Written by **Jack Kenny** on May 26, 2012

Duty, Honor, Country: Douglas MacArthur

When retired General of the Army Douglas A. MacArthur made a farewell visit to his alma mater on May 12, 1962, it was to receive the Sylvanus Thayer Medal, the highest honor bestowed by the United States Military Academy. It was also an occasion for him to share his thoughts on the meaning of the West Point motto.

"Duty, Honor, Country," he solemnly intoned, invoking the three words that summed up the cadets' calling. "Unhappily, I possess neither that eloquence of diction, that poetry of imagination, nor that brilliance of metaphor to tell you all that they mean." It was perhaps the most eloquent downplaying of a speaker's own rhetorical skills since Lincoln assured the gathering at Gettysburg, "The world will little note nor long remember what we say here." MacArthur proceeded to move both young cadets and battle-tested officers to the brink of tears with his eloquence of diction, poetry of imagination, and brilliance of metaphor.

"There wasn't a dry eye in the place," said Bob Boehm, an airline pilot in New Hampshire who was a plebe at West Point at the time. "He was an amazing wordsmith and what an orator! He had an ability to say things so you could visualize exactly what he was talking about." And hear it. And feel it. "When he talked about the sounds of the battlefield, you could almost feel the vibrations of the rounds going off, the explosions, even the smell of the battlefield," Boehm recalls.

MacArthur was 82 when he made that final appearance at West Point, no longer as agile physically, perhaps, as he was when, as a spry 70-year-old, he ruled as viceroy in Japan, while simultaneously directing a war against communist forces in Korea. Yet his mind and his eloquent tongue roamed nimbly over his 50 years in the Army and more. His life covered an amazing span. "During his infancy," wrote historian and biographer William Manchester, "Indians attacked his father's troops with bows and arrows; in his later years — when he proposed that wars be outlawed — superpowers were brandishing nuclear weapons." He grew up in an age when an automobile was still a rare luxury. He died in the age of astronauts, having lived long enough to hear a young President speak confidently about landing a man on the moon and bringing him safely back to Earth. Much had changed, he told the cadets that day; the creed of "Duty, Honor, Country" had not. Neither had the courage and devotion of "the American man at arms."

His name and fame are the birthright of every American citizen. In his youth and strength, his love

> and loyalty, he gave all that mortality can give. He needs no eulogy from me, or from any other man. He has written his own history and written it in red on his enemy's breast.… In twenty campaigns, on a hundred battlefields, around a thousand campfires, I have witnessed that enduring fortitude, that patriotic self-abnegation, and that invincible determination which have carved his statue in the hearts of his people. From one end of the world to the other, he has drained deep the chalice of courage.

Courage for MacArthur was no mere abstract or theoretical virtue. "Unquestionably, he was the most gifted man-at-arms this nation ever produced," wrote Manchester in his biography of the general, *American Caesar*. "He was also extraordinarily brave. His twenty-two medals — thirteen of them for heroism — probably exceeded those of any other figure in American history. Repeatedly he exposed himself to enemy snipers, first as a lieutenant in the Philippines, shortly after the turn of the century, then as a captain in Mexico, and finally as a general in three great wars." Yet his ability to inspire courage and confidence in others was perhaps his greatest gift. After the success of the famous Inchon landing in Korea, General Matthew Ridgway wrote that if MacArthur had suggested "that a battalion walk on water to reach the port, there might have been some ready to give it a try."

He learned early in life of the soldier's fierce pride in the honor of his calling. He was the son of General Arthur MacArthur, a Civil War hero who had won the Congressional Medal of Honor at age 18 and later commanded U.S. forces in the Philippines. Along with the sense of honor in military service, he received from his father a treasure of 4,000 books, which he explored in his youth with a keen intellect, devouring information and finding inspiration for that "poetry of imagination" he would often call upon in later years.

