what I've learned in my time serving with the Army.

In the past twelve years I have worked for the great Generals of this generation; Dempsey, Petraeus, Odierno, McChrystal, Austin, Rodriguez and Dailey. All graduates of the Military Academy, each man, different in his own way.

Dempsey, a man of great humor and compassion, whose quick wit, and keen tactical sense allowed him to secure Baghdad as a Division Commander, lead the Central Command as a three star, and today, as the Chairman, he presides over the greatest change in our military since WWII and he does so with tremendous reason, intelligence and with a song in his heart.

Petraeus, whose understanding of the strategic nature of war was unparalleled. Who saw opportunity in every challenge and who dared greatly in hopes of great victories. His daily command decisions in Iraq and Afghanistan unquestionably saved the lives of thousands of young soldiers.

Odierno, a soldier's soldier, who as a Division and Corps commander in Iraq, fought with a fierceness one would expect of a great warrior and then as the Commander of all forces in Iraq combined that fierceness with the diplomat's subtle hand to lead and shape the future of a sovereign Iraq. And today, he leads the greatest Army the world has ever known.

Austin, the quiet bear of a man, whose deep intellect and incomparable combat experience allowed him to think through every complex problem and to succeed where others might have failed.

McChrystal, whose creative mind and intense drive for perfection, changed forever how special operations would fight on the battlefield and changed how SOF would forever be perceived by the Nation—and in doing so, likely changed the course of the Armed Forces as well.

Rodriguez, the everyman's general who proved time and again, that character matters--that hard work, perseverance, persistence, and toughness on the battlefield are always traits of success.

And Del Dailey, whose boldness and innovation, coupled with a Night Stalkers sense of teamwork and aggressiveness, began the revolution in special operations.

What did I learn about the Army in watching these men and other great leaders like Keith Alexander, Chuck Jacoby, Mike Scaparrotti, John Campbell, Bob Caslen and Rich Clarke?

Well, ***I learned first and foremost that your allegiance as an officer is always, always to the Nation*** and to those civilian leaders who were elected by the people, who represent the people.

The oath you took is clear; to support and defend the constitution, not the institution-- not the army, not the corps, not the division, not the brigade, not the battalion, not the company, not the platoon, and not the squad—but the Nation.

I learned that leadership is hard. Karl von Clausewitz once said that “everything in war is easy, but the easy things are difficult.”

Leadership sounds easy in the books, but it is quite difficult in real life.

I learned that leadership is difficult because it is a human interaction and nothing, nothing is more daunting, more frustrating more complex than trying to lead men and women in tough times. Those officers that do it well earn your respect, because doing it poorly is common place. You will be challenged to do it well.

I learned that taking care of soldiers is not about coddling them. It is about challenging them. Establishing a standard of excellence and holding them accountable for reaching it.

I learned that good officers lead from the front. I can't count the times that I saw Petraeus, without body armor, walking the streets of Mosul, Baghdad or Ramadi, to share the dangers with his men and to show the enemy he wasn't afraid. Or McChrystal, jockeying-up to go on a long patrol with his Rangers or SEALs in Afghanistan; Dempsey on a spur ride in Iraq; Austin at the head of his Division during the invasion of Iraq; Odierno, cigar in mouth, rumbling through the streets of Basrah; Rodriguez and Dailey always center stage during the tough fights in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I learned that if you are in combat, move to where the action is the hottest. Spend time with the soldiers being miserable, exhausted and scared. If you're a Blackhawk pilot or and Tank Commander, spend some time on the flight line or in the motor pool with the maintainers and the wrench turners. ***Whatever position or branch you are in, find the toughest, most dangerous, shittiest job in your unit and go do it.***

I learned that you won't get a lot of thanks in return. I learned that you shouldn't expect it. Your soldiers are doing the tough job every day, but I guarantee you, you will learn a lot about your troops and they will learn a lot about you.

I learned that the great leaders know how to fail. In the course of your Army career you will likely fail and fail often. ***Nothing so steels you for battle like failure.*** No officer I watched got it right, every time. But the great ones know that when they fail, they must pick themselves up, learn from their mistakes and move on.

Rudyard Kipling, the great British storyteller, poet and soldier once wrote, in part,

“If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs
and blaming it on you.

If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you, but make
allowances for their doubting too.

If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster and treat those two
imposters just the same.

Yours is the earth and everything that's in it and which is more--
you'll be a man my son.”

If you can't stomach failure, then you will never be a great leader.

I learned that great Army officers are risk takers, but the greatest risk is not on the battlefield, but in standing up for what's right.

I have seen a young lieutenant stand up to a colonel when that officer's behavior was out of line. I have seen a captain challenge a general about a flawed battle plan. I have seen many a general privately confront their civilian leadership and question the merits of the national decisions.

All Army officers are expected to take risks in battle. *The truly great officers know that real victory is achieved when men and women of character take professional risks and challenge the weak-kneed, the faint of heart, the indecisive or the bullies.*

And finally, in watching Army officers, young and old, *I learned that the great officers are equally good at following as they are at leading.* Following is one of the most underrated aspects of leadership and each of you will be asked to follow someone else. The strength of a good unit rests more on how well the officers follow the commander, than how well they lead their own soldiers.

I have seen many a good Battalion and Company underachieve because someone in the officer ranks thought the Commander was incompetent and quietly worked to undermine his authority. I guarantee you, that in the course of your career you will work for leaders whom you don't like and don't respect. It will be easy to make fun of their idiosyncrasies, their receding hair line, their soft chin or their spouse. Be very careful about getting too smug, too opinionated and too righteous. *As long as the actions of your commander are moral, legal and ethical, then do everything you can to support the chain of command* and avoid the rolling eyes, the whisper campaigns and junior officer dissension.

