

Honor Coin Presentation Speech
Part of Another Link in the Chain Program
Delivered by VADM Michael Haskins, USN (Ret.)
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Commandant, classmates and wives of our great Class of 1966, and most importantly, members of the Class of 2016: it is an honor and pleasure to be able to spend time with you this evening.

On behalf of the Class of 1966, I want to congratulate each member of the Class of 2016 for achieving your goal to become a Midshipman, and I want to thank you for choosing the “road less travelled,” which is to serve and protect your country. There may be days ahead, in the next few years, when some of you may wonder if you made the right choice; let me assure you right here and now that you did. I am proud of each and every one of you for making that choice.

The ceremony this evening is part of the program we call “Another Link in the Chain”, which, in this case links the Class of '66 with your Class of '16. That chain with those links is prominently displayed on the front and back of the Naval Academy ring that every graduate is entitled to wear. We were where you are 50 years ago, and we are committed to supporting you by providing guidance when asked for, and sharing the wisdom and experience we have accumulated in our lives. We are looking forward to getting to meet you, sharing special moments in your life here during the next four

years, and forming a bond of friendship. As part of “wisdom and experience,” I will tell you two things that I hope will help you when things get hard for you here. First, you need to know that you can make it through this place and graduate, regardless of how hard and impossible it seems. You would not have been selected if you could not. It may take a lot of hard work and perseverance, but you can do it. Second, when you start having doubts about being able to make it, pick out a Midshipman in the Class of 2015, and say to yourself, “I know I am better than that Mid, and if he/she made it through so far, I certainly can.” For a very convincing effect, pick one who is clearly not the sharpest knife in the drawer, if you get my drift. My advice is to stay the course, and you will never regret that you stayed and graduated.

After five weeks here, you have figured out that this place really is extremely different from a normal college experience. The reason for this is simple. The purpose of every college and university is to provide a Bachelor’s degree, and those with ROTC add a bit of military training. The purpose of the Naval Academy is to provide strong ethical leaders to the Navy and Marine Corps, and by the way, get you a Bachelor of Science degree in the process. Your education and training have been very carefully tailored to meet the moral, mental, and physical requirements of leaders who will make a real difference in the lives of people. The subjects I will talk about tonight will never be discussed in any University classroom, which is very sad because they are applicable to everyone’s life.

I say all of this because you need to clearly understand that you will have a very different life from your civilian counterparts. You took an Oath where you swore that you will defend our country and our way of life. You now have a life that has a noble purpose that is greater than you. What you do is important to the citizens of our country--and they recognize it. They wish their lives were as significant—I know this because even some CEOs of large corporations have said this to me. For the next four years, your role in this life of service to our country is to do your very best as a Midshipman in every facet of life here so you will be the best leader in your first assignment in the Fleet, the best leader for the rest of your life.

Now comes the really important part of this presentation so listen very carefully—if you miss any part, it will be your loss. Bottom line: you snooze, you lose. Clear your brain of your rates, menus for the next three meals, information your upper classmen have told you to memorize, and other thoughts. When the upper classmen ask you why you do not know your stuff, tell them Admiral Haskins said it was OK for this one time. While they are laughing in your face, keep in mind that it is very hard to scream with anger and laugh at the same time.

I am now going to share with you the Secret of How to Become the Best Navy/Marine Corps Officer, the best person (well beyond your time in the Naval Service and any other career), and what author Matthew Kelly calls the “Best Possible Version of Yourself”.

Honor, Courage, Commitment, Integrity—these are much more than the Core Values of the Navy/Marine Corps. (I know we added Integrity, and I will explain why when I get to it.) These are the four cornerstones of your ethical foundation and determine who you really are and thus what kind of leader and person you become. By the choices you make on a daily basis each of these will be enhanced or weakened. The good news is that you have full control of the four, while most other things that impact your life are out of your control—as you have seen firsthand since you’ve been here. I am going to talk about these not in an academic, philosophical, or idealistic manner but in a real life manner and will include personal experiences.

HONOR: I will not bother with any definition because you have already had many hours on the Honor Concept. We can use “not lying, cheating, or stealing”. We all know how hard it is to always tell the truth regardless of the consequences, how easy it is to rationalize that in our society everyone lies and cheats and, after all, “nobody will be hurt”. The truth is that while not everyone lies and cheats, it is widespread. And society is worse because of that. But you now live in a society called “The Military” where honor is the norm—and lying and cheating are unacceptable. There is no remediation program in the Fleet. I have personally seen officers from Lieutenants all the way up to Admirals get fired for it. The truth also is that someone always gets hurt. No one likes to be lied to; when you do, all respect and trust towards you is lost. When you cheat by downloading an academic paper and submitting it as your own work, you are cheating your classmates, because you are

