

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, Fellow Admirals (Buzz and Sue—a treat to see you again) and Doctor Kumar. Merchant Marine Academy faculty, staff, family, friends, and of course, the graduating class of 2014!

I'm honored to have the opportunity to speak to you today—especially a day as great as this. You've worked very hard, you've persevered, and you've transformed from midshipmen into leaders who will serve this great country.

I'm tremendously excited for you, because I have a sense of what's coming in your future... But despite any advice I may offer, I also know that practically all commencement speeches and even their speakers go unremembered.

It's true, and for those of you who have parents and siblings in the audience who are graduates—you can test this fact on them later. Ask them what was said at their graduation speech.

Now all of us can appreciate that there's the excitement of the day and some of you last night will have spent a lot of time thoughtfully rehearsing today's celebration. So there're all the normal distractions that make it impossible for the graduates to focus on the speaker. But I'm with the federal government and in the spirit of transparency to the American Taxpayers I'm here to tell you that the premise we naturally would agree to is **SIMPLY NOT TRUE.**

How many of you have seen the movie Men in Black? Yes raise your hands. [You must participate, I'm an Admiral.]

I'm sure many of you recall the neutralizer, the device the Men in Black agents use to zap away the memories of hapless bystanders.

Well, in honor of my speaking here today, I've received authority from the Secretary of Defense himself to declassify yet another program: The Neuralyzer. Here's the one I was issued for today. [Show Neuralyzer] Yes, this is an electro bio-mechanical neural transmitting zero synapse repositioner. If it doesn't look like the one in the Movies, I have been trusted with the latest version.

As an aside, the part of the program that is not declassified is how we manage to distribute these to all the commencement speakers just in time for all the graduations. That's still a secret.

I will share, however, that we developed and practiced the distribution process over centuries in direct support of Santa Claus and his annual runs. What you didn't know Santa was real? Ok --But allow me to begin...

I had the great opportunity to meet with some of your alumni a couple weeks ago. They were impressive graduates who told me of their experiences at the Merchant Marine Academy and proudly shared their tales. As our conversation went on, I realized how much we had in common:

- In your first year as plebes, you ran to and from your classes.

Likewise at Annapolis, we did some similar running. I'm sure the training had the same intent—to instill in us a sense of urgency in everything we do.

- We both had crack-of-dawn room inspections, where you and your roommates did everything possible to ensure the room was ship-shape, spotless, and dust-free.

Despite the many similarities, Kings Point has its own proud traditions and unique history among the federal service academies. For one, that's a pretty darn big flagpole you got there—tallest free-standing one on the East Coast? I bet even now Rear Admiral Buzz Buzby can recall its exact height.

You also have the proud tradition of yearly community service, a year at sea before you even graduate, a “K.P. Family” (as I have been told), and a history of midshipmen serving and sacrificing that dates back to World War II.

That history is forged by the lives of the brave 142—their memory, and their legacy. Their service is preserved and honored in the unique battle pendant that only adorns the flag of the US Merchant Marine Academy.

Standing well apart from other schools is your tradition of bell ringing. For our US Navy Seal Candidates, if they decide to quit their arduous program, they ring a bell to tap out. That is their final symbolic gesture of giving up. No more struggle for weeks on end to achieve their Herculean missions and goals.

For you graduates, bell ringing is the opposite. You ring it to celebrate passing exams and defeating a multitude of challenges. I think you have the symbolism right.

You've passed high hurdles—your hard time at the Academy is behind you... But truly, the bell is the signal that heralds the beginning of a great adventure, awakenings, and a resonating sound—the dedication to a future of service and sacrifice.

With the ringing, you physically demonstrate the deepest points made in literature about the connections of people and the need to respond when clamoring bells ring out:

No one is an island.

The loss of one person diminishes us all.

For whom does the bell toll? It tolls for thee.

As you answer the sound that calls you, you are moving into the world in exciting times. The globe has new challenges:

- In the Middle East, Syria is still in the grips of civil strife and conflict. Thousands have died in a struggle between Al-Assad's government and citizenry, rebels, and even foreign fighters.
- Iraq is struggling. There are aggressive drives by insurgent Iraqi and Syrian fighters who think brutality and spreading fear are suitable substitutes for the rule of law.
- In Africa, organizations like Boko Haram spring up, sowing oppression and terror.
- Crimea finds itself clawing off foreign influence, manipulation and violation of their sovereign integrity.

- And finally, in the Asia-Pacific, the seas separating the Philippines, Vietnam, China, and Japan boil with confrontations between those powers as they vie for control over natural resources.

These challenges are legion, but in this time of uncertainty you chose to step forward anyway. With the bell ringing in the Powell Oval, you signaled your readiness to serve.

Now you stand at a point of choosing; you get to start your own individual journey. A favorite poet of mine, Rabindranath Tagore, once said “You can’t cross the sea merely by standing and staring at the water.”

