USNA ’80 Reunion Memorial Service Comments

My Dear Classmates,

My greetings to each one of you! Thank you for joining us in this time of remembrance and gratitude! With each passing year our numbers dwindle. How fitting that we should gather at the beginning of each reunion to remember, honor, and celebrate our brothers and sisters in arms who have preceded us as they “slipped the surly bonds of earth... and touched the face of God” as the famous WWII-era poem states. They are friends, brothers, sisters, parents, grandparents (could we really be that old?), classmates, shipmates, mentors, heroes, and perhaps other descriptors. I deliberately use the word “are” because they are still with us in our memories and in their contributions to our lives and others. It is indeed a healthy discipline to take a few moments to listen to the names of our fallen classmates, reflect on our memories of them, and ponder the day in the not-too-distant future when we too will be numbered among the departed.

Inescapably, Eternity faces each of us, and increasingly so as undoubtedly health concerns and funerals become more prominent parts of our experience. We have buried parents and other relatives, friends, spouses. Some of us have felt isolated. Others have felt lost. Still others have stood on the edge of losing hope. We can stand with our classmates and make a difference. We can call or visit or email or write a physical card with a thoughtful note. We can pray. We can be attentive to what we hear or read of one who is hurting in one way or another.

Life circumstances can knock us off-balance. Often, we shrug them off, ignoring rather than reflecting.

I recall very clearly walking through the passageway in USS John F Kennedy when the OOD came onto the 1MC abruptly calling an end to the Fleet Exercise in which our battle group was participating off the coast of Spain. It was 23 Oct 83, in the immediate aftermath of the murderous terrorist bombing in Beirut which took the lives of our classmate Don Woollett and 240 other Marines and sailors. After that announcement, I along with all 5500 members of ship’s company and the airwing were confused as to what had just happened as we felt the ships engines increase their turns and the ship gently but very noticeably began to heel over as we made a wide course change. Later, after the CO came announced on the 1MC that we were heading into combat operations in the East Med, I could sense a tension in the air. I could see it on every face. Questions of whether we would come under fire, and if we would see our loved ones again ran through our heads. That was an opportunity for reflection…

At a different time, I remember walking through the hangar deck by Elevator 1 on JFK. It was a typical day at sea, maintenance crews working on F-14s and A-6s on a warm summer evening. I had finished dinner and was peacefully walking through the hangar bay, on my way to my stateroom to catch a few hours of sleep before my midwatch. I hit the rack, as usual falling asleep immediately. Instead of being awakened by the messenger, I was jolted awake by the call of “man overboard” – and it was not a drill. I yanked on my clothes and got to CIC to muster. There I found out that a rogue wave swept overboard the maintenance team that was working on El 1, taking the life of the tractor driver. I was shaken that just a couple short hours before, I was walking only a handful of feet away from that very crew. Another time for reflection…

On September 11, 2001, providentially I had not planned to drive into my office in Arlington from MD. I watched the TV newsfeed of the North Tower burning, then in shock saw the 2nd plane fly into the South Tower. I called my assistant to ensure she was watching the TV and did not drive to the office in Arlington from her apartment in Pentagon City. Shortly afterward, we learned of the Flight 77 crashing into the Pentagon. Later that day reports of heroic actions of the passengers against the hijackers of Flight 93. Passenger Todd Beamer’s last known words were “Let’s roll,” as he helped lead a counterattack against the terrorists who hijacked United Flight 93 – a counterattack which disrupted their awful mission. This was certainly a time of reflection for many of us as we wondered what our world had become. I remember wondering, as I read about Beamer and the others who stormed the cockpit of Flight 93, what I would have done. I was shaken even as I pondered. What fortitude and courage and hope they had – and helped each other to have!

What I desire for myself and for each of you, my classmates, is a life filled with hope, despite the difficulties we all face, or will inevitably face. We came to Annapolis and these halls 45 years ago as mostly naïve, unseasoned young people trying to find ourselves and chart a path for our futures. We experienced testing in the form of plebe summer and challenges in academics, character, leadership, and decision-making. We achieved successes we did not fully anticipate, and we experienced setbacks that helped fashion us into who we are today. We have precious memories that still bring smiles to our faces over 40 years later. But, as a wise man once said, “Man cannot live without hope” (Hal Lindsey).

Where do we find hope? Different people will express varied ideas. Research shows (Psychology Today, “The Will and Ways of Hope” by S.B. Kaufman) that many people tend to focus on “mastery goals.” Eventually they reach the limit of their abilities and ingenuity. At that point they are vulnerable to losing hope. Most of us experience finding that we have run out of resources and/or energy to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. Regarding hope, I can only share definitively my own experience: I have a God in Heaven, who loves me dearly and came to earth to die in my place, and I have a book of love letters from Him we know as the Bible – these experiential truths have sustained me through many sorrows and pains and losses and failures. I have had the privilege to participate in the journeys of several of our classmates and friends through these inevitable challenges in which we need a brother or sister to be an agent of life-giving hope. Likely many of you have done similarly. Let’s keep at it! And if any of you could use a listening ear and some words of hope amid the situations you face, please do not hesitate to grab me this weekend, or get my contact info from Joe Grace. I would count it an honor to walk with you in part of your journey.

In 2021, my wife and I lost 3 friends to different varieties of cancer. Another, among my closest of friends, received a sobering diagnosis and is in treatment. He sits in this chapel with us today. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, “Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened… for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” May we all receive that comfort and rest from the God who loves us all deeply.