

Branch Night for the Class of 2015, 20 November 2014

(As delivered by LTG Joe DeFrancisco '65, USA ret)

THANK YOU, General Thompson, for that very generous introduction. It is a pleasure for me to be here to participate in this wonderful celebration. Since all of the special guests have already been recognized I will forgo recognizing them again. There are two special groups, however, I would like to recognize. First and foremost the Class of 2015, congratulations on accomplishing another “rite of passage” on your way to commissioning by joining the branch in which you will serve as leaders of character. Next, to my classmates from the Class of 1965, thank you for being here to witness this important event.

Members of the class of '65 have been part of every major event for the class of 2015 from R Day through tonight. Many of us have participated in the various milestones for 2015 thanks mainly to the efforts of our class affiliation lead, COL (ret) Pat Kenny and his “forward deployed” agents, COL Bob Frank and his wife COL Mary Frank, who are with us again tonight. It has been a source of great pride and joy for us to watch the development of our 50 year affiliation class.

The concept of Affiliation is relatively new at West Point. I'm told the 50 year Affiliation Program began around 2000. So we in the Class of 65 had no such program. As you have no doubt heard many times, the class holding their 50<sup>th</sup> Reunion at our graduation was the much celebrated Class of 1915 featuring Generals Eisenhower, Bradley and scores of other heroes from the World Wars. To be perfectly honest, what I remember most about the Class of 15 at our graduation is that they look old, mighty

old. So I have no illusions about how we look to you. In fact on the way into the auditorium tonight I heard one firstie say to another “Remember, it ain’t over till the old guy speaks. As soon as he’s finished we can get our branch assignment and go get a beer” .... . The Class of 1915 are all gone now, just like my class will be all gone by the time one of you stands here at Branch Night for the class of 2065. It’s all part of passing on the traditions and values of West Point, and the never-ending strengthening of the long gray line in selfless service to our country.

THAT’S NOT TO SAY THAT TRADITIONS DON’T CHANGE OVER TIME.

Branch Night is a perfect example. The concept of a Branch Night began with the Class of 1994. Things were very different for our Cl of 65. Branch Drawing was done in South Auditorium, now Robinson Auditorium, one afternoon, probably after our last class. Branch quotas were shown on a screen, a moderator called names in OML order and each cadet responded with his choice. When a branch quota was filled the branch was declared CLOSED and could no longer be selected. There were 596 of us. We had a choice of five branches (Infantry, Armor, Artillery, Engineers, or Signal Corps) plus a limited number of openings in other Services. Your procedure is much more complex and sophisticated, involving innovations such as the Talent Management and the Branch Education and Mentorship Programs. Matching attributes and skills with Army requirements and needs is a positive, and necessary, step. Your process is better and much more appropriate for today’s environment.

The Army you will join operates in a much more complex environment than the Army we joined 50 years ago. Today’s Army describes that environment in its newly published Operating Concept entitled “Win in a

Complex World - 2020-2040". Who do suppose will lead that Army in the complex environment of 2020-2040, an era that begins less than 5 years from your graduation day? Who will be the Company/Troop/Battery Commanders, the Battalion/Squadron Commanders, Bde/BCT Cdrs, Project/Program Managers? I think you know the answer. It makes perfect sense that the Army try to do everything possible to match talent and attributes with requirements and needs in order to set the conditions to maximize the potential of each leader, and have right person in the right spot. That's exactly what your Branch Selection process tries to do.

#### SO, THEN WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF A BRANCH?

Your Branch becomes for you another community, another family. It's something larger than yourself and in many cases, something that will become part of your identity for the rest of your life. A common question when old soldiers meet is to ask: What Branch were you? As an example to help illustrate this enduring tie, a few years ago at our 45<sup>th</sup> Reunion we had two sets of pictures taken- one by Cadet Company, the other by Branch.

