

“For All the Right Reasons ...”**May 18, 2009**

Good morning, and thank you – My sincere congratulations to the parents of the Prep School Class of 2009. I know you’re proud of your daughters and sons, justifiably so. I am, too. And thank you for nurturing such fine young men and women who will one day help form the backbone of our United States Air Force.

Also, I wish to thank Col. Todd Zachary and his able staff for providing me the encouragement and support to join this worthy occasion.

And, of course, my special thanks to the Class of 2009 for this distinct honor to be your Exemplar. Your gesture means a great deal to me. It has rekindled memories that have been dormant for many years. Allow me to share some of these thoughts in the context of my theme – *For All the Right Reasons*.

I am here before you today because some 37 years ago I was a fighter pilot, in a place called Viet Nam where, with others, I shared many exhilarating if not harrowing experiences. I happened to be there when the action turned fierce, and ... well, one thing led to another and now I find myself here, at this podium, somewhat overwhelmed, and a bit out of my element, I’m afraid. But, if you’ll bear with me for about 20 minutes, I’ll give it my best shot ... here we go.

Building solid foundations for a successful AF career takes dedication and *ambition* – it requires the pursuit of Excellence. But you know this. In fact you might be tired of hearing this same old, “*be the best you can be*” mantra. Right? I would ask that you *do not* tire of it – the pursuit of Excellence is a life-style; and it is simply *your job* from this day forward. It’s not about winning, or being the top dog – it’s about gaining self-respect, and about earning the respect of others.

I used the term “ambition” just now in the context of Excellence, because *ambition* constitutes that inner drive to excel ... However, ambition is a double-edged sword. *John Adams*, our second American President, observed as a young lawyer/politician, long before assuming office, in a letter to his equally brilliant wife, Abigail, that, “Ambition is one of the more ungovernable passions of the human heart. The love of power is insatiable and uncontrollable.” *Heavy, eh?* Actually, this was self-criticism, confessing his weakness to *ambition*, yet knowing it to be *vital energy* in his efforts to gain independence for our fledgling country. So, how does this relate to you? Well how about ... ambition leads to success, which leads to honors (or “power” in Adams’ terms), which often defines Excellence, and which inevitably bolsters one’s Ego, eh? O.K. we hit on the right word – now I can speak with authority because fighter pilots are known for huge Egos. So, let me propose that Ego, like ambition, is also a double-edged sword. Let’s look at how Ambition, Ego, and Excellence relate in this connotation.

Fact -- Ego is at once a fighter pilot’s greatest strength – and greatest weakness.
Fact 2: To *Excel* means you must *truly* believe in yourself. Fact 3: Sometimes

Ego gets out of hand – becomes arrogance, hubris, greed. That said however, Ego/ambition is a key driving force in the pursuit of Excellence. And it's not just about fighter pilots. Ego resides in all of us to some degree – it's a human condition. Whatever the case, Ego must be kept in perspective or it easily becomes selfish, malicious, and often deadly. Ego, when kept in proper perspective becomes self confidence, courage, vision, and leadership – these are attributes of Excellence, achieved for the *right reasons*. A good healthy Ego translates to a “can do” attitude when things are toughest. It gives rise to the focus and determination to make it through another day, *and another*, and to graduate. Well now, that's *you* – guilty as charged ... you, too, have an Ego!

But let's look at the other edge of this Ego Sword – the potentially deadly side. I'm obligated to tell a war story here ... I mean – that's why you invited me – right? Anyway, it fits well because my war story ties to my message, and I feel it's important that you think about how it plays out – a little different than you might expect – most likely. I'll try to keep it short, yet hopefully still offer enough detail to answer those BIG questions in the back of your minds ... How did he manage to collect so many DFC's and Air Medals in such a short time? And, having done so, why didn't he stay in the Air Force? Let's see if I can explain.

