

WEST POINT CLASS of 1966 40th Reunion Sept. 15, 2006

Thanks for inviting me to be with you on this significant occasion. I attended your 15th, 20th and 30th reunions, but to me you will always be those 17-, 18-, and 19-year old boys who arrived here for Beast Barracks in July 1962. Looking out at this crowd tonight, however, I must say that the illusion is getting harder and harder to sustain.

When you only get up to West Point every few years it's a little easier to see the changes that have come to this place. The academy of course is accused of accommodating change at only a glacial pace—two centuries of tradition unhampered by progress—but of course that's a caricature. If you take the long view—and that, of course, is the only view the United States Military Academy would have you take—change here has been profound. In the forty years since you've been gone, the Corps has admitted women; it has become much more diverse; it has dramatically overhauled the curriculum.

But as a historian I like to look deeper into the past and that's where you really see how far West Point has traveled without ever leaving this promontory on the Hudson. I've been reading Douglas Southall Freeman's magnificent biography of Robert E. Lee, where we get this portrait of academy life for new cadets in the summer of 1825: "No cadet could drink or play cards, or use tobacco. He might *not* have in his room any cooking utensils, any games, or any novel. With the consent of the superintendent, Colonel Thayer, he might subscribe to one periodical, but to only one. Too much reading was accounted bad for a soldier: the library was open only two hours a week—on Saturday afternoons. No visitor might call on Sunday, in study hours, or in the evenings....Such were the regulations; the practice fell far short of this stern assumption of the perfectibility of youth. There was drunkenness and fighting and abstention from parade and occasional visits after Taps to North's tavern, where supper and strong drink were to be had."

Actually, perhaps the place hasn't changed *that much*. Maybe the most *un-*recognizable thing about Lee's plebe year was that his academic load consisted entirely of a little math and three hours of French every day.

I'd like to briefly report to you tonight on the progress of *The Long Gray Line*, which was published 17 years ago. It has sold about 330,000 copies, and has been published in several languages including Japanese and Italian. The Swedish title is *Drillade För Krig*, which I'm told translates as "Carhart, see me in the sinks." Over the years there has been interest from a half dozen movie producers, but, as is often the case with Hollywood, nothing came of it, in some cases because it wasn't clear that they were committed to being true to who you are and what you've done.

The book is still in print, still selling—about 2,000 copies last year, for which I'm grateful to a new crop of plebes every fall. And I still get questions and queries about you. For example, last month I had a phone call at home from a stranger, a woman, who wanted to know, just *had* to know, whether Buck Thompson's son, who was a toddler when Buck was killed, had gone on to attend West Point. I told her no, he had not. Then

she wanted to know what had happened to that nice boy from Arkansas. No, not you, Wes. Sorry. George Crocker. And on and on. They care about you, still.

I suspect that just about everyone in this room misses someone connected to the class. Perhaps those who never had a chance to grow old: Frank Rybicki, Tommy Hayes, Buck Thompson. Perhaps those who left us mid-journey: John Oi, Mike Silliman, Art Boniface.

Personally, I miss the Rev. Jim Ford, who died in Aug. 2001, five years ago last month. As the chaplain, he served as a sort of Greek chorus to your larger drama. I last saw him on the day he retired from the House of Representatives after 21 years there as the chaplain, in March 2000. He invited me to lunch in the House dining room, and told me how at the age of 67 he had taken up ultralight piloting, flying his own 40-horsepower aircraft over the Virginia countryside, dropping water balloons. Our lunch was constantly interrupted by congressmen who wanted to wish him well and to thank him for his service. There had been a controversy over his successor; a search committee had recommended a Roman Catholic chaplain for the first time; the House Republican leadership rejected that recommendation in favor of a Presbyterian, and the squabbling continued for weeks. Ford, a Lutheran, was both amused and appalled. His favorite theological notion was the Lutheran conception of grace: “when you’re loved by God and don’t deserve it.” He was fairly certain that there were a number of members of the House of Representatives who didn’t deserve it, and all through lunch he made quips under his breath about this member or that member. I won’t tell you what he said about Tom Delay, but you know he detested hypocrisy. After lunch I walked with him back to his office, HB-25, which had been Henry Clay’s office, and the last thing he said to me was, “It’s been a long time, but that class you wrote about remains something special for me.” And from his desk he picked up the coffee mug he always used, which had the crest on it of the West Point class of 1966.