Furthermore, your Branch identifies you and associates you with an area of expertise. The insignia you put on tonight carries expectations. You will be expected to master a body of knowledge and be able to execute certain tasks associated with your branch. This is all beyond being leaders of character, being agile and adaptive and being in top physical condition. While extremely important, these traits are for you, as West Point graduates, almost a given. But what do you know about maneuver, fires, communications, counter-mobility and other branch specific competencies? That is what will distinguish you and determine your value

to the team on the ground. Keep in mind also that Branches are not the domain of commissioned officers. In fact the vast majority of most branches is made up of enlisted soldiers. So it's not only your peers and superiors who will have expectations of you. It's your troops as well, including your NCOs, and in some cases your warrant officers. They will all help you develop the skills you need. But you have to be ready to do your part. What you do reflects on them and vice-versa.

Your Branch will become a source of pride and comradery. Before long you will conclude that your Branch is superior to all others, and others serve largely to support or enhance your efforts. That's all fine, as long as you really don't believe it. The Army Concept of Operations, "Win in a Complex World", tells us you will operate in combined arms teams with tailored combat support and combat service support augmentation, usually in joint formations of various sizes. The concept says you must become experts in "sophisticated expeditionary maneuver" with the ability to deploy on very short notice, in small or large formations, into hostile/complex environments. It also mentions the core competencies necessary in every element of operations, from maneuver to medical. In such an environment, every Branch is not only important, every Branch is essential. To succeed you will need to become an expert in your Branch and gain a basic understanding of the roles of other Branches. You may find yourself part of a unit with others of your Branch, like an Infantry or Armor Platoon, or as the sole Engineer, Signal, or MI officer on an advisory team. Either way, you need to know your Branch.

**IN CLOSING I OFFER SOME REMINDERS AND REINFORCEMENT**

Be proud of your Branch, your new insignia and your new favorite colors. Your Branch is now part of who you are. My favorite Army Chief of Staff, who happens to be here tonight, often said that “Soldiering is an Affair of the Heart”. Your branch is part of that affair. Love it; Embrace it: You are now part of each other.

Remember, there are no extraneous Branches. One or another may dominate in certain circumstances, but roles will reverse under different circumstances. All Branches have vital roles to play.

To underscore some of what I’ve said I think you will find interesting the words sent to me two days ago from a recent Graduate. Here’s what he wrote - “Below are some reflections on my branch night and branch looking back 3 years. Hopefully it is helpful to the class of 2015. I know a lot of them from being a SLS Squad Leader and S3 for their Beast”:

1. Regardless of what branch they get, the real foundation of their profession is what they have learned in their 4 years, not what they will get in 4 months of their branch schooling. ... They have to be an officer first, then a logistician, infantry man or artilleryman.

2. Whatever branch they get, they will have to join a combined arms team and fit into the any role the mission calls for. I’m an Artillery Officer...I have been an Light Infantry HQ Platoon Leader, Fire Support Officer, Fire Direction Officer and an Artillery Platoon Leader – I have been attached or assigned to a Light Infantry Company, a Sapper Company, a Calvary Troop, a Special Forces Team and an Artillery Battery. That is the Army they are entering.

3. There are great Soldiers in all the branches - and you will work with all of them. Yesterday my platoon fired 20 rounds from my howitzers in Afghanistan. In our certified platoon on the guns are not just artillerymen, but also 1 Signal Soldier, 1 Transpo Soldier, 2 Mechanics and 2 Cooks – and they all did great!

4. Enjoy the night with your friends! Real life will start soon and fast so enjoy the time you have together tonight and the remainder of the year. I have classmates in Afghanistan, Iraq, Africa, Romania, Guam, Japan and plenty of other locations – all different branches -- so enjoy your time now.

SIGNED: Brian Meese 1LT, FA, Kandahar, Afghanistan

Sure sounds exciting to me and I know it will be for you! Don't forget that your next order of business is to Graduate and get a commission. Your new Branch insignia has no meaning unless it's accompanied by a shiny gold bar.

Once you do graduate many things that are important now won't matter much anymore. It will be no more than passing interest, at best, whether you graduate #5 or #500, whether you were the goalie on the corps squad soccer team or goalie on the Company A1 soccer team, whether you were 2nd Regt Commander or Platoon Ldr in Company B4. What will matter is how you contribute to Winning in a Complex World. Being an expert in your Branch will go a long way toward answering that question. I have every confidence you will contribute mightily and that you will Win.

Thank You and Good Luck

Joe DeFrancisco '65