

Remarks by the Honorable Ray Mabus
Secretary of the Navy
New England College Commencement
Henniker, NH
Saturday, May 15, 2010

Mr. (John) Samenfeld, thank you for that introduction. President (Michele) Perkins, faculty, family, friends and most of all the graduates, Class of 2010, of New England College.

But there is one more person I want to pick out in the audience and that is my friend and fellow former ambassador, George Bruno ... [inaudible].

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, you could not have done this by yourself. You are not sitting here today solely because of your own efforts. You could not have made it without a little help.

Behind every single one of you are parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, friends and teachers, coaches and hundreds and hundreds of people you probably don't even know. Take a little while after this ceremony to thank them, and it's a southern thing - give them a hug. Take time today to remember and recognize what they have done for you because in a very real sense, today is their day too.

It is also important to remember those who in a larger sense have made all this possible. Today, May 15th, is Armed Forces Day, established by President Harry Truman in 1949, the year after New England College's first class, to thank members of the Armed Services for their service and their sacrifice.

Armed Forces Day echoes the reasons behind the establishment of New England College. In 1946, this institution was established primarily to educate veterans returning from World War II. Roughly 16 million Americans served in the second World War, and as they returned a lot of them wanted to go to college to expand their horizons to be more successful in life. The same reasons that I suspect most of you are here today.

President Perkins, I want to thank you and the entire college for continuing that founding vision through your veterans outreach and the Yellow Ribbon program. Your commitment to those who have given so much is thanks made tangible.

This school, your school, began with a student body composed of the Greatest Generation, citizens who had literally saved our country. One million of them died or were wounded in the war. Those members of the first classes at New England College 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.

One of them was George Boucher, class of '50 New England College, born in Manchester in 1927 and enlisted in the Navy as soon as he was old enough. He participated in the liberation of the Philippines and the invasion of Okinawa. On Christmas Day in 1944, his ship was torpedoed in the Leyte Gulf. After the war, he came here to Henniker, he got his degree and went back on active duty in the Navy for 21 more years. He went on to become an agent for the Air Force Office of Special Investigations, and after a second retirement worked for the New Hampshire Board of Welfare.

Another was Milan Knight, who was in the second graduating class, one of 29 in the class of '49, who after service in the Pacific came here to Henniker to become a teacher. He went on to get a Masters in Education from BU and taught in Barkhamsted, Connecticut for 32 years.

Both great solid minds; both of them learned what they needed to know here at New England College. Both of them graduated and went on to make their countries and their communities better. Both of them made a difference. These are only two among hundreds of thousands of similar stories across the United States.

I want to tell you one more story about a fellow Mississippian. 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. He didn't know where he was going and it turned out he was going to 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 came into his position, and Jack grabbed both of them and fell on them. Now the sand in Iwo Jima is very fine, black volcanic sand. He jammed both of the grenades deep into the sand and both of them went off, and Jack Lucas was hurt pretty bad. But he wasn't dead, though his mates thought he was, so he raised his hands to signal for a corpsman. They patched him up. 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 to Mississippi where he started the 9th grade.

You, today's graduates, are the inheritors of that legacy, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the Greatest Generation. You have 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 to educate the generations that will follow you – will you do that? We need people to heal the divisiveness in our country and to heal our planet from the harm of our own excess – will you do that?

Some of your generation have already made their choice and shown their willingness to do this. Some of you sitting here as graduates today, graduates who have already served, who have been to Iraq and Afghanistan and came back here on the GI Bill and the Yellow Ribbon program just like those first students in the 1940s. And I want to take a moment on Armed Forces Day and graduation day at New England College to recognize the veterans in the audience.

Today, fewer than 1 percent of Americans wear the uniform of America. That 1 percent protects the other 99. And that 1 percent have already made their choice in life, showing their willingness. There's 20,000 Marines today in Afghanistan there's an additional 20,000 Sailors afloat and ashore throughout the Middle East on the ground fighting the wars and on the seas fighting piracy. They are the soldiers and the airmen along the DMZ [demilitarized zone] in Korea. They are the Coast Guardsmen in the Caribbean fighting the drug trade. They are the Sailors and Marines building

partnerships in Africa, the Pacific and South America. They went to Indonesia right after the tsunami, to Haiti after the earthquake and they went to Louisiana and Mississippi after Katrina. They are your friends, they 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.

And the question that I have is, are you going to join them? I'm not saying that you have to risk your life. 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 father putting people through college without ever telling his family.

That last story, involved a good friend of mine who only found out about her father's generosity at his funeral, when person after person came up to her to express their thanks for the difference her father had made in their lives by giving them a chance at an education.

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.

I am privileged to lead the Navy and Marine Corps, the greatest expeditionary fighting force the world has ever known, and one of the best things I get to do in this job is to talk to veterans. Last week 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. They fought in the Battle of the Philippine Sea and at Truk, at Okinawa, in the Marshalls and in the Carolines. 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 67 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 put in getting something they cared about put into action, or the mission trip that they made to build a school or a hospital, and build a future for others far away.

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 he'd never know and he did it for the generations in his family that he would 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.