I’d like to talk for just a moment not about you, or this place, but about your fathers. It always struck me as something of a burden to be their sons: they, after all, had won the biggest, best war in human history. You were warrior aspirants following in the large footsteps of men, many of them warriors themselves, or at least cut from the same bolt as those who had delivered us from evil. They have since been consigned to a single glorious pantheon: the Greatest Generation. Tough act to follow.

Let’s think about that. Greater than the Founding Fathers? Greater than the Civil War generation? And which generation are we talking about, the generation of senior leaders, born mostly in the 1880s or 1890s, Patton born in 1885, Eisenhower born in 1890, or the generation of trigger-pullers, born mostly in the 19-teens and 1920s, like my father and your fathers.

More important, there’s an implication that all the brothers were valiant and all the sisters were virtuous. Please! We’ve smothered them in cheap sentimentality. (Let’s remember Norman Mailer’s definition of sentimentality: “the emotional promiscuity of those who have no sentiment.”) Lord knows, there is no shortage of valor and virtue to be

found throughout that war, and throughout that generation. But there's also no shortage of venality, cowardice, confusion, and plain tomfoolery. War is the most complex of all human enterprises, and it most fully encompasses the vast range of human characteristics.

There is a presumption among many Americans that after Pearl Harbor, American boys heard the summons of the trumpet, put on a uniform, and went out fully armed and instantly prepared to kick the stuffing out of the great Axis war machine. But Sylvanus Thayer himself had warned, "To make a good army out of the best men will take three years." When the U.S. Army fought in North Africa in November 1942, first against the French, then against the Germans and Italians, most American soldiers in that force had been in the Army for less than three years, and in some cases for less than three months. The 1st Armored Division was part of that African force and the operations officer, Hamilton H. Howze, West Point class of 1930, said, "None of the division was worth a damn," and they certainly proved it in their early battles, including Kasserine Pass.

A gauzy romanticism has enveloped so much of that war, and that generation. The war in North Africa is seen as a facile, unencumbered campaign of human proportions fought by a doughty band of brothers. In fact, as the historian Eric Larrabee once wrote, North Africa provided "a place to be lousy in, somewhere to let the gift for combat and command be discovered." I can tell you that in many instances Sicily, Italy, and France also provided "a place to be lousy in," because there were always new units and new men coming into the war.

They were not supermen. From Army ground forces alone, more than a half million men were discharged for psychiatric reasons, often for what in World War I had been known as shell shock and which in World War II was usually known as combat exhaustion. This despite a ruthless culling during induction physicals, when 12 percent of the 15 million draftees examined were rejected as mentally unfit. For every six men wounded in World War II, another became what was known as a neuropsychiatric casualty; a million men were hospitalized during the war for combat exhaustion—cracking up. The U.S. Army also would convict 21,000 deserters during World War II, and tens of thousands of others escaped prosecution or were convicted of lesser crimes. Fifth Army, in Italy, was plagued with "S.I.W.s"—self-inflicted wounds. The Allies built eight military prisons in Italy, but deserters, shirkers, and other miscreants so overwhelmed provost marshals that the waiting list to serve time often exceeded seven hundred soldiers.

Here is a snapshot, a group portrait of them midway through that war, taken from the first chapter of my current work-in-progress, which is volume 2 of the Liberation Trilogy. The campaign in Tunisia is over, and American divisions are staging in North Africa, in early July 1943, for the invasion of Sicily. So here they are:

More than a half million American troops now occupied North Africa. They composed only a fraction of all those wearing U.S. uniforms worldwide, yet in identity and creed they were emblematic of that larger force. One Navy lieutenant listed the

civilian occupations of the fifteen hundred soldiers and sailors on his Sicily-bound ship: “farm boys and college graduates...lawyers, brewery distributors, millworkers, tool designers, upholsterers, steel workers, aircraft mechanics, foresters, journalists, sheriffs, cooks and glass workers.” One man even cited “horse mill fixer” as his trade.