increasing your academic standing over them dishonestly—so much for classmate loyalty. Talking about classmate loyalty and honor, I must warn you about a temptation that many of you will face, so listen carefully. Since the first day you got here, your upperclassmen have emphasized your loyalty towards your classmates, using terms like “never ‘bilge’ a classmate, be selfless, do almost anything to help a classmate in need.” All this is very commendable and important for military and personal success. This bond between classmates will last a lifetime and will probably be your strongest human bond, short of marriage and parenthood. Here is the temptation. There will be a day when a classmate will ask you to lie for him/her. Most probably the reason will be to avoid severe punishment involving a regulation violation. He/she will normally not use the term “lie” but rather say something like “cover for me”. Do not do it!! Honor is your most precious treasure—do not give it away. Classmate loyalty ends where honor begins. Ask yourself what kind of classmate would ask you to sacrifice your honor; the answer is not a real classmate. Also do not volunteer to lie, and if a classmate volunteers to lie for you, kindly refuse the offer—you do not want to be responsible for a classmate losing his/her honor. I want to leave you with a saying that will alert you to this temptation and provide you with guidance on what to do. “Loyalty above all else, except Honor.” I say again, “Loyalty above all else, except Honor.” One other helpful hint of how to determine what the right thing to do is: If you or others start thinking or saying things like, “no one will ever find out” or “there’s no way we’ll get caught,” you already know that is not the right thing to do.

I now want to stress the great aspects of Honor and the Honor Concept. In these next four years, you will have the opportunity to strengthen your sense of honor by making it a repeated habit and your default position, so as the philosopher Aristotle said, “it will become part of your character.” Use the Honor concept as your shield to protect you against those temptations and criticisms you may get for being honest. You will gain the trust, confidence, and respect of those who really count and who can recognize goodness when they see it. Earning the trust, confidence, and respect of your Sailors and Marines is key to being a good leader, and it is why Honor is so valued in the military.

I will now tell you a story of how this became clear to me. I was a LTJG on what was supposed to be my final flight in the training command. This was a Monday, and I was supposed to get my wings of Gold on Friday. My co-pilot was also a student aviator, and we were flying a two-engine S-2 aircraft, which as is the case with most of the aircraft I flew, you can only see in air shows or air museums. It was a routine, day/night flight—take off from NAS Corpus Christi, Texas in the afternoon, fly around South Texas, land at NAS Dallas, refuel, and fly back to Corpus Christi at night. I flew the leg up to Dallas and my co-pilot was to fly the leg back to Corpus Christi. Everything went smoothly, although it had been raining heavily in Dallas. No problem for fully instrument-qualified pilots. The rain stopped soon after we landed in Dallas, and by the time we taxied, the skies were clear. I was in the right seat, copying our

clearance—which was permission to fly the route we planned to fly—and just as I finished reading it back to the ground controller, I heard the engines revved up, as though we were going to take off. I immediately looked up, saw that we were not moving, looked over at my co-pilot and yelled “what the heck”—or words to that effect. He said he might have taxied off the right side of the taxiway, and thought more power could get him back on. I looked out my window, and sure enough, the right main mount (that’s the right wheel) was just off the taxiway in the mud. We tried jolting it again—No luck—the airplane did not budge. I called Ground Control and told them we were stuck in the mud and please send help. Soon we had a full maintenance crew plus a huge crane and the biggest ‘budha’ I had ever seen—a ‘budha’ is that tow truck that pulls your airplane out of the gate area to the taxiway where they start up their engines. This ‘budha’ was four times that size. Within 30 minutes they got the airplane on the taxiway, the Maintenance team checked the main mount and nose gear, and the Maintenance Chief told me everything was perfect. I asked if there was any Maintenance paper work I need to take back to Corpus Christi, and he said “No,” since no Maintenance work needed to be done. I called Corpus, told them our estimated arrival time, and we flew back. On the way, my co-pilot said that since the airplane was perfectly fine and we had no Maintenance paperwork, maybe we did not have to tell anyone. I told him that I signed for the airplane, so I was responsible for it, and would take care of it. He noted it might affect my getting my wings—I knew that the moment we got stuck in the mud. When we landed, I went to Maintenance

control to fill out standard paperwork you do after every flight, and when I walked in, the Chief at the desk asked how the flight went. I said it was great, until we taxied the plane off the side of the taxiway and got stuck in the mud. I told him how they pulled us out, and he asked if Maintenance had inspected it. I said yes and noted that the Chief said “no paperwork required.” He nodded, and then asked, “If everything was fine, and there is no paper trail, why did you tell me?” I said, “Well, these airplanes are under your care, and I thought you should know in case you wanted to have your Maintenance folks check it out in the light of day.” He said “Thanks, you are right; I will have my team check it in the morning.” I asked if there was anyone else I had to tell and he said “No, I’ve got it from here.” As I was walking out, he said, “Lieutenant, I hope I have a chance to serve with you in the Fleet. I said, “Thanks, Chief, I would like that.” He then smiled and said, “By the way, the Maintenance Chief in Dallas is a friend, and called me right after you took off from Dallas.” When I was changing out of my flight suit, it dawned on me why he said he wanted to serve with me. TRUST, CONFIDENCE, AND RESPECT—you earn it with Honorable, respectful actions.

