

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Remarks at the Maine Maritime Academy Commissioning

Speaker:
General Joseph F. Dunford, Jr.,
Chairman,
Joint Chiefs of Staff

Location: Maine Maritime Academy, Castine, Maine

Date: Saturday, May 7, 2016

(Applause.)

GENERAL JOSEPH F. DUNFORD JR.: Well, for those about to be commissioned – is this on? (Laughter.) President Brennan, thanks again for the opportunity to be here today. (Inaudible) – and Admiral Shannon, commander Military Sealift Command – (inaudible). And I know many have had the chance to know her across the years. You'll be happy to know that I'm not going to give two speeches today – (laughter) – subjecting you to one.

Just a couple of comments. First, it is an honor to be here today at Maine Maritime. When I was a Marine instructor down at the College of the Holy Cross, there was no ROTC program here in Maine Maritime. So the midshipmen used to come down to Holy Cross, and I would help to prepare them to go down to Quantico in the summertime. So I've got a long connection here to Maine Maritime. So it's actually great to see the robust unit that we have here today, and the fact that the school produces so many men and women like the ones that are here beside us.

I know at this point in the day what most people want to do is spend time with their family, because as I've been looking out at the crowd; you all look as stiff as the folks – (laughter) – and saying, oh my God, you know, we've been at this now for about six or seven hours. It's time to go. It's time to go. And we should do that.

The first thing I want to do, though, is I want to talk to the commissionees here for a minute. Most everybody today has actually said congratulations to you either for receiving your diploma from Maine Maritime or for being about to receive your commissions. What I want to do, though, is actually say thanks instead of congratulations. And I want to say thanks because what you are doing is actually doing exactly what I spoke about in my remarks earlier today: You've chosen to become part of something bigger than yourself. You've chosen an occupation that by definition is about sacrifice. It's about what you give not what you take.

And you're under no illusion. These young men and women are joining the military at a time when there's absolutely no illusion about what it is that they're getting – that they're about to get into. We've been at war for over 15 years, and we're going to ask a lot of these men and women. And they knew that when they signed up to be in ROTC. So, honestly, thanks.

But I think this group would be the first to tell you that they didn't get here alone. And over the years, I'm sure – particularly four years ago, there was late-night phone calls saying, geez, I'm not sure I'm going to pass this course, I'm not sure I'm going to make it, I don't like it here, I'm homesick. And maybe that went on in the second year and the third year, too; I don't know. But the folks that are out here actually have a lot to do with the fact that you're up here.

And I think you all know that. I think you know that their love and support is the reason you've been able to get here. And what I'm going to ask you to do is you all stand up and let's let – (inaudible). (Laughter, cheers, applause.) Captain, they're a little slow. (Laughter.) That was actually very simple. (Laughter.) This is his first year, so – (laughter) – it will get better. I know it'll get better. I know it. (Laughter.)

Look, these young men and women are also coming into the service at a time of extraordinary changes, and I alluded to that in my remarks earlier today. You know, when I was a lieutenant, much of the equipment, much of the tactics, techniques, procedures – everything had been probably much the same as it had been 25 or 30 years before I came into the service. The pace of change was over the course of decades. And they're entering the service now at a time when the pace of change is in months – is in months.

And they're all familiar, having studied here, with Moore's Law, you know, in terms of information technology – things change every two years. And they're going to be confronted by things like cyberspace, space, counter-space, ballistic missiles, those kinds of things. The technology that we have today is incomparable to what I experienced as a – as a young lieutenant, or in your case – (inaudible). But the one thing – the only message I really want to deliver to you, consistent with the remarks I made earlier today, is that, you know, it'll be easy for you – as you go out and fly planes, and go out on ships, and be submarining, and whatever else you end up doing in the Navy or the Marine Corps, it will be easy for you to get swept up in the responsibilities – (inaudible) – the technology that you have to master, all of the things that you have to do to be competent as a naval officer. And again, given the pace of change, it's hard for you – (inaudible).

But I just want to offer to you, as much as things have changed in the Navy and Marine Corps in the last decades, there's one thing that hasn't changed. And at the end of the day, the only thing I want you to remember today is that our business is first and foremost about people. You know, and up to this point it's been about your physical-fitness score, it's been about your grade-point average, it's been about your class standing. It's been about you. It's been about you and your accomplishments. And the most significant thing about today is that, from this point forward, it's no longer about you. It's about the men and women that you'll be fortunate enough to lead.

The one thing I'd ask you to do is never walk past a sailor – never walk past a sailor without looking him or her in the eye and creating – (inaudible) and ask them how they're doing. Never be a leader that's so busy mastering the technology in your occupational field or being consumed by the challenges that you personally have to deal with on a day-to-day basis, never too busy to be personally and decisively engaged with the sailors that are around you.