A later age would conflate them into a single, featureless demi-god, possessed of mythical courage and fortitude, and animated by a determination to re-balance a wobbling world. Keith Douglas, a British officer who had fought in North Africa and who would die at Normandy, described “a gentle obsolescent breed of heroes... Unicorns, almost.” Yet it does them no disservice to recall their profound diversity—in provenance and in character—or their feet of clay, or the mortality that would make them poignant and compelling long after their passing.

Of that half million in Africa fewer than one in five were combat veterans from the four U.S. divisions that had fought extensively in Tunisia: the 1st, 9th, and 34th infantry divisions, and the 1st Armored Division, each of which was earmarked for Sicily or, later, for mainland Italy. “The front-line soldier I knew,” wrote the correspondent Ernie Pyle, who trudged with them across Tunisia, “had lived for months like an animal, and was a veteran in the fierce world of death. Everything was abnormal and unstable in his life.”

In the seven weeks since the Tunisian finale, those combat troops had tried to recuperate while preparing for another campaign. “The question of discipline has been very difficult,” the 1st Armored Division commander warned George Marshall. “There is a certain lawlessness...and a certain amount of disregard for consequences when men are about to go back.” In the 34th Division, “the men did not look well and seemed indifferent,” a visiting major general noted on June 15. Among other indignities, a thousand men had no underwear and five thousand others had a single pair. “They felt very sorry for themselves,” he added. Thirteen hundred soldiers from the 34th had just been transferred to units headed straight for Sicily, leading to “incidents of self-maiming and desertion.” A captain in the 1st Division wrote home, “Too much self-commiseration, that is something we all must guard against.”

Even among the combat veterans few considered themselves professional soldiers, by training or by temperament. Samuel Hynes, a fighter pilot who became a university professor, described the prevalent “civilianness, the sense of the soldiering self as a kind of impostor.” They were young, of course—twenty-six, on average—and they shared a sense that “our youth had at last reached the place to spend itself,” in the words of a bomber pilot, John Muirhead.

They had been shoveled up in what Hynes called “our most democratic war, the only American war in which a universal draft really worked, [and] men from every social class went to fight.” Even the country’s most elite tabernacles had been dumped into a single egalitarian pot, the U.S. Army: of the 683 graduates from the Princeton University class of 1942, 84 percent were in uniform, and those serving as enlisted men included the valedictorian and salutatorian. Twenty-five classmates would die during the war,

including nineteen killed in combat. “Everything in this world had stopped except war,” Pyle wrote, “and we were all men of a new profession out in a strange night.”

And what did they believe, these soldiers of the strange night? “Many men do not have a clear understanding of what they are fighting for,” a morale survey concluded in the summer of 1943, “and they do not know their role in the war.” Another survey showed that more than one-third had never heard of Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms, and barely one in ten soldiers could name all four. In a secret letter to his commanders this month, Eisenhower lamented that “less than half the enlisted personnel questioned believed that they were more useful to the nation as soldiers than they would have been as war workers,” and fewer than one-third felt “ready and anxious to get into the fighting.” The winning entry in a “Why I’m Fighting” essay contest declared, in its entirety: “I was drafted.”

Their pervasive “civilianness” made them wary of martial zeal. “We were not romantics filled with cape-and-sword twaddle,” wrote John Mason Brown, a Navy Reserve lieutenant headed to Sicily. “The last war was too near for that.” Military life enflamed their ironic sensibilities and their skepticism. A single crude acronym that captured the soldier’s lowered expectations—SNAFU, for “situation normal, all fouled up”—I’ll maintain the decorum of this gathering by using a euphemism, but you know they were *not* saying “fouled.” That had expanded into a glossary of G.I. cynicism: SUSFU (situation unchanged, still fouled up); SAFU (self-adjusting foul-up); TARFU (things are really fouled up); FUMTU (fouled up more than usual); JANFU (joint Army-Navy foul-up); JAAFU (joint Anglo-American foul-up); FUAUFUP (fouled up and fouled up proper); and FUBAR (fouled up beyond all recognition).

