

## Memorial Service Reflections

October 23, 2009

USNA Chapel

Good afternoon, family, friends, and classmates. It is great to be back here at the Naval Academy, celebrating with you yet another milestone. Being the guy who writes all about you in Shipmate, I feel I've come to know you better today than at any time during our days together around the Yard. And in that time, I've marveled how well we've been able to stay connected since graduation. Initially, we communicated via snail mail and with a mix of email. When we made our debut on the internet, our website was a quite simple, with each class list update being received via email and having to be typed in by hand. Now, this process is automated...and even this technology is quickly becoming outdated. With Facebook, Linked-In, texting, and Twitter, the way in which we stay in touch is quickly making Shipmate's news ancient history by the time it reaches our mailboxes.

As for my role, it has been a privilege to share your stories and interesting to watch it all evolve. First there was news of deployments, moves, and of course, weddings. Not surprisingly, stories and pictures of kiddos came next...some of which I was on the scene to welcome. There have been job promotions, deployments, big moves, business ventures, book releases, an ordination, political campaigns, graduations, and even a stint on a game show.

While most of the news has been good, our presence here is a somber reminder of the tragic: accidents, illnesses, loss of family members, and the passing of 16 classmates. And like all of you, my heart has grieved each time. Through it all, I've made a couple of observations that I would like to share with you.

For one thing, something special happened during our "Four years together by the bay." It is hard to describe, but it is felt by all in the class, grows to include close family and friends, and is palpable to those around us. Take this story for example: In my role as a military physician, I've often said that I get to take care of the best patients in the world. In some tangible way I get to show my gratitude to the men, women, and families who have sacrificed much in defense of our country. Mr. Lambert is one such gentleman. I met him for the first time just this past Wednesday. Before heading out of town to travel here, I decided to make a house call. At 101 years old, he has lived the history we can only read about. His memory is still sharp and he didn't mind sharing his experiences of 4 years in the Pacific on the USS Yorktown, where he served alongside the future ADM J.J. Clark, and participated in the Battle of the Phillipine Seas and the liberation of the Marianas. Well, when I mentioned that I was heading out of town for my Academy reunion, his eyes lit up and big smile crossed his face. He was NOT an Academy grad...but he voiced he always wanted to be. Having been born in England, he couldn't get in. Instead, he went to Columbia and eventually rose to the admiral ranks. Yet, he always saw something unique and enviable about us boat school grads, and counted a number of alums as his closest friends. I found it remarkable that this accomplished gentleman wanted what we have.

I believe this unique relationship we've forged has served as a life buoy during tragedy. Listen to this description that was penned in the aftermath of the loss of a classmate:

"After the reception we continued visiting...until the early hours of the morning. By the time we fumbled to the airport early Sunday morning classmates had reconnected, old friendship had been revived and new ones

had been formed. We left as a close knit group that was still struggling to say goodbye, but that was beginning to heal.”

Another reflection I have is...well, really starts with a confession: I don't always understand God's timing. And to be truly honest in my heart of hearts, I can't always say I agree. Yet, in this doubt, I have faith...a faith that you echo in all the communications I receive when tragedy strikes. This is faith that there is something bigger than any one of us. We are privileged to live, love, give, and leave something behind that is of lasting value, and whose measure is yet to be revealed.

I have found the words you write in your messages to me for the class to be therapeutic, and penned in such a way I could never do. Thus, I will close with the words received in an email that were typed shortly before his death, and which were published in Shipmate. Jay Woodruff wrote the following:

“...my thoughts and prayer for health and happiness are with everyone, as always. Please know that my USNA classmates have touched my life for the better, and I wouldn't trade a bit of my experiences with them for anything. I have been blessed just to be present to your gifts and talents.”

'94, I am proud to count myself among your numbers. You excel in triumphs and tragedies. Continue to hold each other close, if not your arms, then in your prayers and in your hearts.

Take care and God bless.