

## **CLASS OF 2023 COMMITMENT DINNER**

**August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

**Remarks by Lieutenant General Rich Kramlich, USMC (Ret.)**

This has been quite the event so far, and on behalf of all my Classmates that are here this evening, I'd like to thank VADM Buck and Col. McDonough for the hospitality displayed to the Class of '73. It's really wonderful to be able to continue the Link-in-the-Chain traditions in-person, and that reminds me that I also want to thank Joe Stewart, our Class "pointman", for coordinating all of these opportunities to bond with our linked Class...2023.

And a special thanks to the Class of '23 for inviting me to be the Guest Speaker this evening. It's an honor and a privilege to represent my Classmate and I'm most appreciative for the opportunity. I'm not sure if Col McDonough had anything to do with that invitation, but I'll tip my hat to him nonetheless. And congratulations on being chosen to be the 89<sup>th</sup> Commandant of Midshipmen. It's always great to see a Marine in that slot every once in awhile.

While the Link in the Chain program has become quite robust during this 21<sup>st</sup> century, it wasn't always like that. I can, however, relate one special interaction I know of between the Class of 1973 and the Class of 1923. It was in mid-May of 1973, our senior year and exam week was underway. Coincidentally, the Class of 1923 was having a Class Reunion at the same time and also on that particular day the Seapower Exam was being given to many of the Firsties. As part of their Reunion, the Class of '23 was taking part in noon meal in the Mess Hall. Along with Steve Keller and Bill Liedtke, who are also here tonight, I was in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Company and because of that, we had a special link with the Class of '23.

ADM Arleigh Burke was the most famous member of that Class and over the years he had presented numerous memorabilia items to the 23rd Co. Wardroom, to include a DESRON 23 pennant from the destroyer squadron he commanded in the Pacific War, along with portraits of famous WWII ships of the line. Steve Keller, who was our Wardroom president, was informed by our Company Officer that ADM Burke and a number of his classmates would be paying a visit to our

Wardroom following noon meal. Steve was taking that Seapower exam, no doubt recounting the tactics used by “31-knot” Burke in those famous naval battles. Somehow Steve was able to get the Wardroom presentable for VIP’s, ensuring that all of the memorabilia was dusted off and hanging straight. It came off without a hitch and became a fond memory. While we have some famous classmates in ’73, to include a CNO, SOCOM Commander, PACOM Commander and a Fleet Forces Commander, I think each and every one of them would defer to the incomparable Arleigh Burke. Bottom line, we were honored to be linked in some fashion to the Class of ’23, which produced so many heroic wartime leaders.

But tonight, the proceedings concern the Class of 20- 23, 100 years later, and yet still linked. I can vividly remember that brilliant toasty day in late June of 2019 when you, as a Class, were sworn-into the Navy as midshipmen, on sparkling Tecumseh Court. You all have different yet similar recollections of that day. I mostly recall enjoying the day spending time with my own Classmates while trying to reassure your parents that their sons and daughters were embarking on something that was very worthwhile. My wife, who I might add is a veteran of four June Weeks, was also very helpful in that information-passing effort.

I also remember mingling with the unaccompanied Plebes at the Mexican Monument prior to the march into Bancroft Hall for your first Evening Meal. The first Plebe I met there, perhaps looking for some encouragement, was Midn 4/c Connors, a prior enlisted Marine, who just happened to be assigned to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Company. Very serendipitous, I’d say. Later that summer our Class handed out coins to commemorate your Class’s commitment to the Naval Academy’s Honor Concept, another crucial aspect of your Annapolis experience.

And that would be the last time I was with any of you in person, not knowing that the world would change 9 months later. No Class has had a Plebe Year, followed by a Youngster Year, quite like these two years you have experienced. The complexities of keeping the Brigade functioning, while keeping it safe, are unimaginable. It is not very hard to envision the Superintendent, Commandant and Academic Dean, all screaming to the high heavens, looking for workable “courses of action”. This is not a university or a college...it is an Academy with a

unique and valuable mission to train men and women to become capable commissioned officers in the United States Navy and Marine Corps.

