AIR FORCE 64TH BIRTHDAY SPEECH

FOR

BRIAN McKENZIE

Hello everyone, and thank you all for allowing me a few moments to share some thoughts with you. The United States Air Force celebrates its 64th birthday this year, and I know it’s the kind of occasion we all look forward to commemorating. Over the past 64 years, the Air Force has grown to be the magnificent entity it is today, and its strength and might is a direct reflection on each one of you and those who preceded you, that proudly wore the uniform we all treasure and honor. No one ever said that military service would be easy, and I am sure we’ve all experienced challenges that ultimately showed us what we’re made of, but today we’re here to celebrate and tap into that place inside of ourselves that inspired us to commit to this way of life. I know that everyone loves a celebration and almost everyone loves birthdays-especially if the one being celebrated is a nice large number and NOT your own! Birthdays as milestones are an opportunity to take stock. As we recall the reasons and events that led each one of us to join the Air Force, the lessons we’ve learned while here and the experiences we’ve had the privilege to be a part of, I invite each one of you to pause, reflect and recommit to the profound ideals upheld by our commitment. Think of where you were 5 or 10 years ago. Think of the day you chose to enlist, or try to recall the feelings you had on your first day of basic training. Were you apprehensive or excited or both? And what about your first deployment? Did dread outpace the adrenalin? All of the moments that led you through your military career have brought you to this point in time right now, and since there are no accidents in this world, here we are, together in this room, for all intents and purposes, we’re here for a little cake and a few anecdotes about your service, but I don’t think today or this birthday celebration should just be about the superficial “bells and whistles.” I propose that we make this birthday a reason to remember, reflect, and recommit to the United States Air Force.

Whether you got here through family tradition, a passion for flight and technology, the sense of overwhelming patriotism, or another reason, known only to you, both you and the Air Force are profoundly richer thanks to your service.

There is no question that we are living in extraordinary times, and there is no doubt that each one of you could have chosen a less arduous path, but you didn’t. We’ve all lived through some really serious world situations and by now I figured out that those “wild rides,” whether fighting international terrorism, the implosion and decimation of entire countries, or the unexpected “force majeure” of unthinkable natural disasters, have forever changed the way we live our lives. The “ride” for the past several years has certainly been wild, hard to imagine, and unprecedented. We are Air Force people, and in many ways, we are at the vanguard of many of these extraordinary events, and fortunately, we have our training and commitment as the inspiration that accompanies us every day, no matter where we might be and no matter what we might be doing. “Aim high … fly fight-win!” The Air force adopted that slogan last year-short, sweet and to the point. What does it mean to you? What do you think of when you hear those words? Now is also the perfect time to think of the core values that have guided you through your Air Force careers and subsequently into all areas of your lives. “Integrity First,” “Service before self,” Excellence in all we do.” Do we fully realize and appreciate what gifts these core values are to us to use as a guide through life?

About integrity, the British philosopher, Francis Bacon has said, “It’s not what we eat but what we digest that makes us strong; not what we gain but what we give that makes us rich; not what we read but what we remember that makes us learned; and not what we profess but what we practice that gives us integrity.” Although we all had a fair amount of life experience before we got to the Air Force, upon arrival, I am sure we all realized that life would change forever. We had the opportunity, through basic training and all the other steps along the way, to profoundly learn what it means to be a person of integrity. As defenders of the honor and security of the citizens of the greatest country on earth, it is our responsibility to live every facet of our lives with integrity. We set the example for those we guide and defend. And in turn, operating with integrity becomes the gift we earn. To have the honor and privilege to have received the training and opportunities afforded through our commitment to military service makes the reward of living a life of integrity a precious gift. Integrity, by the way, does not necessarily mean “perfection.” Although excellence and precision are non-negotiable qualities that are integral components of our skill sets, no one is perfect, but integrity allows for honesty and the possession of the highest level of moral principles. If you weren’t in touch with your integrity level before you got here, I am sure you are now! Just think about how much richer your life really is as you live it with the honesty and forthrightness demanded of you through your service. Along with integrity comes self-respect, a gift that grows with age, wisdom and experience.

Of course, we all know what it means to abide by the credo, “Service before self.” Someone once said, “Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth.” I’ve also heard that, “Greatness is not found in possessions, power, position, or prestige. It is discovered in goodness, humility, service, and character.” With this part of the Air Force credo to guide you, think about how service to others before considering yourself has enriched your life. You’ve chosen a career in the military. Service before self comes with the territory and I am sure there are many incidents each one of you can share that describe the depth of humility and compassion that can be achieved through selfless service. “Service before self” does not have to always be a grand, sweeping, life saving event. Every day there are dozens of ways each one of us can put our ego aside with the simple intention to be there for someone else. Of course, all of you are heroes. We know that, but life is not just about living from one adrenalin rush to the next. Service is precious at any and every level, and each one of us can learn from every deed we do. The flip side of “Service before self” is being sufficiently aware of when someone is serving **YOU**. How many times during the day do you find that someone has been there to simply do something for you-whether it’s assisting you in a task or partnering with you on a mission, that person’s mandate is also, “Service before self.” The acknowledgement you will receive for the work you do is in direct proportion to the service, integrity and compassion you provide.

“Excellence in all we do.” Honestly, this part of the credo is kind of a no brainer. Would you really want a mediocre mechanic fixing your plane? (**If you want to make this humorous, say it with a little exaggeration and wait for the laugh**). No really…Excellence is a state we all strive to live in and I think that along with honesty, integrity and self-respect, we know when we’re “in the zone” and we know that when we’re not, we need to put in the necessary improvement. It all comes down to self-awareness, which also goes hand in hand with the other qualities required of the consummate Air Force professional. Colin Powell said, “If you’re going to achieve excellence in big things, you develop the habit in little matters. Excellence is not an exception it is the prevailing attitude.” Simply stated, allow excellence to be the place in which you dwell. Look for the way to practice and demonstrate excellence in all that you do, and, as someone else once observed, “Excellence is the unlimited ability to improve the quality of what you have to offer.” Keep improving…achieve excellence.

I think you get the point. Every breath of life is a gift, no matter where you are or what you’re doing. Every day offers us the opportunity to take a look, assess our position, learn something new, serve others and commit to the cause. Birthdays have a way of magnifying the process, and I hope each one of you have been inspired to have take a good look at your life in the military, take a good deep, long breath, clear your thoughts and find a refreshed and renewed commitment to YOUR Air Force.

Thank you all for being here and Happy Birthday!!