

**UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY
Nininger Award for Valor at Arms for 2006
West Point, New York
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**Remarks By
Major Ryan L. Worthan '97**

General Hagenbeck, General Stroup, General Caslen, Mr. Anderson, COL Hudgins, members of the staff and faculty, distinguished guests, and especially members of the Corps of Cadets.

Thank you very much for honoring me with this Award. The Long Gray Line is full of distinguished combat leaders--true heroes. Some are fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan at this very moment. They are our friends, our role models, our mentors, and our teammates. Others lie at rest in cemeteries across the land. I cannot imagine a greater honor than to be selected to represent the West Point graduates who have fought in battle. And I want you to know, it's a special privilege to be invited to address the Corps here in Washington Hall.

Most important, thank you for the opportunity to tell you about my soldiers. As we all know, it is their dedication, and, too often, their sacrifice, that is required to carry the day.

I have been asked to tell you a bit about my own experience. In the next few minutes I would like to sketch out some images of the soldiers I was privileged to lead and conclude by sharing two thoughts on how West Point prepares us for combat.

On the morning of September 29, 2003, elements of my company were attacked by insurgents near Shkin, Afghanistan. During the next 12 hours, my challenge was to think clearly, assess the situation, and direct my boys to apply their capabilities and firepower to destroy the enemy while ensuring our survival. We applied a considerable amount of violence and ordnance to the situation. Let me tell you about a few of my soldiers:

Second Lieutenant J P Thompson, Sergeant First Class Gannaway, and my 2nd Platoon: came under attack at 0554. (it's funny how times like that are etched into your memory). They continued to fight until well after dark. They took multiple casualties, fighting in extremely difficult terrain, but they never faltered, killing numerous enemy combatants. Several members of second platoon received Bronze Stars for Valor and Purple Hearts.

First Lieutenant Craig Mullaney – West Point Class of 2000 and a Rhodes Scholar. He was initially located in a support-by-fire position, and separated from a portion of his platoon. He fought his way into position and led his platoon, from the front, with distinction.

Private First Class Evan O'Neill – walking #2 in Mullaney's Platoon. Wounded and pinned down in a well-constructed, complex enemy ambush, he continued to return fire while a sniper shot him three more times. His last question to his team leader, SGT Alan Grenz, was simply "Is everybody else OK?" PFC O'Neill was posthumously awarded a Bronze Star for Valor and the Purple Heart. Sergeant Grenz, after assaulting the enemy ambush line, realized he was missing PFC O'Neill. SGT Grenz returned to the kill zone, recovered O'Neill and fought heroically for six more hours. He received the Silver Star and the Purple Heart.

Finally, there was Chief Warrant Officer Bull Woodard. He commanded two Apache helicopter crews. They fought long after their attack helicopters were badly damaged, assisting me in marking enemy positions, so we could destroy them with close air support. Both of his crews received Air Medals for Valor.

I offer these vignettes to give you a sense of the character of our soldiers. As far as my role was concerned, I really believe the foundations of my conduct and decisions that day were built in very basic ways here at West Point. Something as mundane as memorized Plebe knowledge or a cadet squad leader's advice on teamwork will come back to you in ways you cannot now foresee. You will rely on those basic leadership lessons and apply them in the future.

I would also like you to know that I believe West Point's fields of friendly strife do prepare cadets for combat. I believe this is true of all the sports you play here at West Point. Rugby is the sport I know best and has surprising similarities to combat. Rugby is 80 minutes of pushing yourself beyond your limits with little rest. Before a game ever starts, the game plan is briefed and all decisions after that are made on the fly by the players on the field. There is no visible clock, so, there is no definite end in sight. You simply have to grind it out, shedding the anger, the pain, the exhaustion, staying focused, and trying to see the field develop, find your opponent's weakness, and then exploit it. On the rugby field and in combat, team members draw confidence and inspiration from leaders who are calm and even upbeat the worst circumstances. You will find that your soldiers will not quit on you, as long as they see you pushing yourself and keeping your own spirits high.

Everything I've just discussed can be boiled down to one word, "heart". As I watched the Army-Texas A&M football game, I noticed that the commentators said that the Army team was outweighed and overmatched. But with repeated surprise, they acknowledged that Army players who were outweighed by 50 pounds or more, were repeatedly manhandling their opponents. Now we all know that pushing around a bigger player is about technique, but more importantly, it's about heart. I think you will find that your soldiers have an amazing amount of heart, just as your teammates and company mates in the Corps do.

In closing, I want to thank the Association of Graduates and the Military Academy. I am very humbled to be selected as a representative of West Point graduates who have

fought with valor. To the Corps, I salute each of you for the decision you have made to lead our brave soldiers. I look forward to serving with you in the years to come.

May God bless you all, and . . . BEAT NAVY!