All of the things that make the Brigade of Midshipmen what it is....that being a dynamic, breathing, motivating engine of energy.... All of those qualities percolate from a unique camaraderie that every Class creates and thrives on. We did it in our own manner, overcoming obstacles along the way, growing more united in sense of purpose, and you are certainly doing it now. While it has taken a certain re-dedication of purpose on numerous occasions over these last 18 months, as you no doubt suffered from a kind of whip lash, as protocols, rules, restrictive measures and isolation were put in place, then modified, cancelled, and reinstated, you have met the challenge and are here tonight to not only celebrate what lies out ahead of each of you, but to ponder what exactly you have committed to undertake.

Before we go further, let's home-in on what we think the word "commitment" means.....there are multiple definitions but I believe some are more applicable to the reason we are here tonight. A "commitment" is when you are dedicating yourself to something. It's an obligation; more like an allegiance or an act of loyalty. In that vein, the act of "committing" is a trait,....it's a quality that demonstrates a steadfast focus of purpose. So let's not view this as a "quid pro quo" between you and the Navy, where you get something from the Navy in exchange for your service. You shouldn't need incentives; rather you would be self-motivated. Yet there are all sorts of motivating factors lining this path you are committing to take, a path where you are placing service over self. As our Class likes to say ..."non sibi"...not for self. So let me be very clear.....this next step in your journey is more about your commitment to those that you will lead, and to the missions and tasks you will be given to complete.

Regardless of what your service selection is going to be, at some point soon after graduation, nearly all of you are going to be in the operational Navy or Marine Corps, leading enlisted sailors and Marines. And the tasks you will face will be directly related to the combat readiness of whatever organization you are assigned to. And as you most certainly know, there is no dearth of threats to our

American way of life. It all gets real as soon as you hit the Fleet. You may inherit a Division that has just failed an inspection or has a crucial sea trial coming up. You may find yourself as the new platoon commander of a unit returning from deployment with 50% of your personnel at the end of their enlistments and leaving the service. If anything, your first duty assignment will likely be unpredictable, but it will be up to you to adapt and overcome, just like you've been doing over these last two years.

Perhaps I can reinforce this point of just how "real" things can get for a young junior officer by offering a couple of vignettes. Now there are obviously many examples of junior officers meeting the moment when faced with monumental challenges in their initial assignments, given that our military forces have been in armed conflict for the last 20 years. Many graduates of this institution have conducted themselves with high levels of competence and courage, each serving as a prime example of what it means to "do your duty" under duress. I have chosen these two examples because I had personal knowledge of the circumstances and knew each individual officer, though in a totally different context and manner.

The first incident took place in Iraq during the spring of 2004.

..soon after the first battle of Fallujah. Combat Convoy missions in Al Anbar province, Resupply Gen Mattis's 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division units in various Combat Outposts and Forward Bases. Soon threatened by insurgent activity,

Convoy commanded by 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Laura Schmitz, Class of '01, was attacked at NIGHT with IED's and unorganized small arms fire. THIS WAS THE FIRST ATTACK ON ONE OF OUR CONVOYS. Her actions were immediate and effective. Perimeter security established, fire returned, medevac called for and coordination made with ground combat elements in the close vicinity. And in short order, the convoy was back in gear in order to complete the mission.

While her immediate actions on the scene were crucial, it was her attention to detail in performing the pre-mission rehearsals and immediate action drills in the hot Iraqi sun prior to executing the actual mission.

The other example I'd like to share with you involved 2dLt Bobby Lee, USMC Class of 1973. I should point out that Bob started out with the Class of '72, but graduation with that Class was looking unlikely at one point and through the persuasive arguments of then Capt Chuck Krulak (later to become Commandant of the Marine Corps) and Maj Tom Draude, the Superintendent was convinced that having Bob join the Class of '73, in order to catch-up academically, would serve a good purpose. He couldn't have been more correct, as Bob retired as a Colonel, and had a splendid career to include being CO of The Basic School when your own Commandant of Midn. was a Staff Platoon Commander as a captain.