Yet they held personal convictions that were practical and profound. “We were prepared to make all sacrifices. There was nothing else for us to do,” Lieutenant Brown explained. “The leaving of our families was part of our loving them.” The combat artist George Biddle observed, “They want to win the war so they can get home, home, home, and never leave it.” A soldier in the 88th Division added, “We have got to lick those bastards in order to get out of the Army.”

The same surveys that worried Eisenhower revealed that the vast majority of troops held at least an inchoate belief that they were fighting to “guarantee democratic liberties to all peoples.” A reporter sailing to Sicily with the 45th Division concluded, “Many of the men on this ship believe that the operation will determine whether this war will end in a stalemate or whether it will be fought to a clear-cut decision.” And no one doubted that they would fight to the death for the greatest cause: each other. “We did it because we could not bear the shame of being less than the man beside us,” John Muirhead wrote. “We fought because he fought; we died because he died.”

Captain George H. Revelle, Jr., of the 3rd Infantry Division, in a letter to his wife written while bound for Sicily acknowledged “the chislers, slackers, people who believe we are suckers for the munitions makers, and all the intellectual hodgepodge

looking at war cynically.” In some measure, he wrote on July 7, he was “fighting for their right to be hypocrites.”

But there was also a broader reason, suffused with a melancholy nobility. “We little people,” Revelle told her, “must solve these catastrophes by mutual slaughter, and force the world back to reason.”

And so off they go, bound for Sicily and beyond. The point is that to call them the greatest generation is to indulge in myth rather than history; to ignore the fact that they had enormous feet of clay, like all of us. It diminishes their humanity by making them into alabaster heroes. The truth is that some were heroic in a classic valorous fashion, but most were not. Most kept faith, some did not. Most did their duty in the midst of countless SNAFUs, TARFUs, JANFUs, and FUBARs. In them I see you, and in you, I see them.

Jane and I were trying to recall when we were last here together, and it suddenly came to us because it was a memorable day for several reasons: Oct. 4, 1987. Memorable first because it snowed: October 4. Memorable also because Jim Ford had returned to give the sermon that Sunday as a guest chaplain. That morning provided me with an ending to your story, at least within the narrow confines of my storytelling. I’d like to remember him, as he always remembered you. Here we see the Reverend Jim at the end of *The Long Gray Line*:

As always when he visited West Point, Ford made a private pilgrimage to the cemetery before returning to Washington. He knew the nooks and crevices of this churchyard at least as well as he knew the Gothic crannies of the chapel. So much of his youth had been left in this hallowed ground. *The funerals aged us pretty quickly*, Choirmaster John Davis once said. Were Ford to call for an accounting of the dead, as he once called on Founders Day for an accounting of those he had married, how many shades would rise? He had lost track. Sixty or seventy funerals from Vietnam alone. Perhaps several hundred altogether.

For two and a half hours Ford strolled about, lost in mediation. White-tail deer often browsed boldly among the tombstones, oblivious of both the quick and the dead. The dogwoods and cherry trees were already flushed with autumn; soon enough, the yard would be entombed in deep snow. At the headstone of Ted Speers, who had preceded him as head chaplain, he paused, prayed, and walked on, passing first Tommy Hayes’s grave in Section VI and then the graves of Winfield Scott, Sylvanus Thayer, and George Custer. As always, the illustrious and the infamous slept side by side.

On the northern border, beyond the ornate pyramid housing Egbert Viele’s sarcophagus, he paused again, by the simpler graves in Section 36. No spot on earth was more sacred to him, no memories more precious. The names on the stones ran together like a lullaby, a benediction, an American haiku:

Booth. Bonifas. Brown.
Lucke. Hoskins. Rybicki.
Wilson. Lantz. Thompson.

I loved these men, Jim Ford thought. *I loved Peter Lantz. I loved Buck Thompson. I loved these men with all my heart.*

Just so. Thank you again for asking me to be here. Thank you again for letting me into your lives. See you *all* at the 50th.