

ALINC

ADM Leighton W. "Snuffy Smith, USNA '62 speech to the class of 2012

Good Evening

Thanks Rip, for that introduction; you did overlook my most famous claim to fame, which is that I made the upper 95% of our class look good. You may have been one of the few exceptions to that!!

Academically , neither of us distinguished ourselves!!

But we did finish, and we each accepted the challenges of a career Naval Officer.

Let me tell you that it is an amazing journey from Midshipmen to Admiral.

One's viewpoint on this institution changes from desperate to get out, to eager to return.

In that regard, I'm sincerely happy and proud to be here to, on behalf of the class of 1962, extend our sincere congratulations to you all for having completed, or should I say survived, Plebe Summer.

As I was doing some prep work on my remarks I was reminded of a story about an admiral and ensign imprisoned for treason by a mob during the French Revolution. Facing death by guillotine, each was accorded a last request. The admiral replied with some force that his request would be to give a speech on the importance of honor and ethics in Naval Service. The ensign quickly intoned, I request to be killed before he speaks.

Assuming that none of you have a similar request, I shall proceed.

You've been on a rather fast track these past few months. The events you have experienced may not be defining moment in your life, but certainly milestones not soon to be forgotten.

- You were accepted by the U. S. Naval Academy

- You graduated from High School, or NAPS, or completed some other preparatory route
- And, importantly, you solemnly swore to, among other things, support and defend the constitution of the United States
- And, finally, you completed a rather tough summer

The important thing about tonight is recognition that you have passed the first of many tests to be administered here at the Academy. It was by no means the toughest test you will encounter, but it was a pretty fair start.

You have been through a process specifically designed to test your **resolve** and your **ability** to make personal sacrifices; to **accept** a bit of pain and overcome personal **frustrations** to achieve your goals.....but even more importantly, the **goals of your unit**.

Your recent experiences were but a prelude to what is to come. Much will be asked of you during the coming year and you will be expected to deliver. This is the case not for just Plebe year, but for all four years, and those that follow, because the years you spend here are designed to prepare you for the most noble and honorable calling one can imagine.

A warrior serving your country and leading the magnificent young men and women of the Naval Service.

As you proceed you will be exposed to the best and most talented leaders our Naval Service can provide. They will provide the direction and guidance; it is your responsibility to listen and to learn and to produce!

I can tell you from personal experience that it won't be easy for some of you. Of all the things I have done in the Navy, and that includes my 4 years here and the 34 plus I spent on active duty, the moment I recall with the greatest clarity was when I was summoned to the office of the Commandant.

As I stood outside his office I recalled that instructors and friends of mine had, before I had ever left Mobile, Alabama, assured me that I would never make it. That the Academy was too tough, too demanding and that I was simply not prepared for what I was about to take on. At that moment, it certainly appeared

that they had been correct because I was unsat in three subjects and had what amounted to a “D” in the other two.

As these thoughts of encouragement rambled through my mind, the aide came out of the then CAPT Bush Bringle’s office and motioned for me to enter. I did, the door closed, and I marched to a position in front of the biggest desk I had ever seen. Behind it sat the most impressive man I had ever seen. Steel blue eyes set in a rugged face that resembled a very old soccer ball; grey bristly hair, his blue service uniform adorned with rows of ribbons that went nearly to his shoulder topped by a set of gold Navy wings.

He pointed out that my grades were terrible and wanted to know what my problems were. I started to give the standard, “I’ll find out sir.” But he stopped me before I finished that statement and said, “no, I want to know what your problems are.” “Now, are the upper classmen giving you a hard time?” I thought a moment, knowing that I wasn’t getting it any tougher than any of my classmates, then said, “No sir.”

He asked if I was getting all the help I needed from my instructors and classmates; I responded with the same answer because I had gotten all that I had asked for. Then he said something I will never forget: **Midshipman Smith, he said, you can do this!**

Then he told me I had ten days; ten days to get sat grades in all subjects. He said to get whatever help I needed, to get to work (he had already figured out that I had not yet “gotten to work”) and get my grades up or we would be having a different sort of conversation in ten days, then he said that was all.