I will tell you, it's actually not that hard to be a successful leader. It's just actually taking the time at least to be engaged with a particular – (inaudible). When I came in as a lieutenant – can you all hear me in the back? I apologize for turning my back to you, but I just have a message for a minute. When I was – when I was a new lieutenant, my battalion commander – first battalion commander I had said, I'm going to tell you the tools for success. And I said, all right. So imagine all – (inaudible) – how to be successful as a Marine leader. And he said the first rule is to surround yourself with good people. And he paused for effect, and he said, I forget the other two. (Laughter.)

Well, you won't actually always have the opportunity to pick the people that are around you. But the point is, of course, that your success, the success of the organization, is going to be

about those sailors – (inaudible) – that are around you. And the most incredible thing about the responsibility that you are about to undertake, the most incredible thing about becoming an ensign or becoming a lieutenant, is to actually have the opportunity to be responsible for them, to look out for them, to inspire them, to actually focus them, to mentor them, to counsel them, and to actually make them want to be partners. If you can touch people that way, and I think that you can – (inaudible) – you just let people – (inaudible).

You know, another thing I'd tell you is, I remember from personal experience, the first time I drove through the main gate as a second lieutenant at Camp Pendleton, California – (inaudible). So I was driving through the gate knowing that in just a few hours I would have 40 Marines, 80 eyeballs, right on me. As I drove through the gate at Camp Pendleton, it seemed like everything I ever knew and everything I was taught went immediately outside of my mind. And I was sort of, gosh, I don't know if I know what I need to know to lead these Marines. I don't know if I remember all the things that I learned at school, for work at Quantico. I'm not sure if I can do this.

And then, you know, as soon as I stood in front of that first platoon, all the training, all the preparation, all the coaching, all the mentoring, it all came back to me, and I knew it was going to be OK. You're going to have those moments. You're going to have those moments. The first time you get onboard a ship, the first time you get onboard a sub, when you report down to flight school, wherever you happen to go, you're going to have those moments of self-doubt. And you're going to wonder, gosh, am I going to be able to pass this challenge?

And as I mentioned to you today, it's natural that you would have that feeling today. It's absolutely natural that you would have that feeling today. But I, as I look at you, I know that actually you don't have to worry about it. I know you don't have to worry because you spent four years here preparing. The Navy and the Marine Corps are going to take you to the next step. By the time you report to your first command, you'll absolutely be able to do exactly what must be done. So I'll tell you, as you accept this responsibility, I want to just say thanks to you, as I once again say thanks to those who sit out here. Look at the faces. Look at them. Look how – look how proud they look. Look at the smiles. As I look at those faces, I got to tell you, it's a privilege for me to be a part of this. It's an honor for me to be a part of this.

And you know what's happening to me today, as I look at you and I look at really the younger students at Maine Maritime, as I look at – as I look at the quality of individuals who come out here today and I look at a future of the Merchant Marine as a result of the students who were up here today, when I look at the future of my Navy and the Marine Corps, I feel pretty good. I feel pretty good. Because, as I'm looking at you, I know that you're absolutely ready for the challenges ahead. I know you're ready to take care of those Marines and sailors, your most sacred responsibility. I know you're ready for that contribution.

And more importantly, what you should know is that I cannot think of anything that will be more rewarding than what you will do in the next five, the next eight, the next 15, or the next 20 years, whatever the case may be, however many years you serve. Some of you sitting here thinking you'll going to stay in 20 years, some stay in 50. Some are thinking I can't wait to get out – (inaudible). I came in for two. (Laughter.) And I didn't accept financial aid my senior year

because I didn't want to incur an extra six-month obligation. (Laughter.) That was a big mistake. (Laughter.) You're smarter than I am. (Laughter.)

But in all seriousness, I am really, really proud of the great – (inaudible) – despite the challenges that are out here today – and there are no shortages of challenges that are out here today. I could share my inbox with you. (Laughter.) You know, I could talk about violent extremism. I could talk about Iran right now. I could talk about aggressive Russian behavior in Europe. I could talk about what China is doing in the South China Sea. I could talk about North Korea doing nuclear testing and testing ballistic missiles that could reach the continental United States, and on and on. There's no shortage of challenges. And, frankly, when you focus on those sometimes, you can be despondent because of those challenges.

And the only reason why I have the confidence that I do right now, the only reason why I feel pretty good about where we're headed as a nation, despite all those challenges, the things you might see in the newspaper, the only reason is because there's men and women like you that are willing to do – (inaudible). God bless you – (inaudible). (Applause.)

(END)