

Keynote Address for ROTC Commissioning Ceremony

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Good morning. I'm honored to have been asked to speak on this occasion as you young men are about to become commissioned officers and your family and friends mark this notable achievement in your life – one that not only prompts a degree of well-deserved pride, but one that also challenges you to a heightened level of personal responsibility. And that challenge is what I'd like to focus on in my remarks this morning by sharing some anecdotes and observations that I hope will be of some value to you – if not now, perhaps some day in the future.

As Colonel Linder said, I served in the Marine Corps years ago as an enlisted Marine – a grunt. I'm also a writer with a particular interest in how the experience of human beings in combat has a lasting effect on their lives, and that of their loved ones, long after the war itself is over. I'm currently working on a short novel about a dying Iwo Jima veteran. So my comments today are, no doubt, influenced by my background and this point of view.

As you are commissioned in your respective branch of service, I understand none of you will be going to an infantry outfit. And I hope you won't ever have to go into combat. But regardless, you're still going to lead enlisted men and women just out of high school and career non-commissioned officers with a world of experience as you assume your part in the important job of serving and defending this country. As a citizen and as a military veteran of the United States of America, I congratulate you and thank you for your acceptance of this duty. You are sorely needed. Good leaders always are.

I went to Eastern Illinois University after I served three years in the military. But I gave some thought to going back as an officer. At that time in the late '60s, recruiters were calling former Marines in college long before the ink dried on their degrees and asking them to come back. That was particularly true after the Tet Offensive in Vietnam in January 1968 when the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong launched coordinated attacks on cities and bases throughout South Vietnam. I had a family by then and ultimately decided against it. But another Eastern student from a town near where I grew up, who graduated at the same time, joined the OCS program in the Marine Corps and made a career of it.

He's a major general now, I learned recently – that was a surprise to some people back home who knew him to be kind of wild and crazy growing up. I hadn't heard anything about him for years until I was in Washington a few weeks ago for the dedication of the World War II Memorial. I visited a Marine from First Marine Recon at Walter Reed Army Hospital who had lost both arms in an Iraqi ambush on April 7. Maybe you saw him on CNN or on the front page of some newspaper when he saluted President Reagan's casket in the Capitol Rotunda.

Anyway, this Marine corporal was telling me and a friend of mine – a former Marine who had lost a leg in Vietnam – about what happened in the ambush that took his hands and arms and about the outlook for his recovery. He mentioned that a General Jones had been coming around the ward and how helpful those visits had been and how much he respected the general for the way he carried himself and for the way he treated him and the other amputees and wounded. The corporal said the general's first name was Tom. I later learned that it was the same Tom Jones who had gone to Eastern years ago. I was heartened to learn that he's been a good leader and a good officer and made that kind of impression on these Marines, still in the early stages of dealing with their wounds and loss of limbs that will affect them for the rest of their lives. You've got to admire a man like that who has made general and is still serving after 35 years.

When I graduated from Eastern, I went to work as a prison counselor, a journalist and free-lance writer, but mostly worked as a teacher in the high school and college classrooms. And sometimes I think the classroom wasn't much different than some of the duty would have been in the Marine Corps at that time. Teachers got cussed, hollered at, spat upon and even hit by students, parents and anyone else who wanted to take a swipe. In the early days of my teaching career, students weren't shooting at us in the classrooms. Later, though, some teachers and students were (and still are) maliciously targeted and shot because some troubled student didn't like them or had a grudge against the world.

Not much different in some respects from being in Iraq or Afghanistan or Palestine or Israel or Mogadishu or a hundred other trouble spots around the world in the years since Vietnam. A lack of discipline and a lack of respect for others make things worse.

I always told my students that teaching was the second most important job in the world. Parenting was the most important, I believed, and still do. And I said if parents would send polite, compassionate, respectful kids to school, a teacher's job would be infinitely much easier and absolutely more effective in the long run.

And I think the job you're taking on today, by accepting a commission in the armed forces, is another one of those jobs that ranks second only to parenting. Like growing old – it ain't for sissies. The times are uncertain and tenuous. The men and women you'll be leading will expect you to know your stuff and to make good decisions in rational,

legitimate and intelligent ways. That expectation of your leadership will remain with you from here on out – whether in military life or civilian life, whether you're in combat or working in the private sector. So, the kind of leader you choose to become is important.

