

IN THE SHADOW OF GREATNESS



VOICES OF LEADERSHIP,
SACRIFICE, AND SERVICE
FROM AMERICA'S LONGEST WAR



THE U.S. NAVAL ACADEMY CLASS OF 2002
JOSHUA WELLE, JOHN ENNIS, KATHERINE KRANZ
AND GRAHAM PLASTER
FOREWORD BY DAVID GERGEN

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*The U.S. Naval Academy Class of
2002 Joshua Welle, John Ennis,
Katherine Kranz, and Graham Plaster
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— DEDICATION —

TO THOSE WHO SERVED IN UNIFORM AFTER 9/11
AND THE THOUSANDS WHO NEVER RETURNED HOME
TO OUR NAVAL ACADEMY 2002 CLASSMATES WHO
LEFT THIS EARTH MUCH TOO EARLY
AND TO OUR MOTHERS, WHO ALLOWED US TO EMBARK
ON AN ADVENTURE OF SERVICE AND NEVER LOST FAITH





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FOREWORD

David Gergen

In the spring of 1994, preparing for the fiftieth anniversary of D-day, President Bill Clinton invited a group of veterans and scholars to the White House for a private session so that he might better understand that special moment from the past. Each visitor was stirring, but none more so than Steven Ambrose, a marvelous historian and storyteller.

As U.S. troops began to storm the beaches, German machine guns up on bluffs cut them to pieces. A senior officer would fall, and a junior officer would quickly fill in; he, too, would go down, and a noncommissioned officer would take command, pushing men forward. Had positions been reversed, so that Germans were pouring out of the landing craft, argued Ambrose, they would have stopped in the water and called Berlin for instructions—and they would have lost the most crucial battle of the war. But the men hitting those beaches, he said, were “sons of democracy”—young warriors who had learned to think and act for themselves, who had grown up in freedom and would instinctively step up in a time of crisis.

As Ambrose finished, all of us in the room wondered whether our young men and women of today could match the “greatest generation,” whether they had the right stuff. Ambrose insisted that if another moment came, despite the apparent softness of so many, the new generation would rise to the occasion because they, too, were “sons and daughters of democracy” They, too, knew the blessings of liberty and would volunteer their lives.

Anyone who has the pleasure of reading the essays in this book would surely agree: Ambrose was right. The young men and women here were members of the first class to graduate from the U.S. Naval Academy after al-Qaeda struck the United States. They rose to the challenge and soon became known as the “9/11 generation.” One day they could be called the “next greatest generation”

Among the silver linings to be found in these past ten years of continuous war, there is one that shines brightest: the courage, character, and leadership of the young men and women who have answered the country’s call to duty. I see some of them every day passing through the hallways of Harvard and on other campuses. They are part warrior, part scholar, all leader.

The Naval Academy, for more than a century and a half, has produced some of America’s finest warriors, scholars, and leaders, from Alfred Thayer Mahan and Albert Michelson to President Jimmy Carter and Senator John McCain. Years ago, I

had the privilege of working with some of them during a stint as a naval line officer, a chapter distinctly unheroic but full of lessons about leadership. (Serving as a damage control officer was also great preparation for working in Washington.)

Speaking at the Naval Academy's commencement in 1916, ten months away from America's entry into World War I, President Woodrow Wilson told the graduates, "You do not improve your muscle by doing the easy thing; you improve it by doing the hard thing, and you get your zest by doing a thing that is difficult, not a thing that is easy." The young men and women who have written this book have voluntarily chosen the hard thing, and they richly deserve our honor and our appreciation. Just as much, they deserve our attention, because they have provided in this volume first-person accounts of courage and integrity under the most trying of circumstances. They tell us of crucible moments—coming to the aid of soldiers pinned down in Iraq, landing a Tomcat on a carrier in pitching seas, rescuing men from drowning, watching a buddy die. Women are right there on the front lines, again proving their worth. These stories are gripping; some are heart wrenching. All of them show what their generation has accomplished, can accomplish, and God willing, will yet accomplish.

Let's be clear: This book is military in subject matter, but national in scope and relevance. It is penned by those in uniform but is written for citizens and others of all stripes. These accounts will inspire, they will impress, but most important, they will fill you with hope that this rising generation, forged in tragedy and war and called to difficult, often thankless duty, will help all Americans, both in and out of uniform, unite to rise to the occasion once more.

INTRODUCTION
NON SIBI SED PATRIAE



The current generation of young Americans has its share of stereotypes. Many assume this group lacks vision and ambition or the ability to lead in a time of great peril. At Annapolis, we knew differently. We were the midshipmen of the United States Naval Academy, Class of 2002. We longed to be tested, to prove others wrong about their impressions. We wanted a destiny of purpose, a higher calling.

