

SPEECH TO  
CAPTAIN C. ROBERT ARVIN FOUNDATION  
*June 27, 2008*

Bob Arvin was an inspiration to so many who knew him. And when I first met him 45 years ago, I understood immediately: here is a son of the “Greatest Generation,” with the potential to change the world. It’s that memory that my West Point class of 1965 very much wants to keep alive. And of course, it is the guiding purpose of the Arvin Foundation. I am enormously thrilled to be asked by this distinguished VFW post and the Foundation to contribute to that noble purpose.

I’ll try to direct these remarks in great part to the “Millennials” seated here in front—the young award winners now coming of age, who have never met Bob Arvin.

A logical beginning for this is to go back 10 years, to the early spring of 1998, when I was serving as Superintendent of the Military Academy at West Point. As some of you may know, our Physical Development Center at West Point (the “cadet gym!”) is named after Bob Arvin. One of my highest priorities as Superintendent was to tear down most of this antiquated structure and replace it with a modern facility, worthy of the mission of the Academy—to produce commissioned leaders of character for our Army and nation. Equally importantly to me, I also wanted a more fitting way to honor Captain Bob Arvin.

Literally in the middle of demolition on this project, and after millions of dollars had already been spent to design a replacement facility, a Congressman from Ohio decided to stop the project dead in its tracks. We invited the Congressman and his staff to West Point to explain our position on why we needed a replacement, and to hear the Congressman’s reasons why he thought differently. Needless to say, this did not make for a pleasant initial conversation. I was passionate about the urgent need to replace the Arvin gym; the Congressman was not.

So, early in the tour of the by now partially demolished facility, one of the Congressman’s key staffers pulled me aside and said, “General, why did you name the gym the way you did?” I asked the staffer to clarify his question; it was certainly odd and not the first one

I was anticipating. But when the staffer replied, I was stunned at the answer: “General, I don’t understand why you named this gymnasium after the Army of the Republic of Vietnam.”

Now, for the veterans in the room, you’ll understand that he had in mind the letters forming the word “ARVN,” for our former South Vietnamese allies, with whom and for whom we fought for many years in the 60s and 70s. But of course, ARVN had nothing to do with “Captain C. Robert Arvin,” after whom our physical development center is named. So, when I told the staffer that it was in fact named for one of my classmates, my roommate my senior year at West Point, our Brigade Commander and wrestling team captain who was killed in action in 1967, his follow-up question was, “But, who was Bob Arvin, really?”

Let me take that as my mission for the next 18 minutes: to provide an answer to the staffer’s question, “Who was Bob Arvin, really?” Many of you have already heard from my classmates on this podium in previous years. Indeed, some in this audience clearly knew Bob many years before I had the privilege of meeting him in 1963 - - including of course his lovely and cherished family, his friends, and his teammates. But at the outset, what all of us who met him in college knew him best for was captured in a simple paragraph in our West Point yearbook, The Howitzer. A key sentence in that paragraph says, “It wasn’t long before everyone realized that he was a leader!” Certainly, Bob was more than that: a friend, a brother, a husband, a Wolverine (“go Blue!”). But leadership is what I want to discuss with you this evening. Because, in the end, it’s that attribute of Bob, and the values he brought to the game, that will endure.

Leadership as instilled in our Army springs from a simple model: we call it “BE-KNOW-DO”. In essence, we stress that who you ARE (the BE component above) is far more important than what you DO (your actions), or what you KNOW (your encyclopedic knowledge). One business executive sums this up by saying, “Give me someone who’s got the BE part right and I can teach them to DO anything!”

When I knew Bob, I thought he was a complete leader, with all of the BE attributes I thought were possible for someone so young: maturity, compassion, values, inspiration. He was

like those iconic models we were taught to emulate: Eisenhower, Omar Bradley, and later in our studies, Joshua Chamberlain, hero at Little Round Top in the Battle of Gettysburg.

But what was the source of this leadership excellence? In a single word, it was VALUES – bedrock values of our profession that were movingly articulated by another iconic West Point leader, General Douglas MacArthur. On May 12, 1962, when Bob and I were plebes, MacArthur returned to West Point for his final visit and gave his by-now famous “Duty-Honor-Country” address. Nobody who was there will ever forget it.

Towards the beginning of his speech, MacArthur described what those words meant to him; they also happen to be an apt description of what Bob Arvin’s life means to me, and to our class. In talking about Duty, Honor, Country, MacArthur said, “They are your rallying points – To Build Courage, When Courage Seems to Fail; to Regain Faith, when there is Little Cause for Faith; to Restore Hope, when Hope becomes Forlorn.”

To Build Courage, When Courage Seems To Fail – Bob Arvin’s last words were as follows: “I know, I’ll be careful, but they need that machine gun up front.” Shortly thereafter, he was cut down by Vietcong heavy weapons fire and did not survive the battle. Bob was an advisor to a South Vietnamese Airborne Battalion. They needed leadership and inspiration, both to accomplish their day-to-day mission and to build the professionalism of their force. But it was Bob’s courage, at a crucial point in the battle, that he was trying to impart - - to a unit in desperate straits. Note Bob’s words again: “They need that machine gun up front.” It was the same selflessness that all of us knew from this man. The unit survived the engagement, in great part because of the role Bob played. But it was typical of his actions, whether he was trying to build courage for his unit, or his wrestling teams, or the Corps of Cadets which he commanded our senior year. MacArthur’s words clearly resonated.