But how do you know if you're a good leader? It's not going to be how far you get promoted up the ranks, believe me. And here's where my enlisted man's point of view really shows – you'll know you're a good leader if you can build a trust and respect among the people you lead that is so strong and so unquestionable, they would gladly follow you to hell and back – honor, courage and commitment are key.

Let me give you some examples. I was never in combat. My overseas duty was in a guard company in the Philippines where I worked in one of the last red-line brigades in the South Pacific – prisoners had to request permission to speak, to cross red lines and to do just about anything else except breathe. It wasn't any Abu Ghraib in the middle of a war against terrorism; but we had custody of military personnel who were caught smuggling gold, jumping ship in Australia and never planning to leave, going AWOL in Manila and leading a gang of thieves and common criminals and committing any number of other serious infractions of the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

Like most Marine brigades of the time, this one wasn't some place you'd want to go on vacation or pull any overnight liberty. But the brig warden and the officer in charge (OIC) made it crystal clear that while it was a red-line brigade that maintained the Marine Corps standards of incarceration, nobody was to abuse prisoners or physically harm them. We didn't. Nor did we carry cameras inside the brig or force prisoners to humiliate themselves with their nakedness. I can only imagine what might have happened to any one of the brig staff who would have acted inappropriately. Both the brig warden and the OIC were outstanding leaders we all respected and trusted. They were in the brig daily. So was the base officer of the day – all at any time of the day or night. And they never harassed us or pulled rank in any way. They had their job; we had ours. Recidivism was quite low.

It was with that brig duty that I learned that some men and women are born to lead, some learn to lead and yet others never learn. And some of how that turns out goes back to that job of parenting and the way each of us was raised. In many instances of success or failure of leadership, the stakes are not all that high in the big picture – did your team win or lose the game, did your staff make or miss the deadline, did your company increase or decrease its profits? The success or failure of leadership often only impacts your pride or your pocketbook; but in combat, it can be a matter of life and death.

So, let's take a look at leadership in combat.

Vietnam veteran, former Marine captain and author Ronald Drez (who studied and worked with Stephen Ambrose) tells a story about his early days in Vietnam when, from

his point of view, HE got his company caught in an ambush. "It was terrible," he said, "but you make decisions because there is nothing else to do. It took us about two hours to get out of it and when we got back to camp, there were seven dead and they put the bodies around a tree. I was just sitting there thinking of what I should have done differently, all tore up, and the gunny sergeant came over with a cup of coffee. 'Hey, you didn't do so bad,' he told me. 'You got us out, didn't you?' That's what you learn in combat, that there's an inevitability about certain things."

Bill Madden, a retired English teacher and professor from Indiana, learned much about that inevitability and the value of good leaders when he fought on Iwo Jima with Easy Company, Second Battalion, 27th Marine Regiment, Fifth Marine Division. That battleground was a place where a lot of great "Leaders of Men" showed their mettle when it counted. Admiral Chester Nimitz, the commander of naval operations in the Pacific, said, "Uncommon valor was a common virtue" among the men who fought on Iwo Jima

Bill and I have talked quite a bit about valor and leadership as I've been doing research for my current novel, and he tells me that leadership from the standpoint of the enlisted man in combat is a matter of perception. He said he knew very early whether his officer would be liked or disliked, whether he would be a respected, able leader. First impressions were important. Once during training on the big island of Hawaii in 1944, Bill and his company were about to see a training film, but the major wanted to say a few words to them first.

And I'll quote Bill: "Some of us had had a few beers, but one of our men, Guest Mitchell, was feeling pretty high and was holding another full beer in his hand as the major entered. Mitch was in the front row, and before any of us could stop him, he lunged up and stuck the beer in the major's face and said, 'Here, Major, have a beer.' Everyone held his breath as the major stopped and considered for just a second or two. Even his aides seemed paralyzed. We all knew that old Mitch would be thrown into the brig immediately."

