Commandant's Comments

Affirmation Ceremony, Class of 2008

13 August 2006

I offer my own congratulations to each of you on reaching this point within the West Point Experience, that 47-month-long developmental process during which you mature from civilian to Army Officer! As our mission statement indicates, through "education, training and inspiration" the Academy gives each of you the opportunity to develop yourselves within a right understanding of what it means to BE an Army Officer – 'Officership,' as we call it – a shared professional identity. The Superintendent has it; I have it; the officers gathered before you have it; and, you are well on your way to getting it!

So, we are here this evening to stop, to reflect, and to recognize your passage of a critical milestone in that developmental process, the midpoint so to speak, of your transition and maturation.

But it was not always so, here at the Academy. Let me review briefly for you the history behind why you are here tonight as a class; you must understand the purpose of this evening. As an Officer, as you lead your soldiers, you will constantly be asking yourself, "What is the purpose of this exercise?"… and we should do the same thing here this evening! So let me lead you through it.

The first Affirmation Ceremony and, as well, the first use of the Affirmation Oath was instituted by BG John Abizaid when he was Commandant. He, and the then-superintendent, LTG Daniel Christman, established this ceremony and oath in August of 1998, and they did so for the Class of 2000.

Now, if you are asking yourself as I suggested, "What is the purpose of the exercise?" you should note that this event occurred exactly 197 years after the founding of this Academy!! So, why did it take 197 years to get an Affirmation Ceremony and Oath?? Why in 1998, and never so in the almost two centuries before that?

The answer rests in the fact that Generals Christman and Abizaid, along with a committee of this university's staff and faculty, were seriously studying in 1998 what Army Officers need to BE in the coming decade to deal with the new missions in the Balkans, and later now in Afghanistan and Iraq. They were designing what you now know as the Cadet Leader Development System (CLDS), the operational plan of the Academy that focuses and unifies the efforts of everyone working here toward one developmental goal—Officership—whether they work for me, or the Dean, or the Director of Athletics, or elsewhere. And, in their studies they pinpointed a disturbing fact about the Corps of Cadets.

When they asked what cadets really considered to be the "rites of passage" at West Point, they got a very strange answer. The answer was that there were four major

milestones, or rites of passage, during the entire 47 months, only four. And you can probably guess what they were!

The cadets responded that the four milestones in the 47 months of cadet life were:

- Getting through Plebe year and being "recognized" by the Corps
- Receiving their class ring at the beginning of their Firstie year
- Getting their choice of branch in the fall of Firstie year
- Getting their diploma at graduation

Notice what the cadets told this study group: there was no right of passage, nothing at all to look forward to, nothing to mark personal achievement, etc, between the end of Plebe year and the beginning of Firstie year – a period of over two years! And this matched, or actually contributed to the "keep a low profile," "cooperate and graduate," cynical attitude of many of the Academy's graduates of that era.

Notice what else was seriously wrong with the Cadet responses…they honestly believed that the culminating experience at West Point was their receipt of the academy's diploma (their fourth, and last, rite of passage)! Only a few ever mentioned the real culminating point of the West Point Experience, which is receiving the Commission of an Army Officer! Sad to say, back in the 1990s far too many graduates, right up to Firstie year, never matured their self-concept from that of a "college student seeking a highly-

valued diploma" to that of "an officer-apprentice seeking an Army Officer's Commission."

So, while the Committee and LTG Christman worked another year or so to finalize the new CLDS (it was approved and implemented by Christman in 2001, his last year, and then formally published in LTG Lennox's first year, 2002), BG Abizaid instituted quickly in 1998 this affirmation ceremony for Cows to be able to affirm publicly, by Oath, their personal acceptance of the calling of an officer-apprentice for the next two years until their real officer's commission is granted. In so doing he created a new cultural artifact, a new facet of cadet life for all future cadets, right down to tonight.

Obviously, he picked Sunday evening of Reorganization Week for a number of reasons. First, it is always helpful to stop and reflect when changing places in life, from one activity to the next, from one assignment to the next, etc. This is just a healthy way of making sense of the reality that you are experiencing, through individual and collective reflection. In my own experience, we in the Army all too often do not do that.

Second, he picked Sunday of Reorganization Week because it represents the midpoint in your maturation here, a point before which you have had two years to "grow" into the concept of Officership and to see if it fits you. If it does not, you should know by now and will have made a choice to leave the Academy, to pick another vocation other than officership for your life.

But he also picked it because it coincided with a pre-existing legal requirement that any cadet who starts their junior year of classes ands then chooses to leave the Academy will owe the U.S. Government at least two years of active-duty service in the Army. Up to tonight, as you know, you could leave the Academy without having to 'pay back' in terms of active-duty service. But not so after just one day of classes in the junior year. Thus, given the potential costs of going beyond this point without having carefully reflected on what was at stake, BG Abizaid intentionally chose the night before that first day of classes, junior year.

So I have now given you, in historical perspective, the "purpose of the exercise" here tonight. To re-cap, it is two-fold:

A time for the Class of 2008 to stop and reflect, and to personally affirm your choice, by Oath, to now see yourself, and for the next two years to develop yourself, as an Officer apprentice. I know that many of your have already done this, thus we are just affirming an earlier decision. But I also know that is not the case for all of you.

Secondly, having passed this milestone, the purpose is for you to set your eyes, and your heart, firmly on the real culminating experience of West Point, taking the Commissioning Oath after graduation. And for that specific reason the AOG will give you tonight your Second Lieutenant bars in early anticipation of that moment in late May of 2008.

The Army I entered back in 1975 had a saying for such a situation, “Be all you can BE.” It was an apt saying because it accurately reflected the quintessential nature of the Army as a human institution. Twenty-year-old humans cannot be developed by someone else; they have to own the process themselves, though others can stand ready to help, as we all do here at the Academy. So my advice for your last two years here is brief – from here forward, be in charge of your development and, in the process, set your mind and heart on ‘Being All That You Can BE.’ There is, in fact, no limit at all on who you can become or in how influential you can be as a “commissioned leader of character.” And the Army needs every one of you to be just that kind of leader!

Let’s proceed with the ceremony.