You do not idly stand ashore. I see you taking to the waves!
You are comrades in arms. You are going to serve America's
defense and marine transportation needs in peace and conflict.

I'm proud of you all for answering that call to sail... But first,
you need to choose a ship! Now, I know you have selected a ship
for your first assignment, but there are four ships upon which you
will always sail.

The first is "Friendship." This ship has been there for you
since you first set foot on these academy grounds. Its keel is laid
when you meet your fellow plebe candidates and eventually
become midshipmen. It was there to stand on your left and right,
never breaking formation; it would laugh and share stories and
jokes.

The hull is welded and engine established when you share in this powerful experience as *classmates, teammates, and roommates*. And finally, the pilothouse takes shape as you separate, going your different ways across the seven seas, always knowing that if the waters ever get a little too rough, you can always radio friends for safe harbor. In addition to your hard work, your friendships are what carried you through four demanding years at this institution.

Take it from me: friendships forged at sea or a place like this last and serve a lifetime. Nurture them... Depend on them... Never give up on them...

Your second ship is “Partnership.” The best example of partnership is the whole-of-government approach that successfully and expeditiously prepared the Motor Vessel Cape Ray for a special mission to the Mediterranean. It was a ship acquired by the Maritime Administration, assigned to Maritime Sealift Command’s Ready Reserve Force, and operated under contract by Keystone Shipping Company.

Aboard that ship are 35 professional mariners, 64 of Army’s Edgewood Chemical Specialists, a security team, and a contingent from U.S. European Command. Hundreds of government and contract personnel worked quickly to prepare it for its mission: To receive delivery from Danish and Norwegian ships a dangerous haul of the Syrian chemical stockpile, and proceed under the protection of coalition forces to destroy the stockpile at sea.

A multitude of public and private departments, organizations, and governments—men and women from the United States are looking to this *one* ship to carry out a moral and just mission in service to the world. You may soon sail a ship just like her.

Take it from me: partnerships are what allow nations to band together to solve global problems. Nurture them... Depend on them... Never give up on them...

The third ship is a “Relationship.” This one is about the bonds that tie us together as mariners and family and supporters, whether it’s the faculty or your Mom or Dad. It had the courage to support you when it you were right, but unpopular.

It had the courage to tell you when you were wrong, steering you away from shoal water. Whether mentors, teachers, parents, coaches or your community leaders, the relationship was made stronger as you grew to professional maturity here.

The relationship is selfless. The people who are here today have been waiting for this moment. They freely sacrificed and gave so much, and they finally get to see you graduate happy and healthy. And for many of them great satisfaction in that you will be employed. That said, no matter what you do, this ship can turn to its colleagues and proudly boast: “ONE OF MY OWN SERVES THIS GREAT NATION.”

Take it from me: relationships are what give us hope, hold us together, and make us unbreakable. Nurture them... Depend on them... Never give up on them...

The fourth ship? “Leadership.” This ship is why you are sitting here today. This ship sails solidly in fair or rough weather, always ready, always courageous, always prepared with action. It is seaworthy because of its integrity. Integrity lost is leadership lost—this is all that keeps it afloat. This ship knows both its limitations as well as its strengths, and it isn’t afraid to anchor its trust in the proven experience and good character of dependable shipmates.

This ship knows sacrifice: its battle pendant flew high in World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam, Desert Storm, and all other conflicts that led up to the Long War we fight today. You've been on this ship all along.

The Midshipmen demonstrated this Leadership in September of 2001, when foreign threats dealt devastating blows to New York City. Your school came to the aid to the people of the city, ferrying first responders and looking out for those in need.

Leadership stood up again with Hurricane Sandy. Leadership continues to ride high in the water every year. Leadership is also that bond between the captain and crew, the officers and enlisted, and chief engineer and mechanics.

Leadership may involve directing men and women toward a mission or purpose, but it is especially about looking out for your people. Taking care of those trusting in your leadership is the most important of your duties. If you accomplish this task and further focus your attention to your duties as servant leaders, everything else will fall into place.

Take it from me: Good leadership is the most important lesson you can take from your time here. Remember your people. Nurture them... Depend on them... Never give up on them...

Friendship. Partnership. Relationship. Leadership. They are the four vessels you'll need in life. Those four ships will be enough to carry you as long as you serve and until you pull into home port—returning to your family after a long journey. Trust in them and trust in yourself to stay true to course.

So what will it be? Will you keep your feet warm and dry on the beach or take to the waves to keep our nation strong?

Stand--or Sail? You gave your answer when you rang the bell:

Acta, non verba! [Clap]

Now it was nice chatting with y'all, but I'm gonna need you to just do me a quick favor and look right up here at this little spot.... *[Put on sun glasses and hold up neuralyzer]*

Now this is what happened: You men and women in the class of 2014 just graduated, you heard an AMAZING speech, you're excited to celebrate with your family and friends—and you're ready to take the helm and change the world.

Go have fun, and DON'T GIVE UP THE SHIPs!