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The Cadet and the Character

Lowell E. Davis
Speeches which are appropriate for occasions such as this, should have three basic characteristics: they should be brief; they should get quickly to the point intended; and they should be spiritual or inspirational. I will guarantee an adherence to the first two elements; that is, brevity and getting to the point, and you can be the judge as to whether we achieved the third element.

Earlier this week, on Monday, I sat in on the 1989 ROTC Awards Ceremony on the USF St. Petersburg Campus. I saw many of you who were recognized and honored for a variety of achievements including "superior performance", qualities of leadership and outstanding scholastic record, "excellence in military science", "diligence in the discharge of duty", "initiative and leadership ability", and so on. I saw cadets such as Kelly, Avalon, Valley, Luker, Gibson, Bennett,
Ferguson, Johnson and several others (whose names I cannot recall now) stand at attention, proud to be ROTC cadets and receiving their honors for accomplishments.

But I saw something more as the young men and women stood next to each other on the platform, apparently oblivious of the persons standing next to them. Their faces revealed a seriousness of purpose and a seeming glance of their individual horizons, maybe a query as to how to get there and what do you do when you do get there.

As I sat with Colonel Abney, we, and many of you, heard Major Davidson’s remark -- "Your goal is the attainment of a commission". I think this is true in the sense of immediate or short-term goals. I would like to talk for a moment, however, about the more distant goals, some of which you may have dreamed about on your individual horizons. In line with that, I want to mention some of the specific characteristics contained in the criteria used for making the awards last Monday; characteristics such as "qualities of leadership", 2-Cadet & Character
"superior", "outstanding", "diligence", "proficiency", and in at least four instances - "moral character" or "good character".

I feel certain that as cadets, and by virtue of your presence here this evening, you have each enjoyed some measure of success and accomplishment. This has been possible because of some of the characteristics I mentioned earlier: leadership, proficiency, diligence, superiority, hard work and perseverance. It may be that you, too, agreed with John Dewey that "Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself," and that "leadership and learning are indispensable to each other." (John Kennedy). Let me point out, and I do not believe that it is through mere chance, that the criteria for four of the awards made earlier this week contained the requirement of "good character" or "moral character." It is the elemental basis for achievement and success and the solid foundation for sincerity of service to mankind.

3-Cadet & Character
"A [Good] character is like stock in trade; the more of it a man (person) possesses, the greater his (the) facilities for making additions to it. [Good] character is power; (it) is influence; it makes friends, creates friends; draws patronage and support; and opens a sure and easy way to wealth, honor and happiness." (Joel Hawes). "[It] is, in all cases, the fruit of personal exertion. It is not inherited from parents; it is not created by external advantages, it is no necessary appendage of birth, wealth, talents or station; but it is the result of one's own endeavors -- the fruit and reward of good principles manifested in a course of virtuous and honorable action." (Joel Hawes).

The sound moral character of military men and women will seek at all times to serve mankind everywhere as they strive for the achievements on their individual horizons. Let me remind you of Kahil Gibran, the great middle eastern writer, poet, philosopher, who, in his book The Prophet, wrote:
"You give but little when you give of your possessions; It is only when you give of yourself that you truly give (or you truly serve)."

Surely, the sharing of your resources and your possessions is important. But giving of yourself -- your love and understanding, your compassion and sense of rightness, your concern and caring, your reliability and just "being there" - show a magnitude of strength which achieves that Higher Order. These human interactions in civilian or military life are truly invaluable, not something that is quantifiable into evaluative entities. Confucius put it this way:

"To be able under all circumstances to practice five things constitute perfect virtue; these five are gravity, generosity of soul, sincerity, earnestness and kindness."

The great writer Francis Walsingham felt that:

"Every virtue gives a man (person) a degree
of felicity of some kind;

honesty gives a man (person) a good report;

justice (gives) estimation;

prudence gives respect; courtesy and

liberality give affection;

temperance (gives) health; and

fortitude (gives) a quiet mind...."

But let me conclude now. As I do so, I will mention very briefly four final thoughts which I ask that you contemplate later. In this age of high technology, computerization and robotics, it becomes difficult at times to exercise the true nature of our status which characterizes us as human beings in the first place.

1. The internal human power: the renowned writer, John Locke, stated: "The most precious of all possessions is power over ourselves; power to withstand trial, to bear suffering, to front danger; power over pleasure and pain; power to follow our convictions; and
the power of calm reliance in scenes".... (of adversity). This is the quality of your own personal human accountability - your individual moral character.

2. Opportunities: It is said (by Thomas Jones) that:

"...Many (people) do with opportunities as children do at the seashore; they fill their little hands with (dry) sand, and then let the grains fall through one by one (more and more) till they are all gone." But I tell you, "...If you want to succeed in the world...." (according to John B. Gough), "...You must make your opportunities as you go on. The man (person) who waits for some seventh wave to toss him on dry land, will find that the seventh wave is a long time coming (if it ever comes). You can commit no greater folly than to sit by the roadside until someone comes along and invites you to ride with him to wealth and influence."

3. The third point concerns the cultivation of a renewed philosophical approach to living; that is, in

7-Cadet & Character
making excellence a way of life. It is known that

"There is a moral excellence attainable by all who have the will to strive for it; but there is an intellectual and physical superiority which is above the reach of our wishes, is granted to only a few." (George Crabble). May you be among those few.

4. The fourth and final point: Our lives today are governed frequently by numerical precision that is equalled only in mathematics. We use tables and charts and graphs; we resort to data and computer analyses and statistics; then we postulate, project, predict and prescribe. I really have no problems with all of this, except that beyond these exacting limits is the need to dream, to dream the impossible for yourselves, to take risks personally -- intelligent risks -- and captivate the otherwise unattainable.

On the 1890 gate to Harvard Yard, in Cambridge, Mass., a famous line by Charles Wm Eliot is inscribed. It reads:

8-Cadet & Character
"Enter to grow in wisdom (and character). Depart to serve better thy country and mankind."