

Class of '63 Memorial Service Reflections

West Point Fiftieth Reunion

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Bible Text: Psalm 144:1; Isaiah 2:4

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It's a great privilege for me to be with you today in this capacity. First of all two Scriptures, the first from Isaiah 2 and then from Revelation 21.

Hear God's Word,

Now it will come about that
In the last days
The mountain of the house of the LORD
Will be established as the chief of the mountains,
And will be raised above the hills;
And all the nations will stream to it.
And many peoples will come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
To the house of the God of Jacob;
That He may teach us concerning His ways
And that we may walk in His paths."
For the law will go forth from Zion
And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
And He will judge between the nations,
And will render decisions for many peoples;
And they will hammer their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not lift up sword against nation,
And never again will they learn war (Isa. 2:2-4).

And then from the final great vision of the book of Revelation,

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold that tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death and there will no

longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.” And He who sits on the throne said, “Behold I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:2-5).

Would you bow in prayer with me?

Father, thank you for your Word. Grant us grace as we reflect for a moment and consider not only the loss of dear friends and loved ones and classmates but also consider the good life to come. We pray your blessing upon us. In your good name, the good name of your Son, [Jesus Christ]our Lord. Amen.

Old Soldiers Never Die

There is an old cookhouse, far, far away
Where every soldier goes, three times a day
Ham and eggs we'll never see,
'Cause we're just lousy infantry
That's why we're gradually, fading away

Old soldiers never die, never die, never die
Old soldiers never die, they just fade away

There is an old bunkhouse, far, far away
Where we go wearily at the close of day
Just as we lay down in line,
The Sergeant yells out, 'Rise & Shine'
That's why we're slowly dying, fading away

Old soldiers never die, never die, never die
Old soldiers never die, they just fade away

Privates they love their beer, most every day
Corporals they love their stripes, that's what they say
Sergeants they love their drill,
Guess those bullheads always will
That's why we drill and drill, until we fade away

Old soldiers never die, never die, never die
Old soldiers never die, they just fade away

Of course, we remember General Douglas MacArthur taking up the chorus of that ballad as he spoke to a Joint Session of Congress and was, as he said, “Fading away.” It was April 19, 1951 and these are the closing words of his remarks. General MacArthur said,

I am closing my 52 years of military service. When I joined the army, even before the turn of the century, it was the fulfillment of all my boyish hopes and dreams.

The world has turned over many times since I took the oath on the plain at West Point, and the hopes and dreams have long since vanished, but I still remember the refrain of one of the most popular barrack ballads of that day which proclaimed most proudly that “old soldiers never die, they just fade away.”

And like the old soldier of that ballad, I now close my military career and just fade away, an old soldier who tried to do his duty as God gave him the light to see that duty.

General MacArthur never lacked in eloquence and we, in our own class, sat spellbound as we listened to him accept the Sylvanus Thayer Award. And he was a little bit more contemplative at that time, at 82 years of age, in 1962, on the 12th of May [General MacArthur died two years later at the age of 84]. Listen to how he ended his comments on that occasion,

In my dreams I hear again the crash of guns, the rattle of musketry, the strange mournful mutter of the battlefield. But in my memory I always come back to West Point. Always there echoes and re-echoes: Duty, Honor, Country.

None of us could quite say it like he said it then [on that occasion]. Then MacArthur continued,

Today marks my final roll call with you. But I want you to know that when I cross the river, my last conscious thoughts will be of The Corps, and The Corps, and The Corps.”

And so it is with each one of us. [Old soldiers do die, and young ones too.]

Dear friends, classmates, spouses, loved ones, and children, we honor those who have gone before us and crossed that river.

In the 1960s, 23 of our classmates were called home, 19 of them in the Republic of Vietnam.

In the 1970s, three of our classmates were called from this life, one of them in the Republic of Vietnam.

In the 1980s, six of our members left us.

In the 1990s, it was 16.

In the decade which began in the year 2000, 32 of our classmates left our company.

And in this current decade, the number has been 18.

Ninety-eight of the 504.

And while we were together at West Point, we loved to learn war. That was our duty. That was our job. And I'm reminded of the words of Psalm 144 and the first verse, that were just read. "Blessed be the LORD, my rock, Who trains my hands for war, *And* my fingers for battle." Ultimately, is it not the case that God Himself is the one who, in the end, brought us to this place [West Point] and trained our hands for war. And when we had opportunity, we used that training. And now, we need to remember that it is the great God of all who is supervising each of our lives and at the appropriate time, removes us from this life.

I can't help but think of General Eisenhower in this respect when he gave his message to the Allied troops at the Normandy Invasion. Listen to how he finished his comments, "And let us all beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble endeavor." Here is cognizance of the Divine Being. Some of us would call it Foxhole Religion. No, friends, it's much more than that. We live under His [God's] great hand.

On that same day, President Roosevelt led the United States of America in prayer, calling upon the Almighty to bless the great endeavor of that Normandy Invasion. Listen to parts of his prayer,

Almighty God: Our sons, pride of our Nation, this day have set upon a mighty endeavor, a struggle to preserve our Republic, our religion, and our civilization, and to set free a suffering humanity ... Lead them straight and true; give strength to their arms, stoutness to their hearts, steadfastness in their faith ... They will be sore tried, by night and by day, without rest-until the victory is won. The darkness will be rent by noise and flame. Men's souls will be shaken with the violences of war ... Some will never return. Embrace these, Father, and receive them, Thy heroic servants, into Thy kingdom ...

And, of course, you remember Patton, don't you? Patton who could blister paint at 30 paces and make a drill sergeant blush with his language. And yet, in France when the weather was immoderate, as he said, he called upon the Chief Chaplain of the Third Army. The Chaplain wrote a prayer for Patton. And Patton had 250,000 copies of that prayer printed and distributed to the troops of the Third Army with the exhortation to the unit Chaplains that they encourage their troops to pray that the immoderate weather would cease and that the battle could go forward. It's a short prayer. Listen to it,

Almighty God, most merciful Father, we humbly beseech Thee of Thy great goodness to restrain these immoderate rains which we have had to contend. Grant us fair weather for battle. Graciously hearken to us as soldiers who call upon Thee, that armed with Thy power, we may advance from victory to victory and crush the oppression and wickedness of our enemy and establish Thy justice among men and nations.

And so, we should pray today that as the Scriptures tell us, the time will come when, “Nation will not lift up sword against nation, And never again will they learn war.” Lord [Jesus], come quickly that this would be the case that we would no longer need to learn war.

But in the interim, here we are between two positions. We are those who have learned war. Some of us still have in our libraries those volumes of the *West Point Atlas of American Wars*. We pull them out occasionally to study. That’s one position. The other position is before us, ahead of us. It is the time when we will no longer learn war. And as I say, O God, O Lord [Jesus], Come quickly.

This brings us to the time in our service when we rehearse the names of our classmates who have gone before us. And so, I encourage you to think about this juxtaposition: That in this life the great God of heaven trains our hands for war and our fingers for battle; and that the time will come when we will learn war no more.

And as each name is read and you reflect on our classmates, remember this juxtaposition. Remember the good promise of God that we will come to the time of not having to learn war any more. Amen.