I learned that the great Army officers know how to follow.

And what about the soldiers that you will lead? In my career I have been fortunate to have served beside soldiers from the Screaming Eagles of the 101st Division, the paratroopers of the All American Division, the 1st Armored Division, the 1st Cavalry Division, the 10th Mountain Division, the 1st, 3rd and 4th Infantry Division, all Groups of the Special Forces Regiment and my beloved Army Rangers.

I learned that the greatest privilege the Army can bestow upon you is to give you the opportunity to lead such magnificent men and women.

These soldiers are not without their challenges. Your soldiers will, at times, question your authority. They will undermine your actions. They will mislead you, frustrate you, disappoint you, and occasionally fail you.

But, when the chips are down, I mean really down, your soldiers will be there and they will inspire you with their courage, their sense of duty, their leadership, their love and their respect. In difficult times, your soldiers will be everything you dreamed they would be—and more.

All one has to do is look at the citations that accompany the actions of Sergeants Sal Qunita, Leroy Petry, Robbie Miller, Ty Carter, Jarad Monti, Ross McGinnis, Paul Smith, and Clinton Romesha. Men whose unparalleled heroism, above and beyond the call of duty, was only apparent moments before their brothers were threatened.

I learned that your soldiers are at their best when their brothers and sisters in arms are threatened. They are at their best when life deals them the hardest of blows and their indomitable spirit shines through.

In 2007, I visited the intensive care unit in Landstuhl, Germany, where the Army was sending all of its most critically injured soldiers from Iraq. As I walked into the sterile room, clad from head to toe in clean white garb, a man lay naked on the bed in front of me. Missing one leg above the knee and part of the foot on the other leg, he was swollen beyond recognition from the blast of an IED.

The doctor in attendance didn't know the man's unit or service. I asked the man in the bed if he was a Marine or a Soldier. Unable to talk, he pointed to his thigh. There on what was left of his thigh, was a tattoo; the 1st Infantry Division. "You're a soldier," I remarked. He nodded. "An infantryman." I said. He smiled through what was left of his face and then he picked up a clipboard upon which he had been writing notes. He looked me in the eye and wrote on the paper. "I –will–be–infantry–again!" Exclamation point. And somehow I knew that he would.

Just like the young Ranger in the combat hospital at Bagram who had both his legs amputated and was also unable to speak. The nurse at his bedside said that he knew sign language. His mother was deaf and the soldier had learned to sign at a young age. He was so very young and a part of me must have shown a small sign of pity for this Ranger whose life had just been devastated.

With a picture of hand gestures in front of me, the Ranger, barely able to move and in excruciating pain, signed, "I will be okay."

And a year later I saw him at the Ranger Regimental Change of Command. He was wearing his prosthetic shorties, smiling from ear to ear and challenging the Rangers around him to a pull up contest. He was okay.

Just like the young female sergeant who I just visited at Walter Reed this week. She was seriously injured in a parachute accident. With her father by her side, she laughed off the injury like it was a scratch. She's been in the hospital for two months and has years of rehabilitation ahead of her. She has no self-pity, no remorse, no regrets, just determination to get back to her unit.

These soldiers and tens of thousands like them will be the warriors you lead in 500 days. You had better be up to the task, because I have learned that they expect you to be good.

And, most importantly, ***I also learned that your soldiers expect you to hold them to high standards.*** These soldiers joined the service to be part of something special and if they are not held to a high standard, if their individual efforts are no more important, no more appreciated than the efforts of a slacker then it will directly affect the morale of the unit. ***And I learned that nothing is more important than the morale of a unit.***

MacArthur once said of morale, "...that it cannot be produced by pampering or coddling an Army, and it is not necessarily destroyed by hardship, danger, or even calamity...It will wither quickly, however, if soldiers come to believe themselves the victims of indifference or injustice on the part...of their leaders."

The great leaders in the Army never accept indifference or injustice and they only judge their soldiers based on the merit of their work. Nothing else is important. Not the soldier's size, not their color, not their gender, not their orientation, not their religion, not their ethnicity—nothing is important, but how well your soldiers do their job.

I am confident that history will reflect that the young American's who enlisted in the Army after September 11th, were equal in greatness to their grandfathers and their great grandfathers who fought in the World Wars—and in 500 days you will inherit these incredible soldiers. Be ready.

Finally, in watching the Army for most of my career, I learned that no institution in the world has the history, the legacy, the traditions, or the pride that comes from being a soldier. I am envious beyond words.

I learned that whether you serve 4 years or 40 years you will never, ever regret your decision to have joined the United States Army. You will serve beside the finest men and women in America. You will be challenged every day. You will fail. You will succeed. You will grow. You will have adventures to fill ten life times and stories that your friends from home will never be able to understand.

Your children and their children and their children's children, will be incredibly proud of your service and when you pass from this earth, the Nation that you served so very well will honor you for your duty. ***And your only regret will be that you could not have served longer.***

And if for one moment you believe that because Iraq is over and Afghanistan is winding down that the future holds few challenges for you, then you are terribly, terribly mistaken. Because as long as there are threats to this great Nation, the Army upon which this Nation was founded, will be the cornerstone of its security, it's freedom and its future. And you, as Army Officers, will shape that future, secure our freedoms and protect us from harm.

So what has this sailor learned?

That there is no more noble calling in the world than to be a soldier in the United States Army.

Good luck to you all as you complete your final 500 days. May God bless America and may we always have the privilege to serve her.

Thank you very much.