



Kimberly C. Field, retired U.S. Army brigadier general

Commencement 2018 remarks

Parents, grandparents, guests, and members of the Class of 2018, Mr. Chairman, Trustees:

When your Headmaster asked me to speak to you today, I was thrilled. Then I remembered I was never an 18 year old man on the verge of adulthood. Clearly. THEN I remembered that I spent 31 years in the Army surrounded by the best and the worst of male behavior, observing the magic of brotherhood like the one you have built, as well as the thoughtfulness, compassion and even valor, from comrades in arms like your headmaster. Maybe more importantly, I am also the mother of 4 sons (and a male dog). So, I am absolutely delighted and honored to speak to you young men today on a topic dear to me.

That topic is: service is the greatest privilege in life.

This past Veteran's Day, I put that idea out for discussion in the opinion section of the Washington Post – that piece prompted Dr. Nagl's request to speak to you.

In short, I claimed that in response to "thank you for your service," an appropriate response might be, "it was my privilege." And "thank you for yours." Veterans are trusted, thanked, compensated, respected and even admired. Our service allows us to operate way up in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, to a place of esteem, even self-actualization. We are privileged to have had this opportunity. I felt and feel GRATEFUL.

But the thanks we veterans receive has always made me uncomfortable and I couldn't quite put my finger on why – after all, didn't our service come with sacrifice? In my case, it was much less than some, but gut-wrenching to leave my boys for almost 4 years. It was scarring to lose my driver to an improvised explosive device. So what gave?

I thought back to when I was 27 – five short years out of college. I was commanding a Military Police company in Somalia, just prior to the time of “Blackhawk Down.” Our mission was to provide armed escort for food moving from the port of Mogadishu to the interior of the country. Somalia was in the middle of a civil war and a famine and Somalis were literally starving to death.

I recalled a spectacular sunny afternoon like most afternoons in Somalia, when my patrol heard a firefright behind us, right after we had rolled through. We immediately turned our three gun-trucks around and came upon what any American would consider a horrifying scene. An overturned banana truck, people shot, maimed and bleeding. As I was treating gunshot wounds surrounded by bananas and bodies, it struck me that no one was crying. There was no hysteria. There was unbelievable calm; death was an everyday part of life. These people knew sacrifice.

This idea of “service?” This environment was all about *survival*. Those obligatory volunteer hours that made your and my boys' college applications look good? It could have been a different planet, a different species. And it hit me why I felt uncomfortable when people thanked me. I had seen so many people who would have given anything to serve the way I was privileged to serve, to *RECEIVE* all those intangibles I could feel from serving.

Now, having said that, service takes many forms. You will find many different forms. Those Somali clan elders are still – to this day – trying hard to meet the needs of their families. The cashier at Giant supermarket – perhaps a single mom working 2 jobs – who is steadfastly cheerful and patient in the face of her customers' impatience and her

own hardships, is serving. So where is the *privilege* beyond the obligation to just be nice? It is this: those of us who are offered the opportunity to achieve our potential AND earn the trust and admiration of our fellow man - and most importantly, are rightfully pleased with the man in the mirror - are privileged. Those of us who can relatively *easily* do as Aristotle suggests when he answered the question, “what is the essence of life?” with, “to serve others and to do good,” are just plain lucky. You have extraordinary opportunity to do that *on a scale the* cashier and the Somali elder cannot. What a privilege. So much to be grateful for.

Where have you seen this in your lives so far? Who are your heroes other than - obviously! - the Philadelphia Eagles? Does your departing Upper School Head, Matt Green, perhaps come to mind? I have heard he cared about each one of you individually, and enforced discipline with a smile.

He loves his profession, has mastered it, and has earned the satisfaction of knowing he has helped mold an amazing group of young leaders. The thing is, I am sure Matt is grateful.

So please forgive me my earlier somber Somali example; this is a celebration and indeed you have earned the right to celebrate! I understand that you have been awarded second best squash team in America; that Swim and Dive won Easterns for the first time in school history; your crew varsity 4 is first in the nation; and your Robotics team 4th in the world! Holy Cow, I think my high school got third place in county Division C, Girls Field Hockey back in 1976.

Let these accomplishments serve as great reminders of your wonderful potential – potential to earn the privilege to serve. So with that, I’d like to make two main points on the privilege of service, as you close this chapter and enter another.

First, now is the time for necessary selfishness. In other words, this time is for you to focus on fulfilling your ultimate potential. This is in good part where privilege of

service is built. As you take your first steps toward self-sufficiency, you will make more independent choices: *which* knowledge and skills you will accumulate; how you will tend to your minds, bodies, souls; which relationships and interests are most fulfilling. Be thoughtful about that. You may have to untether yourself from others' expectations – even your parents – to do those things. You might not have to follow Steve Jobs – the late founder of Apple – extreme example of dropping out of full time college in order to drop *in* on the classes that actually interested him, but you get the idea. Pay attention to what lifts your spirits. Let me qualify that ... in college there are lots of things that can lift your spirits and while I hope you do have fun, that is NOT what I am talking about.

