

Good evening, Administrator Phillips, Vice Admiral Nunan, Congressman Suozzi, our Gold Star Families, our Merchant Mariners, faculty and staff, and most important, the United States Merchant Marine Academy Class of 2023. It is an immense honor to be here with you tonight to be a part of the Battle Standard Dinner. As we gather to recognize the incredible legacy of this vital institution, we pay our deepest respects to the 142 midshipmen who made the ultimate sacrifice in defense of our nation. Their courage and unwavering commitment to duty are inspiring and it's a privilege to gather here tonight to honor their sacrifice.

To the Class of 2023, I am so excited for you. I would trade places with you in a minute. In fact, we all have something in common. We were all offered admission to the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy. I grew up in the suburbs of Philadelphia. My neighbor was a Kings Point graduate and sailed as a tug captain for SONAT marine. I already had a liking for the sea and its lore, but Jay's stories fueled the fire. Jay was the definition of cool and the stories he shared of his time at Kings Point and at sea, convinced me to pursue a maritime career. During the summer between my junior and senior year of high school, Jay gave me the

chance to ride the tugs and transport fuel barges from the refineries outside of Philadelphia to the Con Edison power plant on the East River. That experience was awesome. I would have ended up Kings Point, if Jay wasn't overshadowed by an even cooler maritime hero who showed up that summer. It was July 1986; Top Gun was in the theaters, and naturally I wanted to go to the Naval Academy and fly jets or to the Coast Guard Academy and fly helicopters. I never made it into the Naval Academy, nor was I selected for Coast Guard flight school—it was the first of many “No’s” I heard as I navigated my career. Had I attended Kings Point, I would have felt better about the outcome of this year’s Secretary’s Cup. Your strong performance in the second half was a reminder to me of the resilience and determination of the Merchant Marine...

While I didn’t ship out commercially, or on a Navy flat top, I have had the fortune to cross the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans multiple times, sail into the Bering in winter, and travel the world, stepping foot on every continent except one—that’s only because I missed the boat. So tonight, I hope to give you a sense of the adventures ahead and some thoughts for plotting your own course.

The theme for my remarks is "Navigating the Decisive Decade: Rising to the Challenges Ahead." The term 'Decisive Decade' comes from the National Security Strategy which articulates the challenges and opportunities we face as a nation. The strategy describes the operating environment that you and your classmates will face upon graduation. At the same time, this next decade will be pivotal in your own personal growth and development, and you will have to summon the courage of the 142 midshipmen we honor tonight, and lean on the hard lessons learned here at Kings Point in order to meet these professional and personal challenges.

The National Security Strategy notes that we are at a key inflection point in history, where the current rule of order is threatened by several challenges including re-emergence of great power competition, land war in Europe, economic and social inequity, and the increasing impacts of climate change. No matter where your career takes you, these are the challenges you will face.

While that may seem daunting, they are challenges that we've successfully faced before thanks to the bravery and service of the 142 and others gathered here tonight, including our Gold Star Families and Congressional Gold Medal recipients.

I am incredibly grateful for the sacrifices our Gold Star Families have made for our nation. To the DONNELLY and SEESAN thank you for being here tonight and continuing to honor the legacy of your loved one and uplifting our future service members.

I'm also grateful for the hard work of Captain Dru DiMattia, the Maritime Administration, Congressman Suozzi and his colleagues for recognizing our World War II Merchant Mariners with the Congressional Gold Medal. I've had the pleasure of presenting two of these medals with Senator Shaheen in New Hampshire during the past year. These medals are a physical reminder of the incredible courage and bravery the U.S. Merchant Marine. Nearly a quarter million merchant mariners served as part of the U.S. military during World War II. They delivered personnel, heavy equipment, supplies and brought life-sustaining hope to a war-torn world. Nearly 10,000 merchant mariners did not return home

to their families – proportionally, a higher casualty rate than any other branch of the military during the war. It's hard for me to imagine how anyone could have comfortably laid down at night, let alone sleep, with the ever-present danger of U-boats lurking just below the surface of the ocean's shipping lanes. CAPT STEPHENS and MR REILLY, thank you for your service to our nation, we're honored by your presence here tonight!

In spite of the dangers and complex challenges, these merchant mariners, and our service members, conducted their missions professionally because they understood the vital purpose of their work and they knew that their fellow crewmembers were counting on them and had their backs. There is a special bond that develops within crew.

In my current role, I oversee Search and Rescue in more a one million square miles of North Atlantic Ocean. The most powerful tool I have at the ready every day is not the Coast Guard helicopter I coveted as a cadet, rather it's the broad network of merchant vessels sailing under the AMVER pennant. When any vessel, regardless of size or nationality is in distress, our merchant mariners never

hesitate to assist with search and rescue and first aid. These deeds demonstrate the character of those who make up this amazing service – selfless individuals who are masters of their craft and are willing to give their all for their mission, their country and for the community of seafarers. As you contemplate the challenges that we will face as a nation in the coming decade take comfort in the courage and determination shown by your predecessors, the teamwork instilled at this very institution and the broad network of maritime professionals and allies who prove their selflessness every day.