I left his office as quickly as I could and then I had a serious come to Jesus meeting with myself. First, I came to the realization that I was responsible for this mess I was in. Not my friends who laughed and said I’d never be able to conform; not my former teachers who had said I couldn’t cut the academics, and certainly not my instructors, or classmates. It was me, and I had but one choice unless I wanted to give up the best opportunity I could possibly imagine. That choice was to accept responsibility for who, and what, I was, and what I would become, and then get on with it!

So, I busted my butt and though I never wore stars for academic excellence, I did manage to get through and I will offer to you that I did stand higher in my class than John McCain did in his! (Please see "Note.")

OK, so why is this personal tale important? Because I came away from that meeting with a personal belief that, in a few words was,

“You can do this.”

And so can you.

Your having come through this summer, the fact that you are here tonight, is ample evidence that you, too, can do this.

One of our classmates, the very talented Vic Rieling, has designed for you an Honor Coin to commemorate this rite of passage celebrated tonight. This is the class of 1962’s way of saying congratulations for what you have accomplished.. and good luck in conquering the challenges that lie ahead.

It also is a way of saying that we are with you on this journey. Our hope is that you will keep the coin with you at all times; that when you are discouraged, you will look to this coin knowing that though what you are facing may not be easy, those before you are confident that you, too, can do this.

We also want you to understand that this Honor Coin is our way of sharing with you what became our standard, our ethos, our code and creed.

Honor,

When you get this coin, please note that on one side there is prominently displayed your class 2012. It is superimposed over what is best described as our class crest, slightly adjusted so that the numbers 2012 and 62 are conjoined below the eagle and above the single word that appears on our crest

Honor

This one word is symbolic of the very high value all of us place on personal honor in the life of a midshipman and eventually, as a Naval Officer. This has been the guiding principle of our lives for the 50 years since we were where you are at this moment.

As our predecessors did before us, we went from this place to battles in faraway lands. Many names of those who went forth are now inscribed on memorials, testaments to the sacrifices that are part and parcel of this life. They, and we, did what we did because we loved the excitement, the thrill of taking the educated risks, the dangers faced; the shock of a parachute opening, a night catapult shot, the mid watch or point man on patrol. But importantly, we did it because of love of country and a sense of duty. And those that followed, for the very same reasons, answered the call to Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan, and places you and I never knew existed.

For whatever reason young men and women from this wonderful country willingly go forward and the people of our nation sleep comfortably in their beds while those you will follow stand in the dark between them and dangers that would freeze their bones. One day you will join them. Prepare well for this awesome task.

Part of your education will be about moral courage and the commitment it takes to rise above your personal interests.

To put service before self.

Examples of such abound among graduates of this institution, not the least of which is my friend and classmate, Col John Ripley, awarded the Navy Cross for his heroic actions in destroying the bridge at Dong Ha.

John is a legitimate hero and would agree with me that this is not a hobby which you are embarked upon; it is not merely a profession. It is a calling. A calling that demands, among other things, that your every action reflect **honor** upon you, the Navy and the nation you have just recently sworn to defend.

In the coming years you will be challenged to seek the limits of your endurance, both mentally and physically. You will do things you never thought yourself capable of doing.

I can tell you with great confidence that there will be times when you will think you are in way over your head. You will doubt your ability to handle the situation

you are facing. You will think there is no way you can go on, no way you will succeed, or survive. It will be then that you will reach deep within yourself, and you will pull out whatever is necessary to complete the mission. You will do this because you will know that is exactly what is expected.

You will do it with Honor

I will not insult your intelligence by expounding on what Honor means. I will just say this:

**Honor is timeless
And, it is not situational**

That is as true for you midshipman beginning your Plebe year as it is for members of the class of 1962, your predecessors by 50 years, all of whom join John and me in wishing all of you well as you press ahead.

Note:

The story of my meeting with Capt Bush Bringle is presented as an essay and published in the book, "A Better Man," edited by Kelly Johnson, the daughter of my classmate, Phil Harrington. Col John Ripley's essay on Courage is also a part of this book as is an essay by our classmate and former POW, Cdr. Paul Galanti.