Instead, the major grabbed the beer, tipped it up, drained it all without stopping, and handed the empty can back to the tipsy Marine. The men applauded and shouted hurrahs. Bill felt, as he put it, the major had "showed the character of a true leader." Instead of throwing the man in the brig for insubordination and drunkenness, which would have served no purpose, the major's gesture – like it or not – demonstrated all at once that he was one of them, and yet he was in control and retained the respect of those Marines.

Bill thinks it was the kind of thing that Chesty Puller might have done in his heyday. Chesty was a legendary Marine general who fought with small-unit guerilla forces in Haiti and chased the rebel Sandino in Nicaragua in the '20s; fought at Guadalcanal, Cape Gloucester and Peleliu in World War II; and commanded a regiment in the 1st Marine

Division in Korea in the '50s. He received five Navy Crosses for his combat actions in a long, distinguished career. It was in Korea when the Marines were retreating as hordes of Communist Chinese were flowing over the border at the infamous clash at the Chosen Frozen in the winter of 1950 when Puller reportedly told a journalist that, "We've been looking for the enemy for several days now. We've finally found them. We're surrounded. That simplifies our problem of finding these people and killing them."

Even Chesty's presence among the men reportedly reassured them as he circulated among them. One machine gunner was quoted in Lt. Col. Jon Hoffman's biography of Puller as saying, "That man made us all feel invincible."

Men like Chesty Puller and Manila John Basilone and many others were legendary in the Marine Corps for extraordinary courage and wisdom in leadership in the midst of combat situations. In boot camp, drill instructors always had favorite stories about men like these that they used to show examples of these great leadership traits. After telling one of these stories, some DIs required their recruits to say in reverence, "Good night, Chesty, wherever you are!" just before lights went out at taps.

Others would tell the story about Gunny Basilone – who'd been awarded the Medal of Honor at Guadalcanal and didn't have to go to Iwo Jima but did anyway – leading his men off the beach on Iwo through murderous machine gun and mortar fire after they'd been hung up. "Let's go, men," he reportedly said shortly before a mortar round struck and killed him and four other men, the others moving toward the west coast of the small island whose airfields soon saved crippled air craft returning from bombing raids on the mainland of Japan. "Who wants to live forever?" The gunny posthumously received the Navy Cross for his actions that day.

Another important leadership quality Bill Madden pointed out to me is the willingness for young officers to listen to experienced NCOs and learn from their experience. There's an old saying about leadership: "Lead, follow or get out of the way," is the polite way of putting it. But that doesn't mean going pell mell ahead and not listening to voices of experience at the appropriate times.

As Bill was training to hit the beach on Iwo Jima, he said: "Sometimes a second lieutenant would come up who was too impressed with his newly acquired military education and wouldn't listen to anyone. His idea would be that of a 'know-it-all.' The NCOs knew that he didn't. They had the experience and knew many things that could help him, including how to get the respect of the men.

"We had many combat veterans from Guadalcanal, Bougainville and other places who knew much more from experience than any military training program could possible teach. I was fortunate to have a lieutenant named Lester Dyer who had been a schoolteacher in North Carolina in civilian life. He knew how to listen to his sergeants and

corporals on things he was not schooled in, and how to teach men who needed his particular expertise.

"For just one example, he was explaining how to strap a new backpack that seemed to have a lot of complicated procedures, when Sgt. Hank Hernandez spoke up and said, 'Lieutenant, there's a simpler way to do that and eliminate a couple of straps and make it a lot quicker and easier.'

"Instead of saying, 'We'll do it my way,' Lt. Dyer said, "Show us, Sergeant." And he did. Lt. Dyer felt no need to be the know-it-all, or to put down his subordinates. He graciously let Hank show us the better way. That's a mark of leadership. He showed the same thing in combat, often deferring to the men who had been there, but also being out front and leading. He was killed on Iwo Jima, unfortunately, but we all respected him and remember him as a fine leader of men."

Bill also mentioned the so-called "Chicken-S-t Second Looies," which is not exactly the way he put it, who knew it all and were quick to throw men in the brig for little or no reason except to show their authority. They were ridiculed behind their backs and got no respect at all from their men. Bill said he was sure they encountered those types of officers, as well, but, interestingly he added, "We don't remember them at all."