Work *hard* at building your scaffolding **your** way in order to maximize your potential ... potential to earn the privilege of service.

My husband and I both went to West Point – and perhaps this is a good time to say to the two classmates who are going to West Point and Annapolis, “welcome to the profession of arms; we are so glad to have you!” ... and maybe this is also a good time to say “Beat Navy!” Sorry, John. I digress ... I retired as a General Officer. My husband was a Special Forces officer and therefore for my boys every 3 mile hike turned into 13, literally from the age of 5. Despite all this, not a single one of them chose to join the military. I to make a deliberate decision not to be even slightly sheepish when people asked, “how many are in the military?” My boys have certainly untethered themselves; and I am proud of them for that ... as your parents will be of the fine young men they have raised ... even if you don't call home as often as they would like, and even if you – like my sons! - are a little slower discovering your paths than they would like. You will discover what you actually love and excel at and only from there – with grace, a little luck, and a lot of hard work ... Haverford has demanded you worked hard, so you know how to do that ... will you be able to exercise this privilege of service.

Second, practice the good stuff as you go. While you are exercising that necessary selfishness, I suggest you test and practice the fundamentals that will allow you to serve and serve with a spirit of gratitude and humility. I am talking about the importance of the seemingly unimportant – the things that every day exhibit who you are. What are they? Well, honestly, I have no idea what they are for you; you will refine your personal

set of guiding values over your college years. But I will share a quick example of what I mean for *me*: I got bruises on my thighs. Seriously ... bruises right here on the front of my thighs. Now I realize that to imagine the thighs of a middle-aged woman is enough to make many of you say, "just send me my diploma in the mail"... but bear with this quick story.

I was a Colonel, serving as executive officer to the commander of all operations across Afghanistan. Talk about a privileged position. I was his right hand, basically arranging how the boss would spend his time, sitting in meetings with the President of Afghanistan, traveling the country with him by Black Hawk and C130 to understand better how to fight the Taliban and build a good Afghan government. About 6 months into the job, I developed a band of bruises across the middle of my thighs. I could not figure out why. Perhaps I picked up some kind of rare disease from eating under-cooked goat meat. Then one day, a junior officer walked in - and most in the HQ were junior to me - and I stood up to talk with him. He said "Ma'am, you don't have to stand up for *me*! I stand for *you*. You're really busy." In that moment I became conscious of this soreness across my legs; I stood up to speak with a hundred people a day and as I did, I leaned toward the visitor, into the edge of my handmade plywood desk. Hence, the bruising. A couple years later, another officer in that HQ at the time said, "Kim, you listened to everyone and it really made the headquarters run better."

Lest you think I am saying how great I am, I don't think that *at all*. It was the smallest of things, the easiest of things - for me. It is actually so easy to be humble and show people you are genuinely listening for the value they are certainly adding. Those things are important to me. What's important to you that will help remind you that to serve others is a privilege? What inconveniences will you bear? What indispensable and essential bruises will you pick up?

Such an exciting time. The world is huge with its endless opportunities, and yet small enough that young men like you have a privileged opportunity to really make a difference - from any path you choose to walk. I have heard your plans and I have had a glimpse of your character. It's all there, all wonderful. I know your marvelous education at Haverford, your extraordinary staff and faculty, and this enduring

brotherhood you have formed, have put life in the words that infuse this school's mission and vision – character and citizenship. So in this next phase, I simply encourage you to consider that this opportunity you have had to build your character and learn about citizenship, is a remarkable gift. And that gift has moved you one step closer to understanding that service is a privilege.

So when that single mom cashier thanks me for my military service, I am humbled, knowing I would not want to change places with her. I am grateful. And I acknowledge she is serving too, and likewise, I am grateful for *her* service. But goodness, what a privilege I have had – and what a privilege of service you have in front of you.

You have worked hard here and done so beautifully. Congratulations and very best wishes to you all.

Kimberly C. Field is a retired U.S. Army brigadier general. Field now works at Creative Associates in Washington, D.C. Her most recent government position was Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, which is a two-star general position in the State Department. She retired from the U.S. Army as a Brigadier General in 2015 from the position of Joint Staff Deputy Director for Political-Military Affairs for the Middle East, having previously served as the Army's Deputy Director of Strategy, Plans and Policy.

After commissioning from West Point in 1987 as a Military Police officer, General Field served in a variety of command and staff positions in the United States, Germany, Iraq, the Balkans, Somalia, and Afghanistan. She has four combat tours.

Field holds a Master of Law and Diplomacy from the Fletcher School, a master's degree from the Army War College, and studied Russian at the Defense Foreign Language Institute. She has published numerous articles and is an adjunct professor with the U.S. Army War College.