

Remarks by the Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
East Carolina University Commencement
Greenville, NC
Friday, May 6, 2011

Chancellor Steven Ballard, thank you for that introduction. Provost Sheerer, faculty, family, friends and most of all, the graduates, Class of 2011, of East Carolina University. It is always such an honor for me to be invited to speak to a graduating class, and I'd like to thank you again for the invitation and especially my friend Dr. Austin Bunch, who first brought the idea up.

I am so incredibly impressed by East Carolina and I want to commend you for a few things. First, that East Carolina, for the last couple of years, has been the fastest growing university in North Carolina. Second, that you have become a center of excellence for leadership, living up to your motto of *Servire*, to serve. And third, that you have developed such a wonderful reputation for research and education. That is a testament to the strength of your faculty and the effort of every single student here to make the most of their university experience.

Now, I'm the Secretary of the Navy, and in the real world the Navy takes out pirates, so I'm doubly grateful that you invited me to speak. And this is probably the only time you'll hear me say it, Go Pirates, Arrrr!

For those of you graduating today, congratulations. Congratulations on reaching this day, you have earned it. You have put in the time, you have made the effort. This is your day. But I hope that you appreciate that you could not have gotten here by yourself. You are not sitting here today solely because of what you did in the classroom. You could not have made it to today without a little help from others. Behind every single one of you are parents

and grandparents, brothers and sisters, friends and teachers, coaches and hundreds and hundreds of people you probably don't even know. Take a little time after this ceremony to thank them. Take time today to remember and recognize what they have done for you because in a very real way, today is their day too.

It is also important to remember those who in a larger sense have made all this possible. Like many of you, I watched the President's announcement last Sunday night on my television and gave thanks to the brave men and women of our Armed Forces for what they did to bring the worst terrorist in the modern world, finally, to justice after 10 years of searching and 10 years of conflict. Most of you were probably in middle school, maybe even in elementary school, when 9/11 happened, so for you, this conflict and this world is what you've grown up with.

And while the events of last weekend are extraordinary, and those who conducted the raid are some of our greatest warriors, they are not alone. Thousands upon thousands of Americans wear the uniform and every single one of them is just as professional, just as courageous as those who carried out last week's mission. That each of them has made the choice to serve is something we should all be grateful for, because in total, less than 1 percent of our population is in uniform. One percent protects the other 99. One percent who have given freely of themselves over the past decade.

I am proud and extremely fortunate to be the civilian leader of the Navy and Marine Corps, and over the past two years I've had the opportunity to see this commitment to service first-hand. I've met thousands of our Sailors and Marines on the front lines and serving all around the world. Every single one of them is doing extraordinary things to protect our country and make sure we have the freedom to live our lives.

As an example, right now there are 20,000 Marines in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, many of them from Camp Lejeune, right here in North Carolina. They are consolidating gains made in stability and security throughout the province in order to promote education, good governance and economic development. When they depart, a few years from now, they will leave behind a functioning and more lawful region that respects the rule of law.

Graduates and student reservists from this university have been part of that transformation in Afghanistan. They've been part of the recent relief efforts in Haiti and Japan, part of everything the military does, deploying with the Navy and Marine Corps, as well as with the Army and Air Force, time and again over the past few years to protect our country. Some of them have paid the ultimate sacrifice.

One of them, Sgt. David Smith, US Marine Corps, ECU Class of 2010, killed in Helmand Province in January 2010, was one of your own. Those who serve are your friends, those who serve are your brothers and your sisters, whether you know them or not. They are making a difference, they are doing something for others, something beyond themselves.

Some of you sitting in these seats have been there, or will join those defending our country shortly, and I want to thank East Carolina for its constant support of the military, ROTC and commitment to national service.

But service is not just about the military. Service means so many things, and there are so many ways to make our country better. Service to country and to North Carolina was one of the founding principles of East Carolina University and remains one of your strongest characteristics today.

In 1907, ECU was founded by the North Carolina General Assembly as a teacher training college and ECU still produces more teachers for North Carolina schools than any other university in the state. Within a few months, hundreds of you will be standing alone and unafraid in front of the scariest thing I can imagine - junior high school or high school students.

That initial dedication to service carried on after the Second World War when ECU welcomed back many of the roughly 16 million Americans who served in the war. As they returned, a lot of them wanted to go to college to expand their horizons and be more successful in life. Those very same reasons I suspect most of you are here today. But you have something many of them did not - dorm rooms. Turns out that ECU wasn't really prepared to enroll that many men, because as a teacher training college it had traditionally enrolled women. There are stories of many of the men living in the basketball courts or recreation centers.

This school, your school, after the war created a student body composed of the Greatest Generation, people who had literally saved our country. Those members of the first post-war classes here at ECU were born in the '20s, they grew up during the depression, they were tried and tested at places like Casablanca and Guadalcanal, Anzio and Iwo Jima, Normandy and Midway. Their lives saw more and they experienced more than most of us can even imagine, and they came back from the war to change America.

