

Commencement Remarks
16 May 2019
By General J.H. Binford Peay III '62

Cameron Hall
1100 Hours

Mr. Boland, Members of the VMI Board of Visitors, Members of the Academic Board, faculty and staff, families and friends of today's graduating cadets..., and members of the Corps of Cadets. Welcome to this Commencement Ceremony...the climax of four years of diligent study and hard work by the Class of 2019.

Graduation from VMI is a great personal achievement, but it is an achievement that cannot be reached alone. Many others have contributed to the success of today's graduates: parents and grandparents, guardians, brothers and sisters, friends, Brother Rats, faculty, staff, coaches, and host families, to name but a few. VMI is "particularly" grateful to parents and grandparents for encouraging and sustaining their sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters, throughout these cadet years. May I ask parents & grandparents to please stand and receive our thanks....This is certainly a proud day for you.

Universities and colleges are many things to many people, but at the heart of any great institution of higher education is its faculty. They are the ones who teach, guide, counsel, and encourage our cadets on a day-to-day basis. I include, in this group, our military staff and those who coach our athletes..., for at VMI we believe that the academic, disciplined military structure, and physical aspects make for a "full and complete" education. Please join me in expressing thanks to the Institute's faculty.

The Class of 2019 matriculated in August 2015 with an official strength of 495 ... and today will graduate 291 cadets. Adding graduates from other classes, today's ceremony will see 303 cross the stage and receive a VMI diploma.

Counting the 157 members of this class who were commissioned yesterday, by the end of this summer, a total of 162 members of the Class of 2019 will have been commissioned. This means that 54 percent of the graduating class have met or will meet the high requirements for commissioning in the Armed Forces. Others will also be commissioned upon completion of the individual services Officer Candidate School (OCS) programs in the late fall. These numbers are especially commendable and reinforce VMI's historic mission of producing Citizen-Soldiers. A number of VMI cadets, staff, and faculty have been called to active duty in support of the current and long war on terror, thus placing their lives and cadetships temporarily on hold. In addition, there are parents and family members – and others in the audience this

morning – who are currently serving or have served. Would all of you – “Veterans” --- you “Patriots” -- please rise and receive our appreciation for your service.

Members of the Graduating Class 2019: It may have seemed to you that as you were going through your four-year-cadetship at VMI that the years were progressing slowly, especially during the “Dark Ages” of winter or other demanding times; but now, I am willing to wager that you are thinking that the years actually seem to have passed quickly. At VMI, as the years pass by, certain moments stand out as important markers or milestones along the way, such as: “taking your Cadet Oath at New Market”; or the day you broke out of the Rat Line, which in your case was clearly the coldest, most bitter breakout weather in VMI’s long history and then you became the Class, known by many, as “The 1-9”; or maybe the special memory was your Ring Figure and receiving your coveted ring; and, perhaps a great party at Zollman’s or a special Hop. You participated as the largest marching unit in two inaugural parades...one for President Trump and the other for Governor Northam. You were present as the nation passed the important milestone of America’s entry into the First World War and now, in this year, the 100th anniversary of the peace negotiations that ended that war. You were diligent in your duty to running: a most professional Ratline; the military, class, and honor systems; and, your class was particularly proficient in the classroom, performing with academic excellence. As a sign of the excellence of your class, you produced the top Marine Corps OCS graduate and the top Army ROTC cadet in the nation, and a classmate was selected as a Fulbright Scholar among many other class and individual honors.

A small note..., your Class (impacted by weather) marched the fewest parades (this year) in recorded VMI history. Clearly, the Corps “rain dances” overrode my weather machine’s predictions, which was feverishly operating in the vast tunnels under my Quarters.

Now you have reached the final milestone of your time at the Institute: “Commencement”. Each of you will have his or her own personal milestones to remember and to celebrate, and you take them with you as you depart for the last time.

Today you celebrate your success in meeting the challenges and requirements of a VMI education. Now you set your sights on new goals. There is no “fixed formula” for achieving success of course, but what I can say with some certainty is that success is a matter of knowledge, skill, hard work, learned wisdom, and luck.

The first two – “knowledge” and “skill” – are closely related. Knowledge is something you acquire through life experiences and education. Skill is what you are able to do, and do well, with that knowledge. Skill is *doing* built on a firm foundation of *knowing*. You will build a reputation for your competency, so important at each phase of your life’s journey...and, particularly in the early years. As your past educational experiences have demonstrated, you can develop knowledge and skill. They are things you can acquire through careful attention, study, and perseverance.

Thus, “continuing” education and “honing” your skills are important requirements in your future.

I continue to believe that despite some of the current social declarations today..., “hard work” in America is still a competitive advantage as it has been throughout our history from our nation’s earliest days...; it brings excellence and intangibles, it brings a steadiness to life, and joy to accomplishments and success. It is also a “bedrock” of wisdom.

Wisdom: there is a story about an old General being interviewed at the end of his career by a young reporter, who asked the old man to what he attributed his great achievements and successes. The General thought for a moment and barked his reply, “Good judgement”! The reporter, who was a bit taken back by such abruptness..., followed quickly with another question: “Then, General, to what do you attribute your good judgement?” The General, with a hint of a smile, replied..., “Bad judgement.”

