

Remarks by Colonel James P. Inman '86
VMI Chief of Staff
December Graduation
19 December 2018
JM Hall

Thank you very much Sir, for that kind introduction. Mr. Boland, Mrs. Peay, Faculty and Staff, ladies and gentlemen, family and friends and most especially to you graduates. Good Morning. Let me start by saying what an honor and privilege I consider it to speak with you on the occasion of your graduation from VMI, and as General Peay mentioned, it makes it all the more special to be with you here in JM Hall.

Occasionally, being a retired Colonel and combat Veteran, I am asked to make remarks at Memorial Day. Several years ago, I was asked to be the guest speaker at Clarksville, TN and Fort Campbell's Memorial Day Ceremony. As I was putting together my remarks, I decided I would quote Mr. Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.... So I had a very brief introduction, then recited the address word for word,.....you know it is only two hundred and seventy one words and is among the most beautiful prose in the English language. And it has such a powerful message, one that resonates as strongly today as it did over one hundred and fifty years ago.

You may remember that it ends powerfully: "it is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause which they gave the last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth"; unquote. And then I had a very brief conclusion. And when I finished there was thunderous applause...Now I gave Mr. Lincoln credit. Now I have done this on three or four occasions and I can't tell you how many people have come up to me and said that's the best Memorial Day speech I've ever heard.

So I looked for a Gettysburg address equivalent for graduation speeches, but much to my chagrin could not find one worthy – so I will have to muddle through this one on my own.

As I was preparing for this, I tried to recollect, who was the speaker at my own graduation and what he said. I am embarrassed to admit that I could recall neither.

So with that in mind, and recognizing that you very well may have preferred to have someone of national or international renown ,,,,,. I will promise two things, one: to do my best and two: I will keep it relatively short.

I love VMI's marketing slogan: "Don't Do Ordinary." It is elegant in its simplicity. The older I get, the more I believe that simplicity lies on the far side of complexity. When you think and think on something and can distill it down to its essence, it often becomes elegant in its simplicity.

This is certainly the case with our slogan, Don't Do Ordinary. It truly sums up the essence of the VMI experience. Now, I know.... that you know.... today is more of a beginning than an ending. You sit here full of potential. Some of you will accomplish truly extraordinary things – Corporate CEO, 4 Star General; attaining the absolute pinnacle in your chosen professions..... but statistically, most of you, like me, will lead a life with good, solid but relatively ordinary accomplishments. There is absolutely no shame in this.

The key, in my opinion, is to do the ordinary – extraordinarily well. Do the ordinary -- extraordinarily well.

VMI has provided you with an exceptional education and with a superior foundation for the future. I'm not sure you realize how well prepared you are. This includes not only your academic credentials and knowledge, which are impeccable thanks in large measure to our teaching faculty, but the simple skills that are often unlearned by most college graduates today – an example of the kind of skills I am talking of are being at the right place, at the right time in the right "uniform"..... well prepared to do the task at hand. And you are no strangers to hard work so your work ethic, right out of the blocks is better than most. Perhaps the most important component of your foundation for future success lies in the fact that you are ladies and gentleman in word and deed. Honorable. and by this I mean not just, not lying, cheating or stealing.... but a higher order of honorable behavior – treating others like you want to be treated, acting civilly, being polite. You don't recognize these aspects of "not being ordinary" when you are here. But you will. Employers know.

Your boss will know, and more experienced adults know... So understand right now – you are exceptionally well prepared for the future. Of that there is absolutely no doubt.

You may or may not know that the U.S. Department of Education ranks us number 1 among all public colleges in the Commonwealth. This is largely due to the amount of money our graduates earn relative to the cost of attendance. While it varies a little we are often in the top 25 to 30 schools in the nation when it comes to the income of our graduates, across all disciplines.

Now this is significant, and while it is better to have money than to not have it, it definitely isn't the most important metric. I believe the true value of a VMI education is the impact, the positive impact, our alumni make in other people's lives.

Now that we have established that you are well prepared and are very likely to make enough or more than enough money, Perhaps we should focus for a moment on how you can make a positive impact.

You know as human beings we are all imperfect. Perfection is not a realistic goal or expectation.

I think a better goal is to look at how as leaders – we can best contribute to the success of our team, whether that be a business, military unit, law practice, nonprofit- whatever.

I like to think of an airplane flying as an example.

How do we contribute to our organization taking flight and going as high as it can go? In a sense, how do you provide more lift, than drag? You do it by focusing on people.

Now don't get me wrong – you can be demanding, ambitious, set and enforce high standards..... you can be critical without being ugly, and you can be competitive. But at the end of it all – it is how you treat people that will determine your personal and your organization's successes. If you focus on people – all the rest will come.

In the military – special operators – Delta, Special Forces, SEALs, the Ranger Regiment are truly phenomenal at what they do. They generally don't enter and clear a building any differently than a conventional force does, but what truly sets them apart is how well trained they are.

Navy Seal, Senior Chief Hatch said it very well at our leadership conference. “Advanced Techniques are really basic techniques performed at a very high level under very tough circumstances. Advanced techniques are really basic techniques performed at a very high level under very tough circumstances..... For me, this is a perfect example of what I mean by doing the ordinary extraordinarily well. If you routinely do this and focus on people first, the sky is the limit. It's like Secretary Mattis said, when he spoke with us earlier this year – he distilled it down to three elegant, simple words – Put Others First. I would distill it down to one word – kindness.

Be all you aspire to be and then be kind to every person you meet. Start with being kind to yourself. Develop a lifetime of wellness, get enough sleep, exercise and eat well. You only get one vessel – treat it right.

Then be kind to your family, friends, colleagues, even old adversaries and then be kind to every person you meet, or at least attempt to. So there you have it.

In my own life, I have often reflected on my time here at VMI, and the lifelong friendships that only get better with age. Our school is a treasure and the lessons learned here make an indelibly positive imprint on our psyches that remains with us

over our entire lives. I believe our experiences here lift us up and demand that we be better men and women because we know it is the right thing to do.

I look forward over the next many years to watching you thrive, learning of your successes and observing you having a hugely positive impact on your communities, state, the Nation and yes even in your professions. And I believe you will come to discover that your true legacy will be the positive difference you have made in many, many lives.

I think Sir Paul McCarthy had it about right when he said “and in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make...”

We are proud of you and we wish you all the best. It may take a little time before you are ready, but not as much time as you think it will, but when you are ready come back and visit. Last but not least, congratulations on joining an extraordinary group of graduates and alumni. We are delighted to welcome you..... And continue not doing ordinary.