

Nininger Award Acceptance Speech
Given by CPT Walter Bryan Jackson, Class of 2005
September 17, 2008

General Stroup, General Linnington, General Finnegan, Mr. Anderson, Mr. and Mrs. Kenna, other distinguished guests, members of the staff & faculty, and, especially, the Corps of Cadets.

I am deeply honored to be here to accept this Award.

The Long Gray Line has historically produced soldiers of remarkable courage and valor--true combat leaders such as Grant, MacArthur, Pershing, Eisenhower, and countless others. Whether you realize it or not ... that includes each of you. Up until the time when I was wounded in action, I never really thought it might include me.

The recognition I have received and continue to receive is simply overwhelming . . . The Distinguished Service Cross that I wear, and the honor of receiving the Nininger Award tonight are not so much for me personally, but I receive them as a tribute . . . as a reminder . . . of the heroism displayed by my classmates ... Emily Perez ... Phil Neel ... Thom Martin ... Jacob Fritz ... Jon Edds ... Neale Shank ... and my roommate Matt Ferrara—all who have made the ultimate sacrifice.

Many members of the Long Gray Line are serving in Iraq and Afghanistan at this very moment. They are our friends and family, former teachers and students, mentors, and teammates. I can think of no greater honor than to be selected to represent West Point combat veterans. I am deeply honored to stand before you tonight in Washington Hall.

Tonight I would like to talk to you for a few moments about three soldiers, who stand out as being among the best of the best. They saved the lives of countless Soldiers ... including me. I would like to tell you briefly of their heroics and conclude by drawing on a common thread that links their service to your experiences here at the Academy.

Two years ago, on a September evening in 2006 . . . in the town of Hit in Al Anbar Province, Iraq, TF 1-36 Combat Outpost 3 came under attack by indirect mortar fire and small arms fire. A quick reaction force responded and detained two men in the sector. After linking up with the quick reaction force, our Commander's HMMWV became stuck in the mud, and along with the CDR & 1SG, I dismounted to pull security.

While attaching the tow cables to the back of our vehicle, our element came under heavy machine gun fire from two separate locations. SFC Newlin immediately moved to his Bradley to orient his gunner to the source of the enemy fire. He then directed several soldiers to move outside the Bradley, under fire, to assist in evacuating CPT Stainbrook, and, later, 1SG Sapp and myself. With our CDR and 1SG out of commission, not only did he facilitate our expeditious, non-standard Casevac to the field hospital; but also, in the absence of his Commander, SFC Newlin took command of the Company net and directed mounted and dismounted forces against the enemy. Sergeant Newlin repeatedly exposed himself to mortar, RPG, & small arms fire. His personal actions enabled our task force to detain 58 enemy personnel after an 8-hour battle. Many owe their lives to the heroics of SFC Newlin that day, including me.

For his actions SFC Newlin received a **Silver Star**.

The quick reaction force platoon leader that day was 1LT Diem Vo ... another tough-as-nails Soldier who didn't let bullets slow him down. An Armor-branch officer turned Infantry platoon leader, Lieutenant Vo had just recovered from the QRF mission when we were ambushed. After CPT Stainbrook was evacuated to the back of the Bradley, LT Vo came to assist me in evacuating 1SG Sapp and to recover the commander's weapon He never slowed down as he ran into the line of fire And he never slowed down even after he was hit in the arm by heavy machine gun fire. He just kept pressing on LT Vo continued to direct our evacuation even as bullets riddled our HMMWV and I was shot once again in the leg. Only after the commander and first sergeant and I were ready for transport in the medevac bird did LT Vo leave the battlefield for treatment of his own injuries. For putting the welfare of his commander, other soldiers and the mission before himself, 1LT Vo also received a **Silver Star** that day.

Let's fast-forward almost a year later -- to August 2007 . . . to eastern Afghanistan . . . to the actions of one who once sat where you sit tonight a classmate, a star-man, an athlete, a fellow E-3 eagle, and a close friend. Let me highlight the tenacity and courage displayed by CPT Matt Ferrara. For his actions as part of the 173rd ABCT, he would later, posthumously, receive a **Silver Star**.

Matt's Silver Star citation, in part, reads as follow: *"CPT Ferrara's courageous leadership and calm demeanor under fire were instrumental in repelling an overwhelming attack by an enemy force three times larger than his own. During three hours of intense combat, CPT Ferrara expertly led his men in the defense of the Aranus outpost until he was able to call for air*

strikes dangerously close to his own position to neutralize the enemy threat." CPT Ferrara maintained his composure as a leader and his men later reported that they could see in his eyes the resolve to never quit. Those of us who knew Matt would have expected nothing less.

The lessons taught by all three of these heroes are simple: focus on the mission . . . take care of your soldiers ... and ... persevere. In the future you all will be called on to persevere through any adversity ... whether it is physical pain or constant fatigue ... mental stress or fear. Each of you at some point will face challenges that will shake the foundations of your character. When that day comes ... I know that you will do your duty ... with honor ... for your country. Trust me, the 47-month West Point experience teaches you how to think, not what to think.

Today, you persevere through formations, classes, lectures, & even banquets (like this one), intramurals, and parades. As a cadet, you are forced to balance the stress of being a full-time college student with the added demands of an athlete and Soldier. West Point trains you. The Army will be—without a doubt--your proving ground.

With all the changes taking effect to restructure the cadet summer training schedule, opportunities abound to hone your leadership styles. Take advantage of the mentorship offered by staff and faculty and Tactical Officers and NCOs. Believe me when I say ... what they all taught me—collectively--is one of the main reasons that I'm alive and here with you tonight.

In closing, I want to once more thank the Superintendent and the Academy leadership, the Association of Graduates, the Kennas, and the Corps of Cadets. You have made an admirable and selfless choice to step forward and serve while our Nation is at war. You are ready for the challenge of leading our Nation's finest in combat; and I'm confident that each of you has what it takes to lead them through any situation.

Know that I accept this award on your behalf and that your Nation supports you and is counting on you. I look forward to seeing each of you out in the Army ... especially those of you wise enough to go Field Artillery, and I wish everyone here a successful year.

God Bless you all...and ... Beat Navy!