I want to tell you a story about one of them, a fellow Mississippian of mine, a guy named Jack Lucas. Jack Lucas joined the Marine Corps in WW II at 14 – he lied about his age. And he made it all the way through boot camp and all the way to Hawaii before the Marines found out. They separated him from his unit and said, we're sending you back,

you're too young. Jack Lucas stowed away on the first ship he could, a ship headed for a place called Iwo Jima.

By the time they found him, it was too late to do anything about it and he went ashore in one of the first waves. His unit came under attack and two grenades were thrown at him. Jack grabbed both of them. Now the sand in Iwo Jima is very fine, black volcanic sand. He jammed both of the grenades deep into the sand, both went off, and Jack Lucas was hurt pretty bad. But he wasn't dead. A corpsman found him and evacuated him off the island. After he recovered, he came back from Iwo Jima and went to the White House where he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Then he went back home and started the 9th grade.

You are the inheritors of that legacy, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the Greatest Generation. Your generation has the potential to change America and to change the world for the better just as they did. What you do with their legacy, whether you will be the next Greatest Generation that we produce, whether your accomplishments will be held up 50, 60, or 70 years from now is up to you. Because there is one thing that is certain as you head into an uncertain world – there is no end of things that need doing.

We need teachers educated here at ECU to create the leaders of the generations that will follow you. We need doctors and nurses from ECU to heal the ill and injured in our country and we need biologists and coastal scientists from ECU to heal our planet from the harm of our own excess. We need economists from ECU to realistically confront the budgetary concerns of our nation and address the looming issue of the national debt and continued deficits.

Many of your generation have already made their choice and shown their willingness to do this. The question that I have is, how are you going to join them? Now I know I come here with a certain unique perspective and a certain bias towards military service, but let me be clear: I'm not saying that you have to go into the military to do good. And although we need skilled and dedicated people defending this country, the military is far from the only way to serve.

There are other quiet acts of heroism that go on day after day. It's the act of a teacher, staying after school to help a struggling student. It's the act of a nurse, staying long after the shift is over to be by the bedside of an injured patient. It's the act of a neighbor, shoveling the snow from the walk of an elderly friend without being asked. It's the act of a philanthropist putting people through college without ever telling his own family.

I'm asking every one of you to do something outside yourself, to do something to make a difference, do something to give back to this unique country of ours. Do something to help people you may never know and who may never know what you have done. Do something that is not just about you or your advancement.

Now there is nothing wrong with making money. And there is nothing wrong with seeing how far you can go in your chosen field or profession. And there is absolutely nothing wrong and a lot right with looking after yourself and your family, but at the end of your life, the most important things aren't going to be the money or the stuff that you accumulate. I have never seen a hearse with a U-Haul. The important things will be the people you've touched, the lives you've made better and the futures that you have made brighter.

One of the best things I get to do in this job is to talk to veterans. A few months ago I went on a ship's reunion of the USS *Stephen Potter*, a WWII destroyer that was commissioned in 1943 and decommissioned in the '50s. There were four plankowners there, plankowners are members of the original crew. That crew won 12 battle stars in a year and a half. They left the United States and they didn't come back until the war was over, braving submarine attacks and kamikazes along the way.

Every one of those Sailors told me how important their service was, how important it was to them to do something bigger than themselves; to make a difference. They remembered their service like it was yesterday and after 68 years it had not dimmed in brilliance or significance.

I also meet a lot of people who aren't veterans, but who remember the two years they spent teaching when they were young, or the time they spent as a social worker getting something they cared about put into action, or the church mission trip that they made to build a school or a hospital and build a future for others less fortunate than themselves.

It's not what you do, it is the service that matters. I learned that in my own life. I graduated from the University of Mississippi in 1969, when the Cold War and Vietnam were both at their height. I learned as a 22-year-old naval officer what it means to be a part of a team when lives are at stake. I learned that what I did had ramifications for the next watch, for the next day and for the next year.

Do something in your life that will last. It doesn't have to be the Marine Corps – you may look at the Peace Corps. You don't have to run for office, but vote. Get passionately involved with the events of your time, don't let them pass you by. Get involved in your school or community, get involved in your state or your country, or the world. The Greatest Generation I talked about changed the world. They made it a lot better and you sitting here today have exactly the same opportunity.

I hope you'll do something that you don't see the results of the next day or maybe ever. My father Raymond Mabus Sr., a member of the Greatest Generation, earned his living running a hardware store and growing trees in Ackerman, Mississippi. He died in 1986 when he was 85 years old. In the last year of his life he did not cut a single tree, but he planted tens of thousands. He knew for an absolute fact that he would never see those trees grow. He knew for an absolute fact that he would never get any benefit from a single row. But he planted and he did it as an act of hope, he did it as an act of faith. And he did it for granddaughters and future generations of his family that he'd never know.

Cherish your day, cherish your graduation, you've earned it. But when the day is over, go out and earn some things that will be cherished long after you've gone. Tomorrow, after this wonderful day, ask yourself, what trees am I going to plant?

It's your turn, it's your life. Congratulations.