Like most of you, I didn't lack for *ambition*. At the Prep School, the Academy, grad school, pilot training, I worked hard to be the best at everything I tried, succeeding much of the time. Honors and recognition were the rewards that I thrived on. Although my efforts appeared productive, they were rather naïve actually, and sadly, not always for the right reasons. In retrospect, my problem was not having a well defined goal, consequently my ambition netted successes that served my Ego more than anything else. And I made many *serious* mistakes due to reckless overconfidence. In blissful ignorance, I set myself up for a fall.

Let's fast forward to Viet Nam - Korat AFB, Thailand - several months into my tour as a Wild Weasel (the mission of surface-to-air missile suppression). Our job was to make the SAMs shoot at us, then evade them and attack the site, disabling it before strike aircraft arrived on scene. Like other Weasel aircrews, I had trained hard and grown comfortable with combat, mostly in lower threat zones. But, more so than most, I hung tightly to the coat-tails of the “old heads”, the ones wearing that cool patch, *100 Missions - North Viet Nam*, sewn on their flight suit. Those rough and rowdy River Rats were my heroes and I lusted to join their elite fraternity. With their tutelage, I soon earned Flight Lead status for missions North, as well as Theater Indoctrination instructor for newly assigned Weasel aircrews. These were distinctive achievements for a freshly minted Captain – *you guessed it ... ratchet up the Ego syndrome* – get ready for the fall.

It was on one such Theater Indoctrination sortie that fate took a nasty turn. As instructor I occupied the back seat of the F-105G, enduring zero forward visibility, the “newbie” pilot up front – my life in his hands, but ultimate responsibility in mine. Upon return to Korat for routine landing we were forced to break out of the

traffic pattern to narrowly avoid an F-4 on emergency landing – it was a *crash* actually, that essentially closed the single Korat runway. Suffice to say that the ensuing melee involved major confusion leading to high risk choices requiring rapid, radical decisions. My Ego prevailed over caution – rather than follow orders to somehow eject over the bomb dump area, I forced our only alternative – land on the Korat taxiway. Fortunately, we managed to land safely, although our engine flamed-out during landing roll due to fuel exhaustion. Basically, I got lucky, saved an expensive aircraft, and avoided aircrew injury. However, in so doing I had placed other property and personnel in grave danger. Although a major disaster was averted, collateral damage was not. Upon exiting the aircraft, flashing staff cars met me as my feet touched the tarmac – I was summarily fired, grounded, and ordered off the base within 24 hours – certainly justifiable ... not exactly career enhancing, however.

But for some reason my *exile* was delayed several days, although I fully expected the axe to fall at any moment. Just then – the launch order for Linebacker 2 came in. I watched, and was devastated as *flight after flight* of Weasels took off for Route Pack 6. Then, late on the 2nd night my Ops Officer tracked me down with a proposition – he was short a qualified Weasel crew, but had one airworthy aircraft – would I take a late add-on “special HQ” mission? It might be pretty dicey – single ship coverage for a large cell of B-52’s attacking the outskirts of Hanoi. Really? ... O.K. – let’s go. In similar fashion a hapless Electronic Warfare Officer was conscripted for my back seat, so off we went. That dark-of-night mission was more than just dicey, it was *surreal* – one Thud Weasel against a large sector of Hanoi’s air defenses. Arriving on target, we expended *all* of our ordnance within minutes at multiple SAM launches; but, there were many more SAM’s bristling for action. We resorted to *decoy tactics* – see the missiles, fly at them, simulate an attack profile, and hope the SAM crews pulled the plug so the missiles wouldn’t guide on the B-52’s high above ...or us, the decoy. Scary stuff – pure chaos. Finally it was over, B-52’s were scattered, some had damage, but all made it out, as I recall. We exited the target area at *warp speed*, chased by Migs, but no *serious* threat. And, after a rather testy air-refueling on the post-strike tanker we made it home, much to the pleasure of our Ops Officer. I’m not sure he really expected us back from that mission.