That's pretty telling, I think.

Here's more of Bill's seasoned words of wisdom: "The officer should truly lead physically (in combat), as well as mentally. In training, whether we had a speed hike or a 20-mile forced march, Lt. Dyer was out in front. He kept himself in great physical shape so that he wouldn't ask us to do anything he wasn't willing to do himself. In fact, he did it better than any of us. He wasn't one of those paunchy, out-of-shape jeep officers who rode behind the troops and complained about them. There are those kinds of officers, too, but we had precious few of them in the Marine Corps."

Bill himself got hit on March 6, the 16th day of the campaign, and left the battle and the island. A legendary tale about a replacement officer who came in after Bill was evacuated has made it down through the years, too. Jack Lummus had been an outstanding end at Baylor University and had played with the New York Giants before he joined the Marine Corps and became a highly respected platoon leader.

Late in the bloody, 36-day campaign that cost more than 6,800 lives – mostly Marines – and twice that many wounded, Lt. Lummus led members of Easy Company against a well-fortified Japanese strong point of foxholes and caves that was stopping the northern progress of the Marines to the coast. After being wounded but still single-handedly destroying a gun emplacement and another enemy position, Lummus was hit by a mortar round and had both legs blown off at the knees. This story of legendary

proportions has Lummus standing on his stumps, leaning on a rifle for support and urging his platoon up the hill, where they eliminated the enemy positions they were advancing against.

Some members of the platoon who were there say that didn't happen. They do say he rallied them with his courage before he was hit and continued urging them on after he was down. But no matter – the lieutenant was leadership personified and received the Medal of Honor for his actions and inspiration to his men. In Richard Newcomb's account of the battle of Iwo Jima, Marines were reportedly crying and cursing as they advanced on the positions. But, by god, they got all the way to the ridge overlooking the sea by the time they dug in for the night.

Easy Company Marine Keith Neilson, who was with Lummus for a short time before he was taken back to the Fifth Division hospital where he died later in the afternoon, said Lummus opened his eyes at one point and said he wouldn't play any more football.

Back at the battalion aid station Lummus reportedly opened his eyes and grinned at Dr. Thomas Brown and said, "It looks like the New York Giants have lost a damn good end, Doc."

Sounds a little like the Pat Tillman story of today's warriors. Tillman, of course, was the Arizona Cardinal defensive back who spurned a multi-million-dollar contract to play football and joined the elite Army Rangers after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and lost his life in Afghanistan.

My point is that people will follow a man or woman with that kind of grit, resolve and passion anywhere. Gen. George Washington got his half-starved, nearly frozen men to cross the Delaware River on Christmas Eve and to surprise the British and help turn the tide of the Revolutionary War, then went on to lead the 13 colonies to a new country and a political structure that has survived to this day.

President Abraham Lincoln led the country in some of its darkest days when it seemed like what Washington and the men of his time had started might not survive. General Dwight D. Eisenhower headed the invasion of Normandy to assure the defeat of the Nazis in the Second World War when there was some doubt about its outcome. Eisenhower even had a press release written by hand on a pad of paper in case of defeat that said: "Our landings ... have failed, and I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to attack at this time and place was based upon the best information available. The troops, the air and the Navy did all that bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt it is mine alone."

The characteristics of a true leader.

'Nough sed, I think. As I mentioned, you may never have to lead in combat. But such lessons of leadership are applicable to all aspects of life. They serve civilian life, as well as military life. My hope for you is that you will lead men and women whose respect you have earned – whatever military role you undertake in the future and in civilian life after that. I would argue that it's not the judgment of those who rank above you, but rather the respect, trust and loyalty of those who rank below you that is the true measure of your leadership. They are the ones whose well-being you look out for; they are the ones whose lives are on the line for you; and they are the ones who, if you have done your job well, will remember you for a lifetime and always appreciate your leadership.

You've got the good upbringing from your loving parents; you've got the great education from a fine university; you've got the superb training from an outstanding ROTC program and OCS. Now what you do with it all is up to you.

Good luck and Godspeed.