To Regain Faith, When There is Little Cause For Faith – Everyone in their life suffers set backs – everyone! But the question is, what does a leader do when those set backs inevitably occur? There were two that I recall distinctly from Bob’s life when I was his roommate our senior year. The first was a loss that he sustained in a wrestling match against Syracuse University. They had an outstanding wrestler in his weight class, and Bob lost badly. But when

he returned, all he was concerned about was keeping his team motivated for the next match, particularly against our major rival, the U.S. Naval Academy. Bob didn't know the meaning of the term "failure." In fact, I recall distinctly Bob telling me to get down on all fours, so he could practice some new wrestling holds for his next match. My neck hurts to this day from his half-nelson!

But a second loss that Bob sustained was one that I shared with him. Bob and I were both finalists for a Rhodes Scholarship in December, 1964. Bob was one of two winners from the state of Michigan, and I was one of two from the state of Ohio. We met in Chicago, where there were four Rhode Scholarships given that weekend for the Midwest Region. Neither of us won the scholarship; one West Pointer did, and his name was Al Hottell, a young officer from the class before us who, tragically, was killed in Vietnam in 1970. I rode back to my uncle's house in Chicago with Bob on the train that night. Like his loss in the wrestling match, Bob didn't dwell on the setback. We talked about it a bit on the train, and Bob encouraged the two of us to put it behind us. Frankly, I found that hard to do at the time, but his advice was, of course, unfailingly correct. Again, it's not the behavior of the leader when things are going well that defines that leader; it's how that person behaves when the going gets rough - when the inevitable setbacks occur. In this area especially, Bob helped "to regain faith, when there seemed to be little cause for faith!"

To Restore Hope, When Hope Becomes Forlorn - - I view "restoring hope" the same way I view "imparting inspiration;" it's what demarcates a leader from a manager. One of the reasons I felt so strongly about the need to rebuild the Arvin Gymnasium at West Point was the role it might play, by highlighting Bob's life, to "restore hope" and inspire literally thousands of cadets who went through the center's doors every day. I knew some might look upon the citation for Bob's awards for heroism and his contributions to Academy life - - and be moved. Our West Point class committed itself to reconstructing the entrance to this facility in a way that would provide a permanent and inspiring memorial to Bob's accomplishments: his Silver Star and Purple Heart, his West Point leadership, as well as a brief narrative on his life. This explains why I was so angered at the Ohio Congressman's behavior in 1998.

To set the record straight, we eventually prevailed, and the new gymnasium was built in the style and manner that all of us desperately wanted. Simply said, I felt it was my duty to finish what Bob had started: to use his life as a vehicle to help restore hope to young cadets, who might at times be in desperate need of such inspiration. As a class, I'm confident we've fulfilled that mandate.

Now, each of these stories, building on the MacArthur speech, describes what Bob did as a leader. But the enduring question for me, and I hope for you, is how Bob did it. How did Bob Arvin become a leader of character? How did Bob "build courage, help to regain faith, restore hope?" Bear with me while I tell three short stories, each of which will be relevant at the end to answering this question. The stories involve, in order, Harry Potter, Coach Mike Krzyzewski ("Coach K"), and George Washington.

I'm sure many of you are whispering, "Well, the old guy is losing it! Coach K? Harry Potter? George WASHINGTON?" Again, bear with me. Let me ask, first of all of our awardees, how many have read a Harry Potter book? What I expected – the bulk of this group! (To my VFW compatriots, if you haven't waded into this series, I'll guarantee, they are a bit different from "The Hardy Boys" or "Nancy Drew!")

But if you recall in one Harry Potter sequel, there was a scene in which Harry was asking the Headmaster of the Hogwarts School, Albus Dumbledore, a question about his choice of his dormitory. Readers will recall, Harry selected Gryffindor, not Slytherin. Harry wanted to be in Gryffindor, but he was worried that he might actually belong in Slytherin. (For those not familiar with Harry Potter, Slytherin was the "detested rival," the "dark side of the force" in Star Wars terms, "Ann Arbor High School" for the Ypsilanti alums – or for the West Pointers here, think . . . the US Naval Academy!) But seriously, Dumbledore's words to Harry were enormously insightful: "Harry, remember, it's the choices you make that determine who you are, far more than your abilities!"

Now, put this aside for a second and let me tell a Coach K story. Mike (a West Point grad, Duke University's Basketball Coach, USMA Class of 1969, by the way) was giving a leadership lecture to a West Point audience last fall. He described how, as a young man, prior to

leaving for West Point, he was heading downtown in Chicago and was about to grab a bus. His mother yelled out as he was leaving his house, “Mike, remember, be sure to get on the right bus!” Mike said, “Mom, I’ve lived in Chicago all my life, I know the streets and the bus lines. Don’t worry.” Mike’s mother responded, “Michael, I’m just telling you, be sure to get on the right bus!” Mike said yet one more time, “Mom, I know these streets by heart. Don’t worry.” Yet, she repeated the warning a third time.