COURAGE: When we hear that word, we think of Physical Courage in combat, jumping on the grenade, holding off the enemy even when outnumbered. I will talk of another kind of courage which will be much more a part of your life, and already has been—that is Moral Courage. I will link the two of them at the end. Moral Courage is the choice to do the right thing regardless of the consequences to you or the pressures

placed upon you to act differently.. It is your willingness to speak up or take action to promote the good and prevent the bad. It is the selfless step you take to tell the truth when others would have you lie; it is your intervening when someone is being wrongfully harassed, insulted, or discriminated against; and it is holding people accountable when they have done something wrong. It means having the courage to live your life in accordance with your universal moral values, and cast aside the nonsense that individuals can have their own set of values (relativism). In short, Moral Courage is a selfless action taken for the sole purpose of saying or doing what is right, while others would remain silent or look the other way. Leaders must display Moral Courage, teach it to their subordinates both verbally and by the leader's own actions, and encourage subordinates to exercise it themselves.

Now to the link with Physical Courage: I have had the honor and privilege to talk to a number of Navy Cross and Medal of Honor awardees, and have asked them how they were able to act in such an incredible manner. The answer was the same from each one, and was stated in a very humble manner. "I simply saw what had to be done, and went out and did it." When I asked about concern for their own welfare, they said, "When people are shooting at you, you are already as scared as you can be, so you just do what has to be done." In short, a selfless act to do the right thing. If you want to prepare yourself to be able to display Physical Courage in combat, or when you see a car or house on fire with people trapped inside,

make Moral Courage part of your character. Selfless action to do what is right.

COMMITMENT: Commitment is simply saying you are going to do something, and then doing it. When you took the Oath of Office, you made a series of commitments that will change your life in a wonderful way. You made a commitment not only to defend our country and uphold its ideals and principles, but also to assume leadership and responsibility for the young men and women placed under your charge—they are this country's most precious treasure. Their lives and their success will depend on your making the right decisions and motivating them to achieve and surpass the Service's objectives and their own personal goals. You will not do this through your words, but by your actions, which must always be beyond reproach. This is a mighty obligation that you will fulfill through selfless ethical leadership, personal example, and genuine concern for the welfare of your people. Your reward will be much more than mission or personal success; it will be the knowledge that you changed their professional and personal lives for the better. To achieve this, you have made a commitment to take full advantage of your four years here, and your time in the Fleet, to strengthen your character, learn your job, and hold yourself and those who work for you accountable for your and their actions. When you reach my age you will find out that your fulfillment of these commitments will be your most prized possession.

INTEGRITY: Integrity is the result of repeatedly and regularly using Honor and Moral Courage in your daily lives until they become part of your character. People, especially when under pressure, act in accordance with their character. A person of Integrity is one who is considered to have a strong Moral Character. You determine what your character is by the choices you make in matters involving moral principles. The good news is that you are the one making those choices, so as I mentioned before, your Honor and your Character are under your control. The bad news is that often the wrong choice (lying, cheating, failing to do the right thing) seems to be the easier, less painful thing to do, and you can twist your brain to rationalize that in this case, it is OK. Being dishonest is never right, it corrupts your character.

The secret to become the best Navy/Marine Corps Officer, the best person, and the “best possible version of yourself” is to become that Person of Integrity. Your Sailors and Marines will not care what your major was, or what your class standing was; they will want to know what your character is. They will want to know if you can make the hard and right decisions and whether you care as much about them as you do about yourself. They want to be led by an officer of demonstrated Integrity. It is all about Trust, Confidence, and Respect. When it is all said and done, you will be defined by your Character, not by how rich you are or how high you rose in your profession. If you have difficulty believing this because you are young, look at what people say about the billionaire former CEO of Enron—or more currently Joe Paterno.

There is a Law of the Navy that applies to living these Core Values. I know you have memorized it, and now you can see how it applies to you: “On the strength of one link in the cable, dependeth the might of the chain. Who knows when thou mayest be tested, so live that thou bearest the strain.”

To be able to live these values and make right choices, it would be helpful to have a role model you can look up to, to see just what a person of rock-solid Integrity looks like. I could point at your Superintendent, or your commandant, but having been a Midshipman, I know that in your eyes they are individuals of authority who appear to be well beyond your reach. You do have one individual here at the Naval Academy who is the absolute best example of Honor and Integrity. When you meet him and talk to him, I guarantee that you will feel that you would love to be like him someday. I know he makes me feel that way. He is very approachable, and you will enjoy your time with him. He is Colonel Art Athens, the Director of the VADM Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership. His office is on the second deck of Luce Hall. He is a retired Marine Colonel, but you will see he is more like a father figure. Please stop by and see him; trust me, you will be glad you did. I’ve already told him to expect you. Remember, “Athens,” like the capital of Greece.

Finally, one quick word about the coin we are about to give you. Do not just stick it in your drawer. Put it somewhere you can see it every day, or better yet, carry it in your pocket.

It will remind you of what is most important in your life. I know that I will carry it in my pocket!

On behalf of all my classmates, I want to wish all of you “Fair winds and following seas” in these next four years. Thank you.