

*Veterans' Graduation Comments*

Wilson Geyling

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, graduates, veterans, cadets, distinguished guests, as well as family and friends alike. My name is Wilson Geyling, and I have had the unique experience of participating in Azusa Pacific's ROTC program for the past 4 years. I have the privilege of continuing my Army experience as an Infantry officer, and I have the honor to address you all this evening as the cadet speaker. As a general principle, I have long believed that, as a twenty-something undergraduate student, I have little experience from which to speak, particularly when speaking to veterans of any sort about anything related to the military. But as a cadet I recognize that I represent a distinct constituency on this campus, and as I reflect on these last four years lived and the many years ahead of me, I recognize that I, and my fellow cadets, may have in fact learned something worthwhile that may translate to wisdom someday.

The military is a dream I have been chasing since middle school, since the days of *Surviving the Cut* on Discovery Channel and *Black Hawk Down* being

played on FX every other Friday night. I was intent on pursuing a career that served something bigger than myself, that got me as far away from a desk as possible, and that challenged me in all facets of my being. The military encapsulated all of those things for me. In the years to follow, as I filled my head with war stories of heroism and grit and I filled my closet with camouflage clothing, I began to develop a mindset that both the most valorous and selfless qualities of human nature awaited me on the battlefield, as did the most grotesque and regrettable transgressions of human nature. While I still believe both to be true, my mindset at the time incorrectly assumed that these experiential extremes existed only on distant battlefields in the thick of war, and that those of us who had the convenience of not experiencing such hardships were somehow weaker or less experienced than those warriors I would read and hear about.

College has changed that perspective. I didn't think I'd see or carry a dead body until a military operation gone wrong, but I ended up carrying my youngest brother into the emergency room as his heart failed and he weezed out his final breaths during a family vacation the summer before my junior year. I didn't think I'd have to navigate the looming threat of death until I was stationed at a COP

somewhere overseas. I didn't think I'd have to consider the complications of living everyday life with a physical disability unless, God forbid, I or a close friend became a Wounded Warrior. Both preconceptions were dashed when my mother was diagnosed with ALS just a month and a half after my brother died, forcing my family to navigate those challenges on a regular basis, and we continue to do so today. I never thought I'd seriously consider laying down my life for any other human being than those I would someday serve with. And yet, I have realized in my time at college that my family and a few dear friends here on campus could derive just such a response from me if the situation called for it.

It would seem that the theme of my college experience has been realizing that there has been something of the more high-stakes kind of life available to me here and now that I originally thought was relegated to those who had experienced the heat of battle. I have not experienced said heat of battle, but I have experienced the visceral heartbreak of life cut short, and realized the inherent necessity in recognizing the hope that can be present in every moment, no matter how insignificant that moment may seem. That margin between heartbreak and hope, between promise and pain, between order and chaos, that, I have found, is where

true living is done and where true experience is gained. Though this wanna-be Army Ranger, who longs for the rush of a firefight, has never even been in a schoolyard brawl, I think I have an idea of what's at stake. The toll of warfare consists of enumerable costs across many facets, physical, psychological, and spiritual. And I can't help but think that us cadets, in our lessons in the classroom, in our training, and most definitely in our life experiences, are somewhat familiar with that cost. Though we live in one of the most prosperous nations in one of the most comfortable eras in human history, we know, both in principle and in practice, that human existence is a difficult one. And the Army, as a human enterprise, is fully entrenched in that existence to an extensive degree, both the hopeful and heartbreaking parts of it. Though we have not experienced the heat of combat, and whether or not we thirst for it, my time in college has reaffirmed to me that us cadets are closer to those hopeful and heartbreaking human extremes than we may think, in times good and bad. And I can't help but think that our awareness of the human side of warfare and the warrior profession into which we are entering will make us cadets that much more prepared for the successful conduct of war when, God-willing, our time comes.

My fellow cadets, though every lesson we've been taught thus far, every tactic we've practiced, and every patrol we have conducted has generally been followed by the consolation that "In the real Army, it'll be different..." or "We never use this in the Big Army..." or "Don't worry, you'll have a GPS..." I want to remind all of us cadets how prepared we are for the task at hand. Though we haven't tasted combat, we have amassed 4 years of training and at least a little life experience to go along with it, all of which has reaffirmed to us what is at stake: the lives of our soldiers, the soul of this nation, and the extremes of hope and heartbreak that are inherent in the human experience. That does not mean we don't have anything else to learn, it does not mean that we won't make mistakes throughout our careers, and it sure does not mean that we are any better than the soldiers or the American people whom we will serve. It simply means that in this moment of our lives, we are prepared for what is ahead.

To all of the cadre who have taught and guided my fellow cadets and I on our journey thus far, I thank you for your pedagogy in the warrior profession. To all of the administrators and Office of Military and Veterans' Services personnel who have squared away our scholarships and paperwork, thank you for handling

the headache. To all of the veterans here tonight, I thank you for your service and sacrifice that has paved the way in the profession us cadets will soon uphold. To all of the family and friends in the room, I thank you for your support of all of us cadets, support which will only grow more vital and cherished as our careers unfold. On behalf of my fellow cadets, we hope our future service in defense of the United States of America makes all of you--cadre, mentors, veterans, loved ones, along with this great nation--we hope it makes you proud.

My fellow cadets, my battle buddies, thank you for all you've done for me these past four years. Know that you always have a battle buddy in me, and that we'll always have a battle buddy in each other. Whether I see you downrange someday or down the road someday much later, whether you head overseas with a rifle in hand or a pair of ring scissors, whether you fight for a full 20 years or the tried and true 2 weeks in the summer, remember that you are ready for it all.

Thank you.