It finally dawned on Mike that she wasn’t talking about a bus. She was talking about ensuring that the people he associated with, the teams he joined, the mentors he wanted to be with, were folks whom he could trust. And, when he grew older, those would be the kind of people that he would want on his bus! This was a telling lesson for Mike, learned before he came to West Point.

Finally, about George Washington. In 1998, there was a wonderful made-for-TV movie about our first Commander-in-Chief entitled, “The Crossing.” Sadly, few in America saw it because it was paired next to one of the very first reality TV shows, a piece of treacle entitled, “I Want To Marry a Millionaire.” Recall, this was Darva Conger’s five minutes of fame.

But for those who saw the movie, it was a telling lesson in leadership. It described the victory that Washington gained on Christmas Day, when he crossed the Delaware on a freezing cold night and surprised the Hessians early that morning in 1776. At the end of the battle, Washington turned to his key subordinate, Brigadier General Mercer, and asked simply, “Hugh, why do all these young men do this, so many following me, some to their death?” General Mercer responded, “General, I suppose it’s because they trust you!”

So, the three stories, linked together, say this, in my view: you make the right choices early, by getting on the right bus. You build the foundations of trust in that way. Later, these become the key ingredients for successful 21<sup>st</sup> century leadership. People will want to get on YOUR bus, because you inspire trust. They want to with you; they want to be like you. It all begins with the choices you make - - now!

This is the collective wisdom of Professor Dumbledore, Coach K, and George Washington. Indeed, it's also the encapsulation of Bob Arvin's leadership model. He made the right choices, he got on the right bus, he was a leader who could be trusted. We wanted to ride with him. There is no better model.

## CONCLUSION

Let me close with some focused remarks to three special groups: first, to my fellow veterans and West point classmates: you made critical choices in your lives. Because of those choices, you inspired trust in others. You served this great country, and you imparted vision to this wonderful Foundation. We can't thank you enough.

To Bob's family, teammates, and friends: what Bob became, he owed in great part to you. There used to be an expression at the U.S. Military Academy that I railed against, and it went roughly as follows: "OK you plebes, listen up: We are going to tear you down, and then build you back up!" This could not be more wrong! West Point, and indeed our entire military establishment, builds upon the values and core character that you as family and friends impart to the young cadets by the time they arrive. We complement what you have imparted, we don't tear down what you have so carefully built up - - in so many important ways, the right way!

For example, young people, yesterday and today, would never have been inspired to come to the Military Academy, or to serve in our armed forces, unless they were encouraged and inspired to do so by people like you.

West Point added significantly to the core attributes that YOU provided. But West Point didn't tear Bob down and build C. Robert Arvin into a totally different and unrecognizable person from what you sent from Ypsilanti. For your commitment to this young man early-on, we will forever be in your debt.

Finally, to the young people here—the "Millennials:" no "next generation" will enter our workforce or government service better educated, more plugged in to the globe, more opinionated, than you. For sure, additional "seasoning" might be necessary. One quotation

from a recent “60 Minutes” documentary points out the challenges for you—and us: “Millennials want to arrive in the workplace at noon on Monday with their flip-flops and their iPods, and still be the CEO by Friday.” But, business (my current work) and government (my former walk in life) must understand and find ways to attract and motivate and retain you—because of the skills you bring to the game. That’s our challenge.

What’s yours? Some 43 years ago, it was described by an emerging leader this way: “Future leaders must be prepared to serve our country, not only as soldiers, but also as ambassadors, advisors, and technicians; they must have an understanding of the complex social, economic, and political problems that face our world community; they must be linguists, administrators, and diplomats, as well as soldiers. And finally, they must have a more realistic relationship with the civilian community with which we will be closely associated in the future.” The author of those words, of course, was Bob Arvin; the words were extracted from his letter to our graduating class in 1965. They still apply -- in spades -- to each of you.

Coach K is fond of saying that what winners all have in common is a “zest to learn.” Winners are always “uneasy about what they know—that it’s too inadequate; that they must know more!” That’s what Bob’s words meant as well. He knew that one needed to breed an environment conducive to winning—to prepare to win was crucial. But bringing intelligence to the game was even more important!

So, in the end, I got on Bob Arvin’s bus when I was 19. I never forgot the ride. Through the supportive mission of this Foundation, and this VFW post, the “Arvin bus” keeps running. It’s a “virtual” bus for sure—but no less significant than the real thing. What a wonderful way, to take a life of substance—Bob’s life, cut short way too soon—and to keep the meaning of that life fresh, not just for the “Millennium” generation, but for millennia to come.

Go Blue! Go Army! Go Bob Arvin! And, for each of you Millenials in the front row, to quote Tim Russert, “Go get ‘em!”

Thank you!