

A REMEMBRANCE WITH GRATITUDE AND HOPE

**Remarks at the Memorial Service
for the 60th Reunion
of the
U.S. Naval Academy Class of 1963
20 October 2023**

Good Morning Classmates!

As you know, this Service follows our long-standing custom of gathering in this beautiful place that means so much to so many of us, to pay homage to those Classmates who have gone before us. Before I offer a Eulogy to them on behalf of us all, I would like to express our gratitude to Chaplain Vanessa Platek for her assistance this morning. You will note that when the Order of Service that you received upon entering the Chapel this morning was printed another Chaplain was listed, but I subsequently learned that Chaplain Platek had volunteered sometime earlier to lead our Service and that she has served aboard U.S.S. *Fitzgerald*. So, a change was made and we are doubly grateful to her for joining us.

I also want to thank our Bugler, Musician First Class Eileen Asero, and Ms. Diane Kinsley, our Chapel Organist, for their support today. The Academy Band and the Chapel Organists have provided beautiful music for our Memorial Services for many years.

Finally, I would like to share with you the good news that the Alumni Association has made arrangements to have this Memorial Service videotaped. That tape will be uploaded to the Association's YouTube channel so that the Service can be viewed on the Internet by those of our Classmates who are not able to be with us today. We greatly appreciate that support.

When I use the word "Classmates" I mean it in a broad sense for two reasons. First, because the word alone does not adequately describe the bond which has existed among us since

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7 July 1959. Second, because we long ago determined that the widows, spouses, and other Loved Ones who have shared the risks, the hardships and the sacrifices of our lives; who have inspired, comforted, taken care of us, and otherwise supported us on all or part of our journey since we left the Academy, are also our Classmates

Isn't it remarkable that more than 350 of us are here today celebrating our 60th Reunion? We can all remember when we thought that graduates celebrating their 30th Reunion were really Old Guys! To put matters in perspective, it should be noted that when we arrived at the Academy in July 1959, Floatplane versions of the old N3N Bi-planes still flew from the Naval Air Facility across the Severn River from the Academy. Enlisted Stewards still marched to the Mess Hall each morning from an old APL Barracks Ship moored on the Severn Seawall where they were berthed. Their previous quarters, the U.S.S. *Reina Mercedes* (IX-25), which the U.S. had captured as a war prize during the Spanish-American War, had been towed away from the Academy less than two years earlier.

In Bancroft Hall, some of the metal desks which had been installed in the rooms when the first sections of the Hall were completed in 1905, were still here. On the white dress shirts that we wore with our Dress Blue uniforms, we still wore the starched detachable collars that first became fashionable in the year 1827. The only women seen in the Yard on week days were tourists. The rigid prevailing academic standards permitted little leeway to midshipmen whose grade fell below the sacred 2.5, as some of our Classmates found out. Thompson Stadium, which

had been constructed in 1914, and which had been both the home field of the football team and the site of the 1942 Army-Navy game, was still here. The Library was still located mainly on the Second Deck of Mahan Hall. There was no central air conditioning in Bancroft Hall. Midship-

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men marched to class and we marched to Sunday Services in the Chapel. At the same time in the summer of 1959, the members of another Academy Class were celebrating **their** 60th Reunion year – that is, the Class of 1899!

Over the six decades since our graduation, we have been blessed in many and various ways. One of those ways is the fact that today, in our 80s, some 63 percent of the members of the Class are still on the journey of life in this world. We may not be roaming the earth like hungry Dinosaurs, but after long lives, we are still contributing, still squeezing as much joy as is possible out of each day.

I hope that you will join me this morning in reflecting not only upon the loss and the pain associated with the absence of those classmates who are no longer with us, but also upon the blessings we have received over so many years from being members of such a very special Class of men.

At most of our early Reunions, we focused primarily upon the loss of our 13 Classmates who had been killed in the War in Vietnam, or on the 15 who had been killed in Line of Duty accidents. Years later, at our 45th Reunion in 2008, Rear Admiral Joe Strasser eloquently reminded us in detail of those who had died in that war and of the individual acts of heroism by Bill Fitzgerald, David Robinson, and Willis Wilson, all of whom had been awarded the Navy Cross Medal, and by Frank Wroblewski, who had received the comparable award of the Army

Distinguished Service Cross. Joe also noted the award of the Silver Star Medal to 15 of our Classmates and the fact that two Classmates, Mike Cronin and Denver Key, had spent long years in a Prisoner of War Camp.