2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Lee's turn in the frying pan came in the spring of 1975, where following graduation from TBS, he was assigned duty as a platoon commander on Okinawa, leading Marines in Bravo Co., 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 4<sup>th</sup> Marines.

It was an undermanned platoon, few NCO's, and a SSgt as the Plt Sgt.

Situation in Vietnam was deteriorating, massive refugee surge and 1/4 was put on Alert, leaving Oki on an old amphib LST Frederick

MISSION - merchant PIONEER CONTENDER 360' 6 holds, not meant for passengers, 10 miles off Cam Ranh Bay.

Well over 10,000 refugees plus 1000+ armed ARVN deserters no means to feed, care for, or provide water to.

Told to board ship, establish order, administer aid and traverse to a nearby island for offload, where deserters would be sent back to the front lines.

2-day trip, random gunfire, score of refugees dying en route.

Linked with Blue Ridge (flagship), arranging for additional medical supplies and pallets of C-rations, led to riots on-board, difficulty in confiscating weapons led to incidents of pot shots

By 5<sup>th</sup> day barges arrived to implement off-load and treat the sick and ailing.

REMARKABLE RESTRAINT on behalf of Lt Lee's enlisted Marines, quelling what could have been a mass casualty event or hijack situation

If Laura Schmitz or Colonel Lee were here right now, they would tell you how dependent mission success was on the professional performance of their subordinates, on how innovative, courageous and committed they were in carrying out each and every task. It absolutely cannot happen without them.

What you all need to do then, over the next two-plus years and beyond, is to develop ways to inspire that kind of behavior, that kind of obedient response from those who call you “sir”, “m’am”, Boss, LT or whatever. They are looking for you to set the tone, and they will definitely take your lead.

Take the time to tap the brains of the senior enlisted advisors that are assigned to your battalions here. They have seen it all, the good and the not-so-good, and probably can remember steering a brand new ensign or deuce-louie in the proper direction with minimal fanfare. I have always thought that the caliber of our enlisted ranks is truly what sets us apart from the military organizations of our potential enemies. The ability of our enlisted members to understand “commander’s intent”, to operate independently and to deal with unforeseen or dire circumstances on the battlefield is unique and essential to success.

And it comes from a palpable trust with the officer corps, one that must not be taken for granted but rather nurtured regularly. As officers, we must display that we are in this with them, that we will share any hardship that they endure. That is what strengthens the reality of the chain of command.

I can tell you, without a doubt, that when you take charge of your first group of enlisted personnel it will begin an experience that will stay with you for the rest of your life, regardless of how long you wear the uniform. I can still picture Gy Johnson, SSgt Calderon, Sgt Garza, Cpl Goodner, etc. like it was yesterday and I was forming the platoon for a three-mile run. The dynamics of that leadership environment, when you are trying all the techniques and methods you have learned to get the platoon to work as one, are so invigorating and motivating, that it gives you an extra burst of energy that you didn’t know you had. When I spoke with Col Lee about his 1975 adventure off the coast of Vietnam, the names of the individuals in his unit rolled off his memory banks as if they were family members.

It is so unique to our profession, the profession of arms, and it is something to be savored. That is what is on your 2023 horizon and I'm thrilled for all of you.

So this is what the next two years here at Annapolis needs to be about....shaping yourselves to be the finest Junior Officers you can be. They deserve it. Being a JO is not akin to the life you've led over the last two years as a Plebe and then a Youngster. Start seeking out opportunities to lead. One I'd recommend is becoming a Plebe Summer Squad Leader. Having that opportunity was the most relevant thing I did during my Midshipman days, as it gave me first-hand experience with having the responsibility of enhancing the military effectiveness of a group of young men that had come from different backgrounds and with different capabilities.