At West Point, he finished first in his class of 94 cadets, having earned more points than all but two graduates in the history of the academy, one of whom was Robert E. Lee. Yet when he graduated as a second lieutenant in 1903, wrote Manchester, he was, like the rest of the Army, "professionally unprepared for the twentieth century's wars. He had never fired a machine gun. He knew nothing of barbwire, tanks, or amphibious warfare. All West Point had given him was a lodestar, the academy motto: 'Duty, Honor, Country.'"

> Duty, Honor, Country. Those three hallowed words reverently dictate what you ought to be, what you can be, what you will be. They are your rallying points: to build courage when courage seems to fail; to regain faith when there seems to be little cause for faith; to create hope when hope becomes forlorn.… They give you a temperate will, a quality of imagination, a vigor of the emotions, a freshness of the deep springs of life, a temperamental predominance of courage over timidity, an appetite for adventure over love of ease. They create in your heart the sense of wonder, the unfailing hope of what next, and the joy and inspiration of life. They teach you in this way to be an officer and a gentleman.

He reached the rank of brigadier general during World War I and was decorated for courage shown in the fighting on the western front, receiving the Distinguished Service Cross twice and the Silver Star seven times. Through "memory's eye," he recalled for the cadets that day, the courage and the struggles of the men in his command.

> As I listened to those songs [of the glee club], in memory's eye I could see those staggering columns of the First World War, bending under soggy packs on many a weary march, from dripping dusk to drizzling dawn, slogging ankle deep through the mire of shell-pocked roads, to form grimly for the attack, blue-lipped, covered with sludge and mud, chilled by the wind and rain, driving

> home to their objective, and for many, to the judgment seat of God.
>
> I do not know the dignity of their birth, but I do know the glory of their death. They died unquestioning, uncomplaining, with faith in their hearts, and on their lips the hope that we would go on to victory. Always for them: Duty, Honor, Country. Always their blood, and sweat, and tears, as they sought the way and the light and the truth.

World War II

His detractors — and they were legion — would dwell on his considerable ego, noting his fondness for the first person singular pronoun. His most famous words are in the pledge he made from Australia after he had been ordered out of the Philippines, over his protests, before the fall of Corregidor and Bataan in the early months of World War II: "I shall return," he vowed. When the War Department suggested he change it to "We shall return," he refused. But MacArthur's judgment may have been based less on narcissistic pride than on a shrewd understanding of the dramatic effect of his words on the people on the islands. After months of promises of supplies and reinforcements that never came, they had more confidence in the general than in his country.

"America has let us down and won't be trusted," said Carlos Romulo, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Filipino journalist who had joined MacArthur's staff as press relations officer and would return as Foreign Secretary in the new Philippines Cabinet. "But the people still have confidence in MacArthur. If he says, he is coming back, he will be believed."

It was two and a half years later when MacArthur did return, landing at Leyte with the Sixth Army in October 1944 to begin the months-long campaign to take back the islands from the Japanese. After wading ashore with Philippines President Sergio Osmena and members of his Cabinet, MacArthur strode to a mobile broadcast unit set up on the beachhead and delivered his message to the people of the Philippines:

> I have returned. By the grace of Almighty God, our forces stand again on Philippine soil — soil consecrated in the blood of our two peoples…. Rally to me. Let the indomitable spirit of Bataan and Corregidor lead on…. For your homes and hearth, strike! For future generations of your sons and daughters, strike! In the name of your sacred dead, strike! Let no heart be faint. Let every arm be steeled. The guidance of Divine God points the way. Follow in His name to the Holy Grail of righteous victory.

By the end of the war, General MacArthur had received a fifth star, along with a Congressional Medal of Honor for actions taken in defense of the Philippines. As the Supreme Commander of Allied Powers, he received the formal surrender of Japan in a ceremony aboard the battleship *USS Missouri* on September 2, 1945. Norman Cousins, who interviewed him after the war, was surprised to learn from MacArthur that he had not been consulted about the decision to drop atomic bombs on Japan a month earlier.

