

Ceremonial Guard Graduation

29 May 2009

Good morning families, friends, distinguished guests, and of course, graduates. Thank you for this tremendous opportunity to speak to you on such an important day. I don't know of a single person who has attended a graduation just to hear the guest speaker's remarks, so I'll keep mine brief.

Today is a day of celebration. We celebrate you and all you have accomplished so far. We celebrate the friends and family that have supported you along the way. And we celebrate the very special journey on which you are about to embark as a member of the United States Navy Ceremonial Guard.

But first, I would like to extend my congratulations to all of the Guardsmen in the audience for being the 2009 Joint Service Drill Team Champions. Our drill team defeated the Honor Guards from all of the other services in competition – a truly impressive accomplishment! Graduates, you are joining the ranks of the very best!

I think all of you will agree with me when I say it was not an easy road to get here. For those who may not yet fully grasp the magnitude of this achievement, it is important to look back at where our graduates started and what they have accomplished to be here today.

These Sailors report here straight from Boot Camp in Great Lakes, Illinois. They represent the very best of our new recruits, voluntarily postponing “A” school for the opportunity to serve in the Ceremonial Guard. Only 1% of those considered for service in the Ceremonial Guard are selected.

The Navy Ceremonial Guard is an organization steeped in Navy tradition, proudly representing the Navy, and the nation, at important events for more than 75 years. For many, the Ceremonial Guard is the “face” of the Navy.

Upon arrival, they must go through up to 10 weeks of rigorous training involving a constant routine of marching, rifle-handling, and intense uniform inspections with a single purpose in mind – absolute perfection.

The lessons they started to learn in boot camp have been reinforced over the past several weeks – Discipline. Teamwork. Leadership. Honor. Courage. Commitment.

Although you have completed your training here, this is just the beginning. Much will be expected of you in the next two years, but this level of responsibility does not come without reward. You will have the opportunity to experience things that most Sailors will not, from:

Honoring foreign dignitaries and world leaders at the White House
Providing Navy “presence” at important ceremonies around the country
And of course, the most solemn honor of representing the President of the United States, a grateful nation, and a proud Navy at the funerals of our fallen shipmates.

These are experiences that you will remember for a lifetime.

I have been involved as an escort in several funerals with the Ceremonial Guard, including the one for my father-in-law who served in World War II. Every one was both inspiring and comforting. Even though he had been retired for 40 years when he passed away, it meant so much to our family to have the Ceremonial Guard present as a final “thank you” for his service to the nation.

You will do many of these ceremonies. Always remember that by participating in these ceremonies, you are honoring all those who have served before you. Thank you in advance for paying this debt of gratitude on behalf of the Navy and the nation.

As always, these Sailors would not be where they are today without the support and encouragement from family and friends. You ALL have been vital to the success of these graduates. Thank you for all you have contributed to the development of these fine individuals who stand before you.

Your support will be increasingly important as they transition from their time with the Ceremonial Guard to subsequent training and ultimately, out to the fleet. The work there will also be difficult and the hours frequently long, but it is critically important work. I encourage you to draw upon the lessons you learned while serving with the Ceremonial Guard to be successful, especially those lessons about teamwork, dedication, and leadership.

As we celebrate “today,” it may be difficult to think beyond your time with the Ceremonial Guard, maybe even beyond the next year. But that time will be here before you know it. You will each go on to do different things in the Navy, but all of you will be part of a unique group called United States Sailors.

Before I leave you today, I would like to share with you a few thoughts about your Navy and what to expect as you move forward in your naval career.

Stabilizing the Force

We are at the point where we are stabilizing the size of the Navy to meet the demands of the Maritime Strategy and the joint force.

We are focusing on performance – our goal is to retain our best Sailors with the right skills, balance the force in terms of seniority, experience, and skills, and continue to attract our nation’s best and brightest through recognition of Navy as a “Top 50” employer.

“Top 50” Organization

What does being a “Top 50” employer mean?

We believe a “Top 50” organization provides a work environment that is personally and professionally rewarding. We are doing this by focusing on three areas: taking care of our people, embracing diversity, and emphasizing performance

Taking care of our people

As a Sailor in the Navy, you have the opportunity to take advantage of some great benefits.

You get 30 days of paid annual leave a year. Only 41% of the civilian workforce gets anything comparable.

You are eligible for free health care and full retirement benefits after 20 years of service.

In addition, as members of the Ceremonial Guard, you receive special pay and meritorious advancement to E-3 upon completion of initial training.

Embracing diversity

We recognize the value of diversity - diversity of ideas, perspectives, and experiences that can only come from tapping into the diversity of our nation, a nation that is changing.

Did you know that 70% of new workers entering the workforce today are women and minorities and that women make up over half of the college graduates in the United States?

We are seeing this talent enter the Navy in greater numbers. You can see the progress we are making right here within the Navy Ceremonial Guard.

Navy was among the first of the services to welcome enlisted women into its honor guard ranks. In fact, fourteen years ago, my Chief Strategist was the Officer in Charge of the Navy Ceremonial guard - the first female commander of any service's honor guard. We are currently the only service that has women performing on their drill team.

We also have three generations serving in our Navy right now. All of you graduating today represent the more than 40,000 Millennials we are bringing into the Navy every year. More so than previous generations, you seek flexible careers that allow for greater life-work integration.

The strong desire for career flexibility is a common thread across all of these groups, and we recognize this. We are implementing programs

and policies focused on flexibility to attract and retain this talent. One example is our Career Intermission Pilot Program that enables Sailors to take a break from service to attend to important personal life events without having a negative impact on their careers.

Emphasizing performance

There will always be a place in the Navy for top performers – do your best, seek challenging assignments, and take full advantage of the tremendous education and training opportunities that are available to you.

The Post 9/11 GI Bill has expanded the educational benefits available to you from \$36,000 to an average of \$78,000 for 36 months of education. In addition, you have the option of transferring these educational benefits to your spouse or children.

The Navy also offers the Credentialing Opportunities Online Program or COOL – this program can help you identify civilian credentials including certifications, licenses, and apprenticeships, related to specific ratings. Over 8,000 certifications have been attained by Sailors throughout the fleet. I encourage you to check out the Navy COOL website and keep up with all of the information available on Navy Personnel Command’s website.

It is important for you to stay informed. Learn about your profession and understand the tremendous benefits associated with being a Navy Sailor. Compare the benefits Navy provides to any “Top 50” employer in the world – we can stand toe-to-toe with them.

This leads me to my last message: these are hard times for many Americans and indeed, many people throughout the world.

It is in times like these that we are reminded of the significance of our service and the importance of our daily contributions.

This is my charge to you - Be proud of yourselves for your success here. Make wise choices in your professional and personal lives. Focus on your long-term goals and make every day count towards achieving them. Most of all, take good care of yourselves and each other.

Thank you for your decision to join the Ceremonial Guard and thank you for your service. In pursuing this career path, you have chosen to give more than your peers and for that, I commend you.

To the families here today, thank you again for your support of these fine Sailors. You have entrusted your loved ones to us and we are committed to taking care of them.

It has been my pleasure to speak to you today. I wish everyone the best of luck in the future. Thank you.