By all means, pick the brains of the staff and faculty of this storied institution, military and civilian alike. That is what truly differentiates the Academy from any other form of commissioning....the four-year immersion in a military lifestyle, surrounded by people that have dedicated their lives to serving this great country. Analyze and assess the different leadership styles you'll experience. What inspires you, what frustrates you, what is more suitable to your personality? Now is the time to populate your leadership tool box.

And while you're at it, get to know your classmates better. Learn about their experiences growing up, as they come from every state in the Union, which will also be the case with the personnel in your first squadron, ship or platoon. Those men and women that will be under your leadership have all arrived at that point traveling different roads.

You'll need to understand why they have chosen to wear the uniform of the United States of America, why they are willing to put their life on the line for that same country, especially if you may be the one to direct them into harm's way to accomplish a mission. It will all come down to the most basic of all leadership tenets....the 3 C's....COMPETENCE, COURAGE AND COMPASSION. Any good leader will have each of these components in measurable portions, likely adding to them continuously. And any poor leader will lack one or all of them, perhaps not even being aware of such crucial shortfalls, due to poor introspection.

This special relationship between you as the officer and the enlisted personnel you'll lead, is brought out in the separate Oath's of Office that each takes to swear allegiance to the Constitution. The enlisted Oath states that they will "obey the orders of the officers appointed over me". Once again, this is that special bond of trust and loyalty, with the trust being in your competence and grasp of what a lawful order entails. Earn that trust and you will get the loyalty in return.

All of you have once again taken the Oath of Office upon making this commitment to at least 7 more years of service to the Country, just as you took it when you became midshipmen two years ago. And you will take it again when you are commissioned in May of 2023 and every time you are fortunate enough to be promoted to the next rank and the next level of responsibility. And that is a very good thing that you'll have opportunities to ponder what exactly that powerful oath means for the preservation of this country.

Unfortunately, over the past few years, we have witnessed breath-taking examples of people in high positions of trusted leadership merely paying lip service to their Oaths for their own purposes. We have seen people that once wore the uniform of the U.S. Armed Forces on the steps of U.S. Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup>, trying to stop a Constitutional process. It still pains me to know that the Marine Corps flag was being carried by several of those protesters. So I wonder what they understood that Oath to mean? When you receive your commission from Congress and the President, you become an agent for the U.S. government and are chosen to represent that government.....and you will have a responsibility for the actions of the units you lead. In your position as a junior officer, I would recommend a re-focus on the portion of the Oath that states that you "will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the officer upon which I am about to enter". That is where you can truly apply what you learn here at Annapolis and where you can ultimately excel in your chosen career path.

And I am very confident that you will do just that. I know it is human nature to feel that the younger generations didn't have it as tough as we did, that things are much easier now or that they are not quite as dedicated to the profession of arms. The young Naval Academy grads that I served with at the latter stages of

my 36-year career, both in garrison and in combat operations, were dedicated, innovative, energetic, focused and conducted themselves with the utmost integrity. While a very small percentage of my Classmates may have doubts, I can tell you with absolute sincerity that the overwhelming predominance of the Class of 1973 is extremely proud of the Class of 2023, and that we are excited to be “linked” with you, like a section of a mighty chain. We have the utmost confidence that the “Commitment” that you all have just made will guide your actions, both as midshipmen, but even further than that, when you ultimately report to the Fleet and the operating Marine Forces as ensigns and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants. That has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?

We also have confidence in the senior leadership to establish an environment and a culture whereby every element of the mission of the Naval Academy can be accomplished, even when faced with the obstacles presented by a global pandemic. While I don’t envy you having to find ways to overcome those obstacles, I do envy the satisfaction and enjoyment you’re able to experience while working with and guiding a Brigade of Midshipmen that exemplify the best this Nation has to offer. I wish you all the best of luck in your pursuits. Semper fi.