The Naval Academy, with its glossy catalog depicting college seniors saluting crisply and brandishing swords, promised to make us heroes. Perhaps only the enlisted service members of our class truly knew what uniformed service entailed, but for those fresh out of high school, the ideal of the Naval Academy was like an invitation to join King Arthur’s Round Table. A magnificent chapel stands on the campus grounds. At the entrance, a magnificent door, twenty feet high, is inscribed *Non sibi sed patriae* —“Not for self, but for country.”

On Tuesday, September 11, 2001, the purpose and test of seniors at the academy became clear. Al-Qaeda attacked the United States, and our commander-in-chief assumed the lead in protecting our allies and our coasts from threats to American interests. Our abilities as tacticians and deckplate leaders would be tested. Our moral compasses would be rattled and recalibrated amid the realities of war. We would suffer losses—of blood, friends, family, and innocence.

These times are of almost limitless access to free media, overwhelming consumption, and layers of instant gratification. We seek greater connectedness online, yet we must also acknowledge that the virtual public sphere fosters an unhealthy state of individualism. We have seen a growing cultural gap between the military and civilian sectors of American society that must be bridged. Integrity, the bedrock of leadership, is today a rare virtue, not a common character trait.

In the Shadow of Greatness presents first-person accounts of junior officers during two wars, on the front lines and at home, in times of valor, humor, and tragedy. It explains how their experiences at Annapolis prepared them for what would be a decade at war. It also explores the nuances of a generation struggling to achieve something big—to earn the distinction of the next greatest generation.

This literary endeavor began in late 2009 after reflection on countless deployments, great victories, and much sorrow among various members of the Class of 2002. Their stories of bravery and service needed to be told. This book provides a podium for voices normally hesitant to write publicly about their experiences. The stories allow readers to meet an array of personalities; each writes in a way that every parent can enjoy and most people could be inspired. The body of work represents the effort of hundreds of people, among them advisers, classmates, friends, and professional writers; they all helped make this book a reality. The stories were selected from a pool of submissions to highlight the most important themes from this age of conflict.

The “war on terror” remains an ambiguous concept. We ask ourselves, time and again, Was it worth it? More than 6,000 American servicemen were killed and more than 46,000 wounded during Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. Thousands of Iraqi civilians were displaced, or worse, died from the armed conflict in their homeland. Now, with the United States suffering under the weight of crushing financial debt and a wide array of other domestic problems, the sacrifices of those who served run the risk of being eclipsed by the crises of the moment.

The writers in this volume are true believers. They have done a great deal of soul searching and invite you to join them on a journey of remembrance of their generation’s Long War. We all believe that the futures of Iraq and Afghanistan look promising, if not assured. We are bearing witness to a global community that has renewed its commitments to combating diffuse extremist groups.

More to the point, those who have served in a decade of conflict and are now returning from war are prepared and ready to lead our country through tumultuous times at home. More than a million men and women served in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2001 through 2011. This great reservoir of leadership is being tapped and called to duty at home, making America great again.

We, the members of USNA 2002, are humbled and proud to be among the many who have served, and we will continue to answer the call. We believe the nation is ready for a new generation of leaders, made up of men and women who have served after 9/11. These are our stories.

PART I



FOUR YEARS BY THE BAY

Inside the Gates of Annapolis



During my time as commandant, a question often posed to me was, Why should our nation invest so much in service academies and the young men and women who are chosen to attend them? My reply was simple: The support and defense of the Constitution of the greatest nation in the world demands a cadre of handpicked men and women who, without distraction, are rigorously prepared morally, mentally, and physically for this challenging but sacred duty. Our country deserves nothing less.

There are always those who doubt. They opine that America's youths are increasingly incapable of shouldering the challenges we face as a nation. They believe that the next class will somehow be less capable, less honorable, and less willing to make the sacrifices necessary to defend the nation and fulfill the call to duty. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the history of the United States, our Navy and our Naval Academy have always, without hesitation, answered the call of duty. No graduating class has failed to inspire us with its honor, courage, commitment, and sacrifice. Graduates willingly leave the comforts of home to patrol the world's oceans and defend our nation and our way of life. It is a dangerous undertaking. Many give their last full measure.

On September 11, 2001, as I sat at my desk in the "Dant's" office, I recall vividly watching the al-Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the plane crash in Pennsylvania. When the images reached the Brigade, and the uncertainty of the events rapidly became reality, I asked myself, Are these men and women, these young patriots, ready for the challenges that most certainly lay ahead? A decade of war has proven that they were more than ready. Fortunately for us all, they remain ready today. We are extremely proud of all they have accomplished and thankful that we chose the right men and women to lead the next great generation.

ADM. SAMUEL J. LOCKLEAR
Commandant of Midshipmen, 2000–2002

There are many reasons to seek an Annapolis diploma. Some dream of glory, to be the next astronaut to explore the final frontier, or perhaps to be a senator, representative, or even president of the United States. Others want to further a legacy because their fathers or mothers served with distinction. As the price of a college education continues to skyrocket, many are driven by a desire for a free

education. Though all are conscious of the fact that the Annapolis experience imbues characteristics that support success, each midshipman's intent is unique.