"He replied that he saw no military justification for the dropping of the bomb," Cousins wrote. "The war might have ended weeks earlier, he said, if the United States had agreed, as it later did anyway, to the retention of the institution of the emperor." An article in the May-June 1997 issue of the *Journal of Historical Review* quotes MacArthur as saying, "My staff was unanimous in believing that Japan was on the point of collapse and surrender."

Following the surrender, MacArthur spoke in a broadcast to the American people:

> A new era is upon us. Even the lesson of victory itself brings with it profound concern, both for our

> future security and the survival of our civilization. The destructiveness of the war potential, through progressive advances in scientific discovery, has in fact now reached a point which revises the traditional concept of war.... Military alliances, balances of power, leagues of nations have failed, leaving the only path to be by way of the crucible of war.... We have had our last chance. If we don't now devise some greater and more equitable system, Armageddon will be at our door. The problem is basically theological.... It must be of the spirit if we are to save the flesh.

Korea

But the uneasy peace that followed World War II was shattered at 4:00 a.m. on June 25, 1950 when 89,000 North Korean troops suddenly crossed the 38th parallel into South Korea. President Truman, without authorization from Congress, sent U.S. forces to fight on the peninsula under MacArthur's command while insisting, "We are not at war." Asked at a press conference if it would be correct "to call it a police action under the U.N.," the President replied. "Yes, that's exactly what it amounts to."

North Korean forces quickly overran the South Korean capital of Seoul and had U.S. troops pinned down on the perimeter of Pusan in the southeast corner of the peninsula. That set the stage for MacArthur's unveiling of a bold plan to land forces behind the enemy lines at Inchon and attack the North Koreans from both directions. Much has been made of the general's flair for the dramatic. "Like King David, Alexander and Joan of Arc," wrote Manchester, "like virtually all of history's immortal commanders — he was always performing." And it required one of his greatest performances to convince the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the landing at Inchon was feasible. At a conference in Tokyo, Admiral Forest Sherman, Chief of Naval Operations, summed up the Navy's objections: "If every possible geographical and naval handicap were listed — Inchon has 'em all." Listening to the arguments, MacArthur recalled something his father had told him long ago: "Doug, councils of war breed timidity and defeatism." As he recounted the event in his memoir, *Reminiscences*, he responded with the following:

> The very arguments you have made as to the impracticalities involved will tend to ensure for me the element of surprise. For the enemy commander will reason that no one would be so brash to make such an attempt.... Are you content to let our troops stay in that bloody perimeter like beef cattle in the slaughterhouse? Who will take the responsibility for such a tragedy? Certainly I will not.... Make the wrong decision here — the fatal decision of inertia — and we will be done. I can almost hear the ticking of the second hand of destiny. We must act now or we will die.

The room was hushed at the conclusion of his remarks. Finally Admiral Sherman, broke the silence. "Thank you. A great voice in a great cause."

MacArthur got the go-ahead from the nervous chiefs. "I wish I had that man's optimism," Sherman said the next day. Admiral James Doyle, who would have to execute the landing, observed: "If MacArthur had gone on stage, we never would have heard of John Barrymore."

Yet the landing was a success and North Korean forces were routed. MacArthur's troops crossed the 38th parallel and pushed north up toward the Yalu River, the border between North Korea and Communist China. When Chinese units entered the war, driving back the UN forces, Mac-Arthur was frustrated by the restrictions put on military actions by an administration in Washington that was fearful of provoking a wider war with China and possibly bringing the Soviet Union into the conflict. Though Chinese troops had already entered the war by the hundreds of thousands, MacArthur was not allowed to bomb bases and supply depots in Manchuria or the bridges over the Yalu River. (Later he

was told he could bomb "the South Korean end" of the bridges, a formidable task since some bridges across the winding river ran east and west, rather than north and south.)