You should also take comfort in the resiliency and determination you’ve already demonstrated. I’m humbled by the challenges that the Class of 2023 has already navigated. Adding to the inherent stress and pressure of your 4/c year, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the world in ways that we could have never anticipated. It undoubtedly impacted your experience at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy. As the virus spread globally, you were forced to adapt to new ways of learning and living, often in isolation from your friends, family, and

classmates. Through it all, you have demonstrated incredible resilience and determination, persevering in the face of uncertainty and fear.

“Me-Too” and the murder of George Floyd brought to light issues of harassment, discrimination, and injustice within our society and our institutions. You contributed your voices to those discussions and demonstrated tremendous courage in your actions. As future leaders, I am confident that you will foster an environment where all are treated with dignity, respect, and equality.

As you continue to navigate the uncharted waters ahead, let the experiences of the past few years serve as a testament to your resilience, innovation, and determination. With the skills, knowledge, and character you have developed at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, I have no doubt that you will play a vital role in fostering a maritime community that is not only more equitable and just but also more innovative and effective in facing the challenges of the Decisive Decade.

While I've focused on challenges that we will face in the coming decade, the National Security Strategy is inherently optimistic about the strength of our institutions and the opportunities we will realize.

Among the key institutions that our nation relies upon for both economic prosperity and national security is our Maritime Transportation System. You all know that the U.S. Maritime Transportation System provides jobs for 1 in 7 working age Americans and accounts for \$5.4 Trillion in economic value each year—or 25% of U.S. Gross Domestic Product. The competitive employment opportunities that you experienced over the course of the past year are a testament to the value that the MTS creates. In order to provide for our National Security and realize the economic opportunities of the Decisive Decade, we need an even larger Maritime Transportation System. Innovations in offshore wind energy, arctic exploration, commercial space launch, alternative fuels, automation, sensors, communication, and data are fueling new growth and innovation in the maritime industry. As the Coast Guard's First District Commander, I see these many of these changes right here in New England. The

Coast Guard engineers, policy makers, marine inspectors and cyber specialists are working hard to sharpen our competitive edge, advance mission excellence and leverage the benefits of these new opportunities while protecting, defending, and safeguarding our nation from the risks. At the same time, Coast Guard crews are expanding our operations and influence. My crews are pushing north supporting annual search and rescue operations and NATO exercises off the coast of Labrador and Greenland. More broadly, the Coast Guard Cutter HEALEY circumnavigated North America and traveled to the North Pole. The Coast Guard Cutter POLAR STAR recently completed its 26th voyage to the Antarctic as a part of Operation DEEP FREEZE with Ensign Joshua King, KP '22 aboard.

These are the opportunities that await you just a few short weeks from tonight!

As the future leaders of our maritime industry and armed forces you will be called to action to lead this innovation and change. The education you have earned here, will provide skills and insights which will enable you to shape the changing operating environment. I look forward to the expertise and energy you will bring to the task ahead!

Let me wrap up by offering a few thoughts on your personal development over the course of the next decade.

Earlier, I shared that I've heard "No" many times over the course of my career. You've no doubt heard it already as well. Get used to it. Embrace the fact that your careers and lives will unfold in many different directions. That's part of the adventure that awaits you. While there is a lot outside your control, and sometimes success comes down to timing and luck, these are not the only determining factors. How you choose to live your life matters most.

A powerful and timeless lesson on personal development comes from C.S. Lewis's essay, "The Inner Ring." C.S. Lewis delivered this essay to a class of graduates at Kings College in London in 1944, but the message is just as relevant today. In the essay, he described the temptation we all face to seek inclusion in an exclusive group--a circle of influence that seems to hold the keys to success and power. The paradox that Lewis highlights is that once you gain access to that inner ring, you'll find that there is another, smaller even more exclusive ring within. The desire for acceptance is never-ending and can lead even the most principled individuals to

compromise their values and forsake their duty to others. The antidote Lewis offers is to commit yourself living your values and honing your craft. Focus on becoming the best craftsman, or professional, that you can be. Over time, other craftsman and professionals will notice your work, align with your efforts, and you will find yourself surrounded by a ring of professionals.

Throughout my career I saw those “No’s” as learning opportunities and recommitted myself to making the most of each opportunity to hone my craft. C.S. Lewis may not speak to everyone, so I’ll offer a similar perspective, from Master Chief. Those of you who work with senior noncommissioned officers in our armed forces, will be wise to seek their counsel. My Command Master Chief’s advice is that there are only three things you control: your attitude, your effort and your actions. Your positive attitude is infectious; your 100% effort is inspiring; and your actions speak louder than words.

“Acta Non Verba.” This powerful statement is not only a reflection of the values you have embraced during your time at the academy but also a call to action for the rest of your lives. As you embark on your careers and face the challenges of

this decisive decade, I encourage you to draw on the examples set by the 142 midshipmen and the education and experiences you and your classmates gained at the US Merchant Marine Academy. While I know that as your first class year ends, you feel like “We’ve got to get outta of this place...” I can assure you that in a few short weeks you will walk out through the front gate, however this place will never leave you.

Congratulations on your achievements. Thank you for your service, I look forward to seeing you out in the fleet!

SEMPER PARATUS