

Comments by Darnell M. Whitt II '59, Captain, U.S. Navy (retired)
Fiftieth reunion speaker at the 2009 ROTC Commissioning Ceremony

President Faust, General Petraeus; Students, Faculty, Staff; Officers, Enlisted, and civilian personnel; Classmates, teammates, shipmates, roommates; friends, relatives, and those of you who have just taken the Oath to defend our country:

Today is a very important day for you, and sort of special for me and for several others from the Class of 1959 who are sitting next to you. I was commissioned Ensign in the United States Navy exactly fifty years ago next Wednesday, right next door behind Sever Hall. It should not surprise you to hear me say that I am very sorry that the three ROTC Units which we knew then have moved away from Harvard; but I am pleased that this ceremony is now being held right here in the center of the Yard. This is a significant form of recognition which we did not have then. It should not be underestimated now. Thank you, Madame President.

What privilege to appear on a program with these two great leaders in today's America. As most of you know, Doctor Petraeus is a scholar soldier; and Professor Faust is a scholar who has written much about soldiers. As the old guy on this occasion, however, I realize that you expect me to offer "a few good injunctions." I cannot refrain from the opportunity!

On that day long ago, 121 were commissioned: 52 in the Army, 58 in the Navy and Marine Corps; and 11 in the Air Force. We went our separate ways to use our Harvard education to serve our Nation, before we left active duty for a variety of civilian careers. Given circumstances back then, I imagine that two to three times our number of ROTC graduates joined us in the Service later. Several took part in the crises of our era: Cuba and Berlin in the Sixties; Vietnam and other conflicts in the Seventies and Eighties. One classmember was killed in action as a combat surgeon at a forward hospital in the Mekong Delta. He was awarded the Silver Star for Bravery.

Three from the Class made the military a career: one each in the Army and Air Force; and one joined the Marine Corps after Law School, and retired a Brigadier General following duty as Judge Advocate General of the Corps. At least two from ROTC '59 had sons who were commissioned from Harvard Units. A few of us qualified for military retirement through service in the Reserve Force. And many of us have returned for the "academic jubilee" this week. So I hope that Harvard accepts our contributions to our country and our College.

On that day fifty years ago, I don't remember some white-haired veteran from the Class of 1909 standing up here and telling us down there what to expect as officers. It would not have done much good anyway, because I was going to get a couple of gold bars in just a few minutes; and the next day, I would be a Harvard graduate. After all, what could I possibly learn from someone hopelessly out of touch with the real world which I planned to change in short order?!

But then there was no old guy from '09 that day because there was no ROTC in America in 1909. I understand that Harvard's Army Regiment – which had fought courageously during the 1860s – was reestablished half a year before the creation of ROTC nationally in 1916. At that time, President Lowell said (and I quote):

The aim of a country which desires to remain at peace, but must be ready to defend itself, should be to train a large body of junior officers who can look forward to no career in the army, and can have no wish for war, yet who will be able to take their places in the field when needed.

You new officers are needed now, and it seems certain that others will be needed later. Harvard must continue to do its part.

Of course Harvard has changed greatly. Yet the Yard is the same as it will be always. And so are the values of those who preceded us here and will follow us hereafter. The names of many who went before are cut into the walls of Memorial Church and Memorial Hall, as lasting evidence of the values which motivated their sacrifices.

There may be only a few names which we recognize, and most we do not. Many others survived those conflicts and promoted those values in order to secure our Nation's freedom as new challenges arose. Not all in uniform were heroes; and not all heroes wore uniforms. Yet I hope that you will take away from this ceremony the conviction that their values are worthy of your strong personal determination to serve your senior officers as well as your faithful subordinates with the very best of what you have learned during your years here. Only you can judge through self-examination whether you achieve the outstanding performance which we expect of you.

When I was commissioned, I was told that I could make it through the Navy if I kept my shoes shined, my khakis pressed, and I did not have a collision at sea. Well, I learned quite rapidly that outstanding performance requires much more than this. And I am sure that you will, too. After all, as we used to say, "A collision at sea can ruin your entire day!"

Samuel Johnson said that "To strive with difficulties and to conquer them, is the highest human felicity." You new officers have conquered difficulties every day – not the least is how to keep your shoes shined despite rain and snow as you tried to get from here up to MIT for an ROTC commitment. I salute you for conquering those difficulties. And to President Faust and General Petraeus: I salute you for conquering the difficulties which you face in your great responsibilities, and for the inspiration that you provide to each of us. We welcome you new officers as your names are added to the rolls of the alumni; and we congratulate you for your personal achievements as you join our ranks.

Fifty years from today, one of you will face an audience like this to celebrate the commissioning of another group of officers from Harvard. I hope that number will be much larger than the few in your cohort, or the 121 of us who started here fifty years next week. Our war was the Cold War, which we inherited from a generation that conquered

totalitarianism in Europe and Asia. I never imagined that I would live long enough to see the end of the Cold War; but I did. And fifty years from now, I hope that whoever stands in this place on that distant day can say the same about your victory over “a truly global extremist threat” (to use the General’s term).

When you return for your Fiftieth Reunion, perhaps America’s current conflict will have been won – led by a four-star officer...who is a woman; and perhaps the President of Harvard...will be a man; and perhaps the current issues about military matters at Harvard...will have been resolved; and there will be a closer connection between this great university and those in uniform.

It is your challenge as leaders – and I include the two of you – to coordinate a compromise between the contending constituencies, not only on this campus, but also in the Congress and across the country – in order to achieve the inclusion about which you spoke so well last year, President Faust; and in order to improve the efficiency of our military forces which you lead, General Petraeus.

Let us never forget that this is the land of the free, because of the brave.

As we say in the Navy, “We wish you fair winds and following seas.” May God speed you on your way! Thank you.