B-17 Flying Fortress Pilot’s Words for Today’s Graduates —

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B-17 Flying Fortress Pilot’s Words for Today’s Graduates ---

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... An excerpt from the 2016 Utah State University Graduate Commencement and Hooding Ceremony

Congratulations. As you leave this university, go with courage and conviction for we expect a lot of you. Your preparation includes the many hours of class work and many hours of research that you accomplished here at USU. But your talents also include the fundamentals of your work ethic, your respect for others, your curiosity – these are aspects of your leadership that come from more than just USU – often it is a strong reflection of your parents and family – some of whom are here today — and many of whom are first generation college students.

I too am a first generation College Student ---

For me, many of my lessons in life came not only from my university training but also from brothers, sisters & parents – and especially from my Dad. You see… as one of six children, of a Boston Catholic Family, I am the son of a pilot flight instructor who flew the B-17 flying fortresses during the end of the war.
Have you ever seen one of these machines? – 14 years ago I was at the Lone Star Flight Museum (Galveston, TX) hoping to see my first B17 – I believe there are only 10 flying in the world today. It was not there. But, as I started to leave the museum an older gentleman came up behind me put his hand on my shoulder and said “Son - you look like your missing something.”

I told him of my dad as a flight instructor on the B-17 and he said, “you come with me.” He took me thru the museum, thru the machine shop out on to the tarmac and said – “Watch!”

As I stood there, literally a B-17 landed and pulled up in front of me. Now this thing is a behemoth with 4 huge thundering Curtiss-Wright Radial engines – you can feel the pounding power of this thing – why the very ground you stand on vibrates. As the pilot shutdown the engines, the crew chief moved to the wing and yelled down at me – “Are you the guy who’s dad was a B-17 Pilot?” I was mesmerize and yelled "Yes!” They invited me into the plane, into the cockpit and sat me in the pilot’s seat. It was as if my father was beside me again. I could not believe I was there!

You see --- My dad would talk about his role as a Flight Instructor in the Army Air Corp – of teaching new war pilots to fly this big 4 engine animal and how he would bring these new pilots up and flip the bomber on its back – and hold it there -- to get across to the new recruits the incredible resiliency of that plane and what they as new pilots could do with this thing. He would say --

“Mark, they had to learn fast how to handle it, because their life and the lives of their crew mates depended on it.”

It is something like what we do here at Utah State University. In the years of your
graduate training, we have thrown a lot at you. We expect you to learn fast and understand that you are only at the beginning of your learning process. Like my dad’s comment, USU opens the fire hydrant and hopes you learn well - for there will be lives that depend on you and the solutions you find.

My father did not go to college. But he was my teacher – every day -- he expected good things but most importantly he expected hard work. Like many service men he learned to trust in the diversity of talent around them. And he was passionate that a war is only something to preserve us and our neighbor’s differences and ensure all of our rights. Both of my parents had rich ties to Scotland – my mother a Campbell and father a MacLellan and though they have long ago passed away — every time I hear "The Scotsman", the Aggie Fight Song – a dual pride arises in me; One for my university and a Second pride for my immigrant Scottish heritage that my parents were so proud of. How they would have loved to hear the Aggie Pipe Band today and beamed at the fight song of every game!

Every generation tries hard to pass on to their children a better place, a better life. Every graduation, we the faculty at USU, hope that we send out to the world a new set of graduates – you guys – and hope that you will discover solutions to deliver an even better world to the next generation, indeed to your children. We hope you will always carry the pride of a USU education and remember it well when you hear the Scotsman. And in case you’re wondering – yes! – you do represent the very best this institution has produced.
Congratulations Graduates!

[McLellan is the Vice President for Research and Dean of the School of Graduate Studies at Utah State University. He was speaking to the 2016 graduating class of PhDs and Master's graduates during the USU Graduate Hooding & Commencement Ceremony at the Spectrum on the campus of USU, May 6, 2016)