

**Remarks to the Corps of Cadets
in Washington Hall, September 26th 2007
by Captain Randall L. Ashby '01,
Nininger Award for Valor at Arms for 2007**

General Hagenbeck, General Stroup, General Caslen, General Finnegan, Mr. Anderson, other distinguished guests, staff and faculty, and, especially, the Corps of Cadets:

I am truly honored to receive the Nininger Award here at West Point, where shadows of combat leaders such as Grant, Lee, MacArthur, Lieutenant Nininger, General Hal Moore, and countless others occupy this mess hall. They are joined by memories of Dave Bernstein, Joe Lusk, Andy Houghton, and other graduates who have made the ultimate sacrifice.

I am really humbled by this award. At the outset, I must tell you, I wear the Silver Star and, now, the Nininger Medallion for my Soldiers. Without their remarkable efforts I would not be in front of you today. They are the heroes; I think of myself as merely a keeper of awards that honor them.

In the next few minutes, I would like to tell you about a few of them and my experience in Iraq.

In the early hours of March 20, 2003 my Soldiers and I crossed the border between Kuwait and Iraq. In the next 21 days we faced a fierce sand storm (at points it was even raining mud), tough combat, and continuous stress. But we were well trained. We had already spent seven months in the desert together. My task was clear if not simple: focus my platoon on the next objective and then make any adjustments to get the job done.

Let me tell you about a few heroic Soldiers.

Staff Sergeant Dan Reed and his squad were the lead element of most of my platoon's missions. He was on the ground with me in Nasiriyah, conducting two critical bridge recons, one under heavy indirect fire. Near Karbala, Staff Sergeant Reed also protected our platoon's Armored Combat Earthmover by placing his vehicle between an enemy element and the ACE and personally engaging the enemy with a large volume of fire at less than 75 meters away. Later, he placed shaped charges while he was under enemy fire, helping to block the attempted retreat of Special Republican Guard elements. Staff Sergeant Reed received the Bronze Star.

Sergeant Scott Barker was another hero. His M113 was hit with an RPG that killed one of our Soldiers and wounded Scott and the other two non-commissioned officers in the vehicle. Despite the shrapnel wounds to his leg, Sergeant Barker continued to engage the enemy with his M16 and M203 during over three hours of movement and contact with Special Republican Guard elements. On the objective, he was still carrying shrapnel in his leg, but he begged me to stay with his squad to crater a key road. Sergeant Barker received the Bronze Star for Valor and the Purple Heart.

Specialist Jesse Blancarte was a member of SGT Barker's team. When the RPG struck, he performed immediate aid on all of the wounded in the vehicle. He then manned the track commander's .50 Cal machine gun and destroyed numerous enemy RPG and infantry teams. On objective MONTY, he helped evacuate the wounded. On the spot he became a team leader and later was recognized for his valor.

The common thread in their actions is a composite trait – something familiar to you: a mixture of tenacity, teamwork, discipline, and flexibility. You learn and practice these traits daily here.

Discipline and teamwork are especially important, I believe. The discipline it takes to learn and recite Plebe knowledge under stress is of the same fabric as the discipline it takes to hold fire when confronted by someone who appears to be a non-combatant even though you are in the middle of contact with the enemy.

The discipline needed to stay physically fit, rested, and fed during combat is another aspect of this trait. You must take care of yourself, so you can make the best decisions possible under stress. Also, in theater it is the well-disciplined units and Soldiers make the biggest difference in their Areas of Operation. They are respected by the Iraqi people and are trusted with intelligence needed to find and destroy enemy forces.

In my view, the skill of building and operating as a team is the most helpful thing you learn here at West Point. Whether it's in Beast Barracks, Camp Buckner, on the fields of friendly strife, or working on projects, teams form, bond, build trust, and operate. The lessons from here will prepare you for the Fight.

The company team I was in was composed of Armor, Infantry, Engineers, Field Artillery, Medics, and Mechanics. Each element was critical. The team we built was close. In fact, two of the three other platoon leaders were members of my wedding party. When we faced a loss or setback, we were

determined to rally around each other and became more close and committed to one another.

In Building Four at Fort Benning hangs a well-circulated photograph of a Task Force 2-69 Armor Bradley Fighting Vehicle. It's pushing through smoke and fire, firing its 25mm Bushmaster. The photograph has become a symbol of the strength of the Infantry. If you see this photograph, look closely and you will see many antennae in the smoke. Some are from tanks, one is from an ambulance, one of them may have been from my vehicle because I was in the formation when the photograph was taken.

Even today many maneuver elements do not move in theater without Engineers to clear IEDs. Engineers receive intelligence, air cover, and security from other units. All units receive support and supplies from the Support Battalions. In short, when the situation becomes crucial, teamwork becomes essential. Its needed to complete the mission and bring everyone home.

In closing, I want to thank the Kennas, the Association of Graduates, the Academy, and especially the Corps. You Cadets have all stepped up and made a remarkable commitment to serve in time of war. Please know that you are ready to take on this challenge. The values and leadership skills that you take from here will make you successful in the desert of Iraq or the mountains of Afghanistan. I look forward to serving with you in the years to come -- or maybe even seeing you in a military science classroom next year.

Again, thank you for honoring me with your presence tonight.

God Bless you all and Beat Navy!