

## **2015 ARMY / NAVY SPEECH**

By Capt. Tom McClelland (U.S.N. ret.):

Thank you for that kind introduction. I'm honored to be here tonight in front of such an impressive group of high-achievers. But I must admit I'm not sure what I am doing here.

I'm reminded of something I once heard from John Warner when he was Secretary of the Navy many years ago. You remember John Warner? He was also once a Senator from Virginia, but he is probably more famous for being the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> husband of Elizabeth Taylor.

Before he began his speech, he told the audience that he felt just like he felt on his wedding night with Liz Taylor...he knew what he was supposed to do but he didn't know how he was going to make it interesting! I can understand that; I feel the same way!

I retired from Navy in 1998 after over 30 years active duty and started at Farragut the next day. I found my first day of teaching in a class (with someone like Jeff Ogden in the classroom) more challenging than a night, pitching deck, bad weather carrier landing. But I loved it right from the start. Working with the cadets, faculty and staff is the most rewarding job I have ever had. The cadets are great (mostly) and a great deal of fun (mostly).

One of my greatest joys has been assisting cadets to receive Service Academy Appointments and ROTC Scholarships. Since the Class of 1999, our cadets have earned 41 Academy Appointments and 101 ROTC Scholarships. 30% of those have gone to female cadets. Over the years, we have had many graduates with distinguished military careers (one is with us right now: RADM Mark Buzby, Class of '75).

But, I used to have a problem. When I first took the job as Director of Naval Science, I quickly found out (and this is a terrible thing to repeat) I found out that I really didn't like the Alumni. They were always coming up to me and saying "Back in my day we did this and such. Why don't you do that?" I quickly got tired of hearing anything that started with "Back in my day!"

But as I got older, and as I really got to know the alumni, I have developed a kinship with them...with you, I hope. Perhaps it's my age (I'd like to say my maturity), because I can relate to

them. I realize I am just like them in looking back and remembering the past. In fact, just like them, the older I get, the more vividly I remember events that probably never occurred at all!

So, if you will indulge me, I'd like to reflect on my past 17 years through the lives of the graduates who have had the most impact on me.

My first graduating class was 1999. Andrea Alvord was Valedictorian and had received a Navy ROTC Scholarship to Vanderbilt. Her family had moved here from Zimbabwe around 10 years earlier. She gave the best, most heart-warming graduation speech I have ever heard. She talked about the hardships her family faced and what it meant to now be living in the United States. Andrea later became the first of 14 Farragut grads who would become Naval Aviators during my 17 years. She flew SH-60 Seahawk helicopters off Navy Frigates and Destroyers. In fact, she was the first pilot to land onboard a new Guided Missile Destroyer, the USS Farragut! I was so proud of her when she landed a helicopter on our football field for a demonstration.

Her sister Nicola (Nicky) graduated in 2001 and also went to Vanderbilt on a Navy Scholarship. Nicky is now an Aerospace Physiologist in Norfolk and married to an F-18 pilot. From both of these sisters and their family, I learned the value of perseverance in the face of hardship and to never take my citizenship for granted.

Next is Ashley Patterson – 2002. Ashley was the Battalion Commander, but I will never forget when she was selected as the winner of the Miss Junior Sun Goddess Scholarship Program. I had the honor of being her escort for the pageant. I got all dressed up in my fancy Mess Dress uniform with my miniature wings and medals and I thought I looked pretty snazzy on the stage with Ashley. My Naval Aviator ego got the best of me when I thought that Ashley won all because I was her escort. She really won because she was the most talented, intelligent and beautiful contestant. Ashley is now Ashley Patterson Beatty and is on our Board of Directors. From Ashley I learned that I needed a little more humility and that beauty and brains can go together.

From the Class of 2005, I remember two cadets that couldn't be more different: Laura Lou Ladd and Chas Ruck. Laura was the Battalion Commander and one of the best I ever saw...top of the class, extremely organized, excellent at time management, funny, dedicated, an absolute 10

in everything she did. Laura was so outstanding that she received appointments to West Point, Naval Academy, Coast Guard Academy and Merchant Marine Academy plus receiving the Army and Navy ROTC Scholarship. Laura could have gone to any school she wanted. But I guess she wanted to follow in Admiral Buzby's footsteps because she chose Merchant Marine Academy. Then she fooled everyone by selecting the Coast Guard for military service. She is now married as Laura Lou Brooks and is stationed in Alaska after just earning a Master's from William and Mary.

Laura Lou is a tiny thing. Barely 5'2", but from her I learned what Shakespeare wrote about in *Midsummer Night's Dream*: "Though she be but little, she is fierce." And Laura was fierce: fiercely loyal to her friends and to Farragut. From Laura Ladd I learned the importance of self-discipline, attention to detail and loyalty.

Chas Ruck is a horse of a different color. At Farragut, Chas had no interest in anything military and even less interest in getting a haircut or shining shoes. When he graduated, he had only one goal...get a college degree in Business and earn big bucks. Then in 2007, I got a strange call from him. He asked if I could help him get into the Marine Corps! After I quit laughing, he said he was not joking and he was thinking about some things I had said in class. That itself surprised me because Chas often wasn't in class and when he was it didn't seem like he paid attention.