Fading Away

When MacArthur's chafing under the restrictions imposed on his military actions became an open secret and a politicial problem for Truman, the President relieved the legendary general of his command in April 1951. MacArthur, then 71, returned home to a hero's welcome, with a tumultuous reception in San Francisco, followed by record-setting turnouts at parades in his honor in Washington, New York, and other American cities. His 30-minute address to a joint session of Congress — ending with the now-famous refrain from an old Army ballad, "old soldiers never die, they just fade away" — was interrupted with applause 34 times. The applause and the cheers followed him on a cross-country speaking tour, as he inveighed against Truman administration policies both foreign and domestic. It was, wrote Eric Goldman in *The Crucial Decade*, "the most substantial and noisiest fading away in history."

The nation, meanwhile, shared Mac-Arthur's frustration over a "no-win" war that would cost more than 54,000 American and more than a million Korean lives before the fighting ended in a stalemate after three years. George Kennan, the former State Department official who was credited with being the "architect" of the global policy of "containment" of communist aggression, described it as "the adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy." MacArthur had a clearer message, one that resonated with the American people: "In war, there is no substitute for victory."

Eventually, he did fade away, leading a life of relative calm and quiet in retirement. He cautioned President Kennedy against committing troops on the Asian mainland. Near the end of his days, he urged President Johnson not to send ground forces into Vietnam. Yet he remained confident, as he told the cadets on that farewell visit, that America's army would prevail in future conflicts.

> The long gray line has never failed us. Were you to do so, a million ghosts in olive drab, in brown khaki, in blue and gray, would rise from their white crosses, thundering those magic words: Duty, Honor, Country.
>
> This does not mean that you are warmongers. On the contrary, the soldier above all other people, prays for peace, for he must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war. But always in our ears ring the ominous words of Plato, that wisest of all philosophers: "Only the dead have seen the end of war."

In less than two years, he would join the ranks of the dead. As he looked back that day on a lifetime of service to his country, remembering both victories and defeats, his peroration brought the cadets and others in the audience to their feet at its conclusion:

> The shadows are lengthening for me. The twilight is here. My days of old have vanished — tone and tint. They have gone glimmering through the dreams of things that were. Their memory is one of wondrous beauty, watered by tears and coaxed and caressed by the smiles of yesterday. I listen vainly, but with thirsty ear, for the witching melody of faint bugles blowing reveille, of far drums beating the long roll. In my dreams I hear again the crash of guns, the rattle of musketry, the strange, mournful mutter of the battlefield.
>
> But in the evening of my memory always I come back to West Point. Always there echoes and re-echoes: Duty, Honor, Country.

> Today marks my final roll call with you. But I want you to know that when I cross the river, my last conscious thoughts will be of the Corps, and the Corps, and the Corps.
>
> I bid you farewell.

Image showing General MacArthur at West Point courtesy of the artist, Paul Steucke. To purchase or view additional artwork by the artist, go to www.paulsteucke.com

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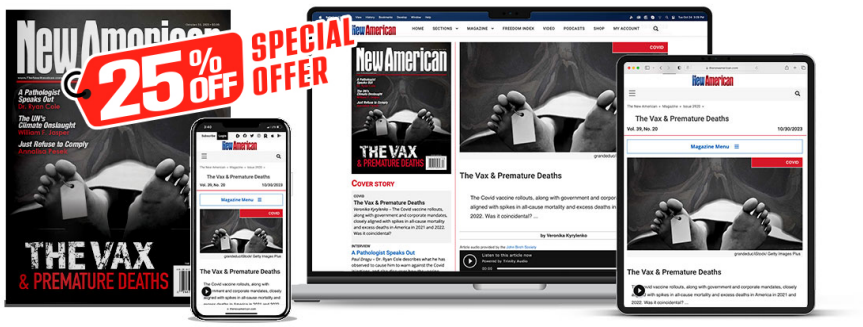

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