As the years have passed, most Americans have forgotten the turbulent times of the war

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in Vietnam and America has changed in many ways, not all of them good. The Memorial Service speakers at several of our Reunions have commented on those changes because so many of them have become causes for national concern. After the peaceful and very successful end to the Cold War, to which we all contributed, there appeared to be strong reasons to hope that for many years our country could live in peace without the dangers, the tensions, and the costs which had accompanied the Cold War. After all, by 1992, America was the only remaining superpower and it had the strongest economy in the world.

Those illusions disappeared on 9/11 2001. The threat of terrorism has remained since that day, of course, and now, the Cold War against the Soviet Union has been replaced by new and arguably more dangerous threats from China, Russia, North Korea and Iran, all of which have -- or in the case of Iran -- can easily produce -- nuclear weapons. The tragedy of the attacks on Israel by Hamas from the Gaza Strip, and Hezbollah from Lebanon, may yet involve us directly in a major new regional conflict in the Middle East. Tragically, over the years since 9/11, and because of our country's complacency, the strength of our Armed forces -- which was purchased at such great cost -- has been permitted to seriously erode in comparison to that of our potential and most likely adversaries. Our ability to deter war has been greatly weakened.

At the same time, our domestic problems have multiplied and are becoming increasingly serious. Cultural conflicts fill the news every day. Values such as integrity, honor, sacrifice for the noble cause of the safety of the Nation, and service to others, seem to be disappearing, to be replaced by self-absorption and operating principles like "What's in it for me?" Our politics have become so bitterly partisan that our Government seems incapable of successfully addressing important matters which cry out for resolution. When reasoned and informed debate among poli-

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tical leaders is so badly needed, what political discourse there is too often accompanied by bombast, hyperbole, a refusal to compromise to get things done, and a failure to educate Americans about the possibilities and risks of various policy options. It is no surprise that polls have consistently shown that the American public has lost faith in some of our most important institutions.

It is obvious that we remaining members of the Class of 1963 cannot do much about these matters today. To a great extent, our professional swords were sheathed many years ago. Others must now carry the primary responsibility for the safety and welfare of the Nation. We can, however, do several things.

First, we can keep the flame of our memory of our departed Classmates burning by never forgetting to honor them for their importance to each of us over the past six decades. Second, it seems to me that even as we honor them, and whatever our current individual situations may be, we can continue to share a deep gratitude – which we are now collectively expressing -- for God's infinite grace in bestowing upon us the blessing of having so much of our lives so greatly

impacted and enriched, by the unique, remarkable men and Loved Ones who we honor today, and by those of the Class who remain.

Our Classmates have been important to us not because of the facts that they were, or are people who entered the Academy when we did and who were commissioned on the same day that we were. No, our Classmates, including all those who have left us and all who remain, have been our Brothers. We all chose to reject the fashionable cynicism and rebellion of the 1960s. We all chose to answer the call of duty, and if necessary, to go in Harm's Way, whether the call was to combat operations or to other dangerous or at least demanding service to the Nation. Many of

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our Brothers who we honor today did so, of course, at the cost of their lives.

We and they have also shared our private lives, including our celebrations and our personal victories. Similarly, we and they have stood shoulder to shoulder when one of us has suffered disappointment and tragedies. I can speak personally of the brotherly love and continuing support that I received from Classmates when I desperately needed it. During and after the greatest crisis of my life, so many of them held me up and prevented me from falling into an abyss.

As of the time that the Bulletin which you received when you entered the Chapel was printed, 329 of our Brothers had left us to meet their Eternal Rewards. As we heard in the reading of the verses from II Timothy, they have "fought the good fight;" they have "finished the race;" they have "kept the faith." Almost all of their names are printed in the Bulletin, but the names of a few Classmates who have died recently are not printed. As indicated in the Bulletin, however,

immediately prior to the singing of The Navy Hymn, those names, and the names of all others who have left us since our 55th Reunion, will be read aloud.

You will recall that the speaker at the Memorial Service for that Reunion was one of our Class heroes, Mike Cronin, who has since left us. Mike expressed his belief that our departed Classmates would counsel us to “live every day to the fullest, to drink deeply of the great and small pleasures of life,” and to face life’s struggles with joy founded on the knowledge that we are fortunate to have the opportunity to engage in the struggles of life.” As a former Prisoner of War in North Vietnam for 2,243 days, Mike certainly had a great understanding of the struggles of life and we can all subscribe to his belief.

I would like to suggest that there is another thing that we who remain here can do. If I

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may be permitted to use a Race Horse analogy, I will note that many Classmates are still riding at a full gallop – or at least attempting to – in the professional work to which they have devoted most of their lives. Others have completed their primary work, but like the riders in a horse race, they have not stopped short after crossing the finish line of that work. Rather, they are still riding, just at the slower pace, or gait, of a canter. They are still contributing in some fashion to the never-ending struggle to make America and our communities safer and better places.