I recommended he check into the Marine Platoon Leaders Class Officer Commissioning Program. He did...and much to my surprise, he was accepted. After graduation from college, he went to Marine OCS at Quantico, VA. I was honored to commission him as a Second Lieutenant in the Marine Corps with his parents present and in front of a gathering at AMCSUS with three retired Marine Generals in the audience. Chas is now also a Naval Aviator flying CH-53 heavy lift helicopters in San Diego. From Chas, I learned to never judge a horse by its color. You never know what a Farragut grad will become! Just look at yourselves!

2006 saw the graduation of a couple of cadets I will also never forget...Michele Gisoni and Daniel Grant. When I say a couple, I do mean couple. Michele and Daniel started dating their junior year. They both wanted to go to the Naval Academy but only Michele received an appointment. Daniel got a Navy Scholarship to Cornell some 330 miles away from Annapolis.

Somehow, they continued their long distance relationship and got married soon after Michele graduated. Daniel chose to become a Marine and Michele chose Navy. They are now both stationed together surfing in Hawaii. Lesson learned? I guess, somehow love will find a way, and also that the Navy and Marines really can work together.

2007: Margot Gates-George, another Naval Academy graduate who is now flying SH-60 helicopters in Japan. When Margot was selected to go into Naval Aviation, she was on an exchange tour at the German Naval Academy. I will always remember her international phone call telling me she was going to Pensacola after graduation. If you see pictures of Margot on Facebook you will see an advertisement for America with her red hair, white complexion and blue eyes. She is a real sight walking among the Japanese. The lesson I learned from Margot was keep in touch, speak to someone on the phone, even if you have to call all the way from Germany.

Finally 2008 – Blake Lusty. Blake was XO of the Battalion and an outstanding student. While at the Naval Academy, he developed cancer and spent a good part of his 2nd year at Bethesda. He was able to keep up his studies and return to Annapolis with his cancer in remission. His senior year, he was selected as one of the Regimental Commanders and graduated with his original class.

Blake fought hard to stay in the Navy, and was able to pass his physical, even running a marathon. However, he couldn't become a line officer so he chose Naval Intelligence. Just this August, Blake received a letter from the Director of Naval Personnel that he could now become a Surface Warfare Officer. He was thrilled to hear that. But, that same week, his cancer came back and this time it had spread. He began a Chemo-Therapy regimen at Walter Reed that was very debilitating. But through it all, his motto (that we will see tomorrow during the Army/Navy Game) kept him going: "Don't Give Up the Ship!"

Last month he underwent surgery at Sloan Kettering Institute in New York. Last week, I asked his girlfriend Lauren for an update on Blake. Here's what she texted:

"Hello sir! Blake completed his (hopefully) final round of chemo this past Friday and is home recovering. He'll have follow up appointments over the next few weeks to do scans and blood

work and determine what the next steps are, if any. He is in great spirits and is happy to be on the other side of Chemo J.”

I replied: “Thanks. Dona and I continue to pray for him (and you).”

Lauren ended with: “Thank you. The prayers are definitely working! Blake’s surgery in NYC in October was nothing short of miraculous!”

So the lesson learned here is: “Prayers are definitely working!” Please keep or add Blake to your prayer list and also pray for Lauren and Blake’s mother, Lily.

There are so many fond memories I have of the over 1000 cadets who have graduated in the last 17 years. I could talk all night about them and why I love the Farragut Family so much. It’s the faculty, the staff, but, most of all the cadets, that give us such joy.

I want you to know that Admiral Farragut Academy is alive and well and still producing the finest graduates and principled leaders that will be taking us through the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In spite of all the world’s problems, there is hope for the future as long as we continue to support Admiral Farragut Academy with our time, our talent and our treasures.

I am no longer the Admiral Farragut Academy Director of Naval Science. I have been kicked upstairs and am now the Development Officer. As such, I want you to be prepared for some announcements regarding significant projects coming that will need your support. We have a vision of a campus of 500 students with 200 boarding cadets. We cannot make that happen without additional facilities and improvements. So please stand by for details later.

That reminds me of an email I received from one of our graduates who is now in training to get qualified in the F-18E Super Hornet. He was describing the thrill of his first catapult shot in the airplane and it took me back to my days of flying off carriers. It also made me think about where Farragut is right now.

We are like a jet taxiing up to the catapult. Our launch bar is down and in the slot. The holdback fitting is attached. You are the Catapult Officer and you have signaled us to release the brakes, run the engine up to full power and engage afterburner.

The catapult is in tension, ready to go. We do one last check of the gauges, turn our head to you and salute. You return our salute and we put our head against the headrest and standby for the launch.

But the Cat won't fire until you make the final step and a commitment of touching the deck. When you do, we will roar down the Cat in less than 3 seconds and head off on our mission. Our mission is to continue to produce the finest young men and women who will be taking us through the rest of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We can't do it until you make a commitment, touch the deck and launch the aircraft.

I thank you for the commitments you have already made and thank you in advance for the commitments you will make in the future.

May you have a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, and may God bless you and may God bless Admiral Farragut Academy.