

Jonathan Daniels' 1961 Valedictory Address

VALEDICTORY ADDRESS
JONATHAN MYRICK DANIELS
Class of 1961

YOUR EXCELLENCY, GOVERNOR ALMOND; MR. MILLER, PRESIDENT, AND MEMBERS OF THE BOARD OF VISITORS; GENERAL SHELL, THE DEAN AND MEMBERS OF THE FACULTY AND STAFF; PARENTS AND FRIENDS; THE CORPS OF CADETS; THE CLASS OF 1961:

With a mixture of relief and reluctance, the Class of 1961 bids you farewell. We are soon to be transformed from cadets in grey into men in mufti. There is more to this transformation than a change of clothes. We are disturbed by a question which cannot be answered. When IS the man - a man? We have spent four years in preparation for SOMETHING. What that something is, who we are, we do not know. It has been said that every graduating class is jaded. I suspect that we are entitled to feel jaded after four years in barracks - after a demanding experience which has monopolized our energies in every conceivable situation. Between the classroom and the drill field, we have been stretched in a great many directions. Four years can be tediously long - and incredibly fleeting. In this respect, as in others, our life as cadets has been puzzling. Perhaps this is to say no more than that V.M.I. has done to the Class of 1961 what it intended to do.

I have said that we are disturbed this afternoon. Although the shock of graduation is now blunted by daily routine, there is present here an undercurrent of regret which makes our solemnity more poignant. It will not surprise us if this becomes more pronounced as we take to the roads leading home. Suddenly, after having settled in for a four-year stay - we hope it has not been a four-year sleep - the gates have opened, and there is nowhere to go, but OUT. In spite of bitter experience, in spite of periodic disenchantment, all but a few of us have found the experience of cadetship strangely comfortable. It is more difficult than we had thought to say goodbye to V.M.I. In a peculiar way, we have "grown accustomed to her face." Perhaps it is true that in some colleges one may study for four years without ever allowing the environment to intrude upon his consciousness. For better or worse, this is not the case at V.M.I. Whether fertile or barren, in this soil we have planted and extended our roots for four years. Not even the weed can welcome the prospect of being uprooted. We have all heard graduation prophets proclaim the new birth, the new vision, the onward march. But implicit in every birth is the process of dying. It is a kind of death that we experience now. We stand poised for flight into a new world and a new vision. We do not deceive ourselves, however, that our new-found wings will bring us ideal happiness or the ancient vision of the rose garden.

The clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober coloring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality.

The time HAS come to say farewell. Already we have heard a thousand voices whispering, "Hurry up, please. It's time. Hurry up please. It's time." We say goodbye to many things in leaving V.M.I. - to the only glamour that some of us will ever know; to a rigorous code of honorable living; to an image of ourselves as the kind of men connoted by the title of cadet; to the quiet elegance of a uniform inherited from an era long dead but justly remembered - whose traditions and standards of behavior we have agreed publicly to uphold. We feel it regrettable that concern with small details has sometimes seemed to obscure more significant values. Yet perhaps to ask that it be otherwise would be to ask too much of human nature - and of human machinery.

After the tension of examinations, we are weary. This does not diminish, but only postpones for a day or two our reluctance to slough the discipline of undergraduate study. We have been changed in the process of groping for truth and technical proficiency. We have been blasted by fire in order to be tempered in mind and spirit. This is the joy of learning, which has sometimes seemed more harsh than pleasant. But the habit of responding to the challenge of new

ideas will remain with us when even the memory of pomp and circumstances has long disappeared.

We say farewell to a mosaic of sensations and impressions which we cannot forget: the musical jingle of Saint Peter's keys, the metallic click of polished heels, the bugler's canonical hours. We shall miss the Blue Ridge Mountains and the green of the Valley. We are conscious of a host of things, some good and some bad, which have left their mark on us during the past four years. We have not the perspective in many cases to distinguish the good from the bad, the beneficial from the detrimental. It will take years for us to gain that perspective. But that will be in another country, and as the saying goes, the wench will be dead. Every man who is graduated today will leave with a sense of regret for SOMETHING at V.M.I. which he has learned to love.

We say farewell, at last, to the teachers and friends who have made sacrifices of time and energy in order that we might have the advice and fellowship we have needed. In most cases there is no just recompense for their sacrifice. We can give them only our wordless thanks, knowing that the validity of our experience will be the proof of theirs. To the men of lower classes who have become our friends, we owe our conviction that good faith is not the exclusive property of the privileged, that respect cannot be commanded by position alone.

Members of the Class of 1961: we have not achieved all that we might have achieved as a class. But let us dignify this moment as a corporate triumph. Through trial and error, the Class of 1961 has become an organic body - with a personality and a set of values of its own. Although the consequences of progress and change have found us their unwilling victims - perhaps even because of this - we have strengthened and matured the ties which began to develop in the ratline. Within our ranks are record-breaking athletes, distinguished students, and prospective officers of acknowledged excellence - as well as some magnificent buffoons. Let us demand of ourselves the same distinction in the body politic, in the industry, in the professions, and in the leadership of the nation.

My colleagues and friends, I wish you the joy of a purposeful life. I wish you new worlds and the vision to see them. I wish you the decency and the nobility of which you are capable. These will come, with the maturity which it is now our job to acquire on far-flung fields. The only thing that we can do at this time - is to "greet the unseen with a cheer." GOODBYE.

JONATHAN MYRICK DANIELS
Valedictorian of the Class of 1961