The United States Naval Academy was established under Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft in 1845. Bancroft envisioned and ultimately succeeded in creating a center of excellence charged with providing future naval officers a scientific education centered on mathematics, navigation, gunnery, steam power, and chemistry, complemented by humanities courses in English, French, and philosophy. The Naval School, the Academy's first incarnation, was established at Fort Severn, a ten-acre Army post. Its first class consisted of a mere fifty midshipmen taught by seven professors. The curriculum's scope evolved as the United States grew in strategic importance and as technology progressed from tall sailing ships and coal-powered ironclad vessels to nuclear-powered submarines and sophisticated marine amphibious forces. The Naval Academy has consistently produced graduates prepared to become experts in the latest technology.

By providing a true liberal arts education in the classical tradition, the Naval Academy has been heralded among the top schools in the country by *U.S. News & World Report*. Although academically impressive, a USNA education extends beyond books. As set out in the Academy's mission statement, its goal is also "To develop midshipmen morally, mentally and physically, and to imbue them with the highest ideals of duty, honor, and loyalty in order to graduate leaders dedicated to a career of naval service."

INDUCTION DAY, 1998

The humidity and simmering heat felt like someone breathing down the necks of the thousand-plus plebes converging on Alumni Hall. The transition from civilian to military life had, for most of us, finally come to fruition. We were a hodgepodge group of seventeen- to twenty-three-year-olds representing every state in the Union as well as Bahrain, Cameroon, Croatia, and Turkey. Among us were high school standouts in debate and music, scholastics and student government, volunteer work, and athletics. While a few dozen were exceptional enlisted men and women, the morning of July 1, 1998, leveled the playing field and made each of us a member of one team.

Induction Day, commonly known as I-Day, transformed this rag-tag group of young men and women into crisply dressed and shorn midshipmen equipped with everything they needed to begin their journey. I-Day is a mix of excitement and foreboding, the first of many such days to come during the next four strenuous and tumultuous years. While high school friends basked in the freedom of their summer vacation and prepared to attend civilian colleges, this small cross-section of American teenagers opted for a more rigid lifestyle, defined by regulations and abject obedience to orders.

One by one, we entered Alumni Hall armed only with our unique talents, ready to join the team that would become the Naval Academy Class of 2002. Each of us carried a manila folder with identification forms and a single, authorized duffle bag containing a toothbrush (but not toothpaste), seven pairs of "tighty-whitey" underwear, one pair of running shoes, and five white t-shirts. None of the accoutrements of a normal dormitory were permitted, and family members were told to wait outside. A barrage of

unique accents was heard; distinctive ethnic backgrounds were apparent in the winding corridors of Alumni Hall. In short, a look out upon the class reflected America's demographic tapestry.

Blue-chip varsity athletes, who chose to attend the Academy after being recruited to play one of the NCAA Division I sports, were sprinkled among the group. The male athletes, standing 6 feet 3 inches or taller and with massive muscles, were easy to spot. They were basketball or football athletes assuredly, all trying to be the next David Robinson or Joe Bellino, Navy's first Heisman Trophy winner. With slight embarrassment or unabashed honesty, some came because they could not afford college and judged four years of relative pain to be a small price for a free education and five guaranteed years of employment following graduation. Many others were still discerning their intent, but nonetheless answering the same call of duty as those who from an early age knew it was their destination.

Whether a person's reasons were self-centered or selfless, no one was judged on their past; all were accepted on the precept that they were now in this together. All held in common a humble appreciation for the prestige of the institution and the challenging journey on which they were about to embark. The only thing that truly mattered was how well the class performed and whether its members could work as a team.

Bancroft Hall is the world's largest dormitory and home to the Brigade of Midshipmen—all 4,400 of its members. It boasts 1,700 rooms, 33 acres of floor space, and 4.8 miles of hallway, and is warmly referred to as "Mother B" or the Hall. Bancroft is large enough to have its own zip code, 21412. The building, designed in the eighteenth-century beaux-arts architectural style, is completely self-contained and functions like a small city. The Hall houses a cobbler shop, uniform store, tailor shop, laundromat, travel office, barbershop, bank, general store, medical and dental facilities, gymnasium, post office, and a dining facility that can feed every midshipman in one seating.

From Bancroft Hall, we were ushered in groups to Tecumseh Court, the main entrance to and gathering area outside the dormitory. We stood nervously at attention in our newly fitted white sailor uniforms or "whiteworks." All 1,231 of us had made it as one unit through the overwhelming process of I-Day and stood ready to tackle the rigors of plebe summer and the challenges that lay beyond.

We were directed to raise our right hands to swear an oath to the Constitution of the United States and to discharge the duties of a midshipman. Some followed the direction uneasily, some with timidity, most of us fearfully, but all voluntarily. Perspiration collected on our foreheads and streamed down our young, taut faces as we stood rank and file among the strangers who would become our shipmates and most committed lifelong friends.