You will also remember, as I implied a few moments ago, that when we commenced our Plebe Year, it had been less than 14 years since the end of World War II. Almost everything at the Academy was the same as it had been prior to the War. One thing was new. The faculty and staff at the Academy included several senior officers who were decorated combat veterans of the War. During our next four years on the Severn, much of our interest and focus was on the history and

lessons learned during the War. Names and locations like the U.S.S. *Arizona*, Nimitz, “31-Knot” Burke, Iwo Jima, Bull Halsey, Guadalcanal, Earnest J. King, Raymond Spruance, “Butch” O’Hare, Okinawa, “Pappy” Boyington, the U.S.S. *Barb*, and Leyte Gulf were fresh on our minds, as they still were with most Americans. We were inspired by the exploits of the War’s heroes. We learned details of the war by watching the 26 half hour segments of the documentary television series *Victory at Sea*. Through the words of the Midshipman Prayer which was in use at that time, we all learned to do the work of men, “and to accept [our] share of responsibilities with a strong heart and a cheerful mind.”

As a consequence of all of that, hard work, moral principles, sacrifice for a noble cause and service to others have not been strangers to us. We have had more than our share of heroes, leaders, accomplished professionals, public servants, and other men of exceptional ability and

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dedication. And, as it is noted in the Class History on our web site, members of the Class have achieved notable success in a wide range of careers. We can all be proud of the legacy that we will be leaving at the Academy, not the least part of which is the Class of 1963 Center for Academic Excellence. But, we still have much to offer. As a Class, we have experienced much. At our Memorial Service in 1998, a quarter of a century ago, I had the privilege of speaking to you. I expressed my own belief that “there is a grace in the universe which stands with men who face front” at a time of danger and large obstacles. I noted that if this is true, then the Class of 1963 has seen grace up close, because our members have certainly faced front and risked much -- and in many cases, everything -- by daring to match our spirit, our minds, and our courage against some of the large issues of life. We can still share the lessons and values we have learned

since July 7, 1959 – values that have guided our lives – with more recent generations, if only by example. And we can continue to contribute, even if only in small ways.

We can also hope and refuse to despair about the future. The words of Winston Churchill are relevant here. In his last great speech to the House of Commons in March 1955, the then 80-year-old statesman who had led Britain and much of the Free World through the horrors of the World War, expressed concern about the dangers of a nuclear holocaust during the new Cold War because of the recent development of the Hydrogen Bomb. Nevertheless, the old warrior observed that “The day may come when fair play, love for one’s fellow men, respect for justice and freedom, will enable tormented generations to march forth serene and triumphant from the hideous epoch in which we have to dwell. Meanwhile, never flinch, never weary, never despair.”

While remembering the wisdom and the optimism of this advice, we can be comforted by the hope that our departed Classmates and our Loved Ones remain near us. This kind of hope

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was expressed by the Reverend Dr. Peter Marshall, who served as the Chaplain of the United States Senate from 1947 until 1949 when he died suddenly at age 46. Some of you may be familiar with his name and life as the result of reading the book “A Man Called Peter,” or seeing the movie with the same name. This Scottish Minister, who was also the Senior Pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC, was the Guest Minister in this Chapel, and delivered the sermon from that pulpit, on the morning of December 7, 1941, the day of the Pearl Harbor attack. In one of his prayers with his own congregation honoring those who had died during the previous year, Dr. Marshall prayed as follows: “I pray, O Jesus, that Thou

wilt reveal to me, unseen presences. Help me to know how close my [Loved Ones are]. For if [they are] with Thee, and Thou art with me, I know that [they] cannot be far away.”

Finally, and most importantly, we can look to the future with the joy that comes from our faith that the separation from our Brothers and Loved Ones who have gone ahead, is temporary. Once again, we can profit from Churchill’s example. It is well known that he planned his own funeral. The Service in London took place in St. Paul’s Cathedral, another beautiful House of God. At its conclusion, a Bugler stationed high in the dome of the Cathedral played Taps, which of course, represented that Churchill’s physical life in this world was over. After a moment of silence, an un-expected but dramatic thing happened. The notes of Reveille were then played by the Bugler to represent Churchill’s hope and belief in the Resurrection and eternal life in the world to come.

At the conclusion of this Service, immediately after we sing the Navy Hymn and prior to the Benediction, we will follow the same procedure. We can take comfort in our own belief and Hope that when we are all gone, and we have all joined the Classmates who we honor today, our

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Class Reunions may not stop. They may continue. If they do, they will take place in a new and even more beautiful and more sacred setting. And thankfully, Memorial Services will no longer be necessary.

Stephen M. Duncan

