

Remarks by the Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
Harvard ROTC Commissioning
Wednesday, 23 May 2012

Thank you so much. President Faust, I'm honored to be able to stand here with you today. We commissioned four new officers into the United States military. This has been a big week for me, and it is a big week for me. Yesterday I named a warship after a hero who lives about 20 miles from here. Today I get to join these four brand-new officers as they begin their military journey. And tomorrow I'll get to sit in one of those chairs and be a proud parent as my daughter Elisabeth graduates.

You are about to become a part of a long and illustrious heritage. Every service has played its part and has contributed to the tapestry that is the history of the American military. One act that we honored yesterday still shines brightly over six decades later. Lieutenant Thomas Hudner was a Navy pilot. He went to the Naval Academy during World War II. He grew up in Fall River, Massachusetts; he lives in Concord now.

He was flying off the USS Leyte over the Chosin Reservoir on December 4th, 1950. His wingman was Ensign Jesse Brown. Ensign Brown, who grew up in my home state of Mississippi in the segregated South, was the first African-American naval combat pilot. When he went through flight training with 600 others, he was the only African-American. He didn't have any friends in the Navy, though he did have Tom Hudner as his wingman.

That day, Ensign Brown was shot down and crashed on the side of a very cold, very exposed mountain behind enemy lines. His unit thought he was killed, but he pulled back his canopy and waved. Hudner made a couple of passes over and tried to figure out how to help. He did the only thing he could think of. He put his plane in beside Ensign Brown and crash-landed on the mountain – a wheels-up landing. He got out and ran to the side of Ensign Brown's plane, but Ensign Brown had been injured far too badly to be saved. There was fuel everywhere; there was a fire about to start. Hudner put the fire out by packing snow around Ensign Brown and around the airplane.

He couldn't save Jesse Brown, who died while he was there. But he heard Jesse Brown's last sentence, which was, "Please tell my wife Daisy that I love her." When the helicopter came and rescued Tom Hudner off the side of the mountain and took him back to the carrier Leyte, he was then sent to Washington, where he was awarded, four months later, the Medal of Honor and was able to deliver the message to Ensign Brown's widow.

The newest U.S. Navy destroyer, DDG 116, will be named USS Thomas Hudner.

That's the legacy that you are inheriting. That's the heritage that you now take up. Tom Hudner is the personification of courage, of heroism, of loyalty. And there are literally thousands of stories like his. The people who went before you in the American military fought at the dawn of our nation at Lexington and Concord. They were on the USS Constitution, now

anchored a few miles from here at Boston Harbor, two hundred years ago this year against His Majesty's Ship Guerriere, when our new independence was threatened.

They were at the gates of Chapultepec. They were at Antietam, at Mobile Bay, at Gettysburg, as the country's very existence was tested. They went up San Juan Hill behind the Harvard alumnus. They followed Belleau Wood at the Muese in the North Atlantic. They were at Midway and Peleliu and Normandy. They were at the frozen Chosin in Korea and Hue and Danang and on Yankee Station in Kuwait, Fallujah and Sangin.

They have fought for America in every element there is: on land; in the air; on, under and above the sea. And every time – every time Harvard graduates have been there. Excepting West Point and Annapolis, Harvard University has, in its ranks as graduates, the most recipients of the Medal of Honor in this country.

And these battles, these famous battles that we all learn about and we all know about, they're known and they resonate down through the ages. But those who served before you in the U.S. military have also healed the sick and the wounded. They have comforted the bereaved. They have brought justice and protected those in need. They were pioneers in ending the shame of segregation. And they have been part of the struggle to ensure that no one is limited because of race or gender or sexual orientation in our society. They have challenged convention and expanded our universe from medicine to the moon.

But for me personally, the Navy represents a circle completed. More than 40 years ago, I reported to my ship in the Boston Naval Shipyard as a brand-new officer, much like the brand-new ensigns we have in front of us today. And by the way, you're the most dangerous thing in the U.S. military, a junior officer. When I reported, we were engaged in a war which had split this country. The conflict over the purpose of that war spilled into a conflict over the people who served in it. And when I ended my military service and came to law school here, ROTC was gone.

I am very proud that our country today may debate the purpose of a war but is united in the support of the warriors who fight. And I am proud to have been a partner with President Drew Faust. Having President Faust as a partner in bringing ROTC back to Harvard was one of the great delights I have had in this job. She has supported the military at Harvard. She has supported the inclusion of all communities at Harvard into military service. She has been a great partner, a great scholar and a great president of this great university.

Both parties, Harvard and the military, have benefited mightily from this partnership. The military should be representative of the country it protects. And a great university and its students should be exposed to the fullest range of ideas and experiences and perspectives.

So today we recognize four new Harvard graduates. We commission them as officers of the United States military: Almost Second Lieutenant Victoria Migdal; new Second Lieutenant Isaiah Peterson; Second Lieutenant Nicole Unis; and Ensign Evan Roth. We have a future Medical Corps officer, an intelligence officer, a judge advocate and a surface warfare officer. You have the full range of our military ability sitting on the stage right here.

This is a proud moment in a proud heritage. And it stretches back over 236 years to the birth of our republic and the birth of our military. To praise another Harvard alumnus, President John F. Kennedy, when he visited Annapolis almost 50 years ago: Any man or woman who may be asked what they did to make their life worthwhile can respond with a great deal of pride and satisfaction by saying: I graduated from Harvard. I served in the United States military.

Thank you very much.