Given that standard, I certainly am in a good position to say something of value. I have the wisdom of many, many errors. Perhaps, the immediate lesson is that when you get knocked down..., get up! You have already experienced that through your four-years here; whether in the Rat Line, the classroom, the military, or on the athletic field. And recall that this year’s Leadership Conference’s theme was, “Grit and the American Culture”. Thank goodness I have had leaders who allowed me to learn from my mistakes. Hard work and gaining wisdom are important requirements.

Luck, on the other hand is largely out of our control. It is not something we consciously acquire. It happens or it doesn’t happen. And, usually it happens to us.

The idea of luck has been around for centuries. The Greeks and the Romans had Gods who were the personification of luck. These Gods were usually pictured as veiled or blind. This is why we speak of “blind luck.” Some have used the term “chance” and others have called it “fortune” – as in the wheel of fortune that stops, no one knows where. Some speak of it as being in the right place at the right time, or its opposite: being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Recently, people have described luck as: “Sometimes you bite the bear; sometimes the bear bites you.”

But is luck entirely out of our control? If you leave VMI with no other message, I hope it will be this: *To a great extent, you can make your own luck, particularly through hard work and learned wisdom.* And here’s what I mean:

Having succeeded in four years of VMI, you have already started making your own luck. You are prepared, morally, mentally and physically to meet many of the challenges of life. You have learned how to organize, manage time, breakdown a problem, think under pressure, exercise leadership, and always with honor. You have a great institution at your back. But beyond that...now..., you must cultivate the ability to recognize new opportunities when they arrive and the ability to alter your

plans to head in new, unexpected directions. Keep your eyes open: see the possibilities. Does this mean that you should sail through life without a compass or no life plan? No! Remain steady on course, but do not get locked into one path or one outlook. The world is an uncertain place. Today, we know people change careers three or four times in a lifetime, much less changing jobs as often. Many say the new 60 is 45 years. Should you chase every flicker of an opportunity ... no ... but keep your eyes open for those flickers and, as that wonderful Boy Scout motto says..., “Be Prepared”!

I urge you to keep yourself open to new ideas and new directions. Take time to “reflect”...that’s a little bit different than “smelling the roses”, which is also important; but reflect on where you are and where you are going and always continue to grow. Work for really good, decent, high character leaders. My experience is they will work you, critique you, and be somewhat demanding..., but they “care” and will prepare you early in your career for the near term challenges of where “the rubber meets the road” and grow you for much greater responsibilities that will be on your plate much sooner than you can envision this morning. For you see..., great leaders care deeply about their subordinates and get (their) greatest satisfaction from their success. Your “instincts” are the first cousins of “wisdom”. Trust them. Take the initiative...be bold...not reckless...nor fear. Think before you act. Listen with your eyes and ears --- our country has lost that important trait. Keep your eyes on special leaders and learn from their successes and their mistakes. Finally..., be an “out-front”, thoughtful, caring, quiet, “thinking” leader yourself, who turns “luck” to your advantage. Be a leader who brings good luck to others. And when you have setbacks, or when bad luck visits you, as happens to all of us, learn from your failures. No matter what you may think and no matter how dark the situation, opportunities and possibilities are always out there. Grab those opportunities!

Knowledge, skill, hard work, wisdom, and luck..., together they make up life. In many ways, they are “foundational” for the world you are entering.

This world is full of promise as well as dangers and threats. We live today in an era of traumatic change, social upheaval, and gnawing cynicism. Many question the fundamental values that have guided our nation and our people for over two centuries. Many complain about problems, while doing little to solve them. Many sit, wait, and just hope that things will turn out well. This is not the first time in our young nation’s history that we have faced such challenges.

We must reject such passive attitudes. We must stand firm in the conviction that America possesses the physical, intellectual, and moral strength to be an inspiring, strong, and respected leader in the world community. America has what it takes to promote a safer, freer, and more prosperous world. And while we cannot solve every problem, right every wrong, or respond to every natural or man-made disaster, we as Americans cannot ignore our global responsibilities and remain true to our national values. As you leave here today, make it your mission -- your objective -- to ensure that your families, your communities and our nation remains secure,

faithful to its ideals, a beacon of hope for the rest of the world and capable of building a bright future.

Each graduating class has heard me say this over the past 15 years at this ceremony..., “Hold onto the concept of honor -- the very bedrock -- of VMI.” People will hold you to a higher standard, because you are a VMI graduate. This high expectation cannot be avoided...; it comes with the ring, the commission, and with the diploma. Embrace it as the heritage that has now been passed on to you, and strive always to preserve and enhance it. The Class of 2019 now goes into the VMI history book with demonstrated pride in its faithfulness to the Institute’s high ideals and from a historical perspective and legacy..., a splendid, splendid reputation. Congratulations! I join the VMI faculty and staff in wishing each of you the very best of all that life may offer. **The open road now awaits you....Godspeed, Class of 2019!**