To my surprise, the next day my name appeared again on the flying schedule, and continued for the remainder of Linebacker 2. Nothing more was said of my fatal mistake, no orders off-base, nothing. Unbelievable. So, I simply hunkered down and did my job, did what I was trained for – flying and fighting. Maybe this was my *Ego* breakthrough. I wasn’t thinking about the number of missions – about medals or torched career ambitions. It was a defining moment for me, a redemption of sorts, and I am ever grateful for that opportunity to serve. And apparently some one, somewhere thought I did O.K. – if one is to judge by the number of Distinguished Flying Cross citations that arrived bearing my name. In any case ... that’s what led to me being here today, with your help ... although not as a retired general, I’m afraid.

So, what's to be learned from my fateful experience? That Ego and Excellence don't mix well? I think not. A better lesson might be that Excellence does not demand perfection, it simply asks for your very best effort – applied *for the right reasons*. You need to take risks, to push your limits, and not be afraid to make some mistakes. But you have to grind it out, learn from those mistakes, and press on. To that end, here are my thoughts about what the future holds for you.

Right now, you're headed for the Air Force Academy, packing a solid foundation provided by the Prep School. At the outset, you'll have a distinct advantage over your classmates arriving from civilian backgrounds. It's not an unfair advantage - you've earned it by hard work at the "P" – but it will be brief. Those other "doolies" will learn fast. Yet in due time, the USAFA Class of 2013 will coalesce into a disciplined cadre, with a strong team spirit. You will have engrained the fundamentals of leadership, integrity, academic expertise, and dedicated discipline. This is a long, tough journey, for sure. It will be physically demanding, but you've already endured and mastered as much. The academic curriculum, whatever you select, will strain every single brain cell behind those steely eyes – yet you *will* prevail – that's a healthy *Ego*. However, the most difficult challenge is also the most subtle – to build the moral fiber that will sustain you throughout your Air Force career, and indeed, throughout your life. Mastering this final challenge means learning to keep Ego and Excellence in *proper* perspective.

I came to realize that although the pursuit of Excellence is an individual effort, it cannot be purely for individual gain ... it's not to serve your Ego – it's to serve honor, and dignity, and freedoms. Excellence builds better *foundations* – so that the person next to you can do a better job, so that future generations can move beyond your example and achieve *ever* greater dreams.

Today these *foundations* comprise a huge body of knowledge that has grown exponentially in the past several decades. To effectively cope with your responsibilities as future military leaders, you must not only master your technical discipline, you must understand the nature of our *total* global environment -- cultures, national identities, religions, geo-political and economic issues. Conflict is prevalent; hate festers; aggression is real. *Coping* is not an easy task. The learning curve is steep, and often information can be biased. When your time comes you'll need to sort it all out, make decisions, *act* – and be right. That's Ambition and Ego in *proper* perspective.

You are about to choose a professional military career. In the most basic terms, this means you will become a warrior – a combatant. Not all of you will assume roles at the "pointy end" in combat, but whether in a supporting strategic role or an active tactical role, you will comprise the *executing force* to wage war, to defend our government, to protect its citizens and resources, to stand in harm's way, and yes – to possibly make the supreme sacrifice ... hopefully, it will be *for all the right reasons*.

This is your challenge. It demands effort, *ambition*, and courage. This does not mean striving for individual acclaim, or coveting the badges of rank and valor. Surely, some of you will go on to the most senior ranks, some may be tested in mortal combat and earn awards for heroism. Great - *You* will become our leaders and we *need* you. But these honors are not to be sought as ends in themselves – they will simply *happen* in your pursuit of Excellence. Always accept the mantle of rank or valor for what it is ...it's simply *your job*.

So, let's revisit *John Adams*, now age 90, 50 years after signing our Declaration of Independence, although frail in body, still keenly vibrant in mind and spirit, when he said, "I would to God there were more *ambition* in the country – *ambition* of that laudable kind – to Excel."

I, for one, am confident that the Prep School Class of 2009 will strive to answer this call – *for all the right reasons*.

Thank you, go forth, and Godspeed.