GRADUATION SPEECH

FOR

JAMES CUPP

Hello everyone. I want to thank all of you for inviting me to speak at this term’s graduation ceremony for the Airman Leadership School. It’s an honor to have the opportunity to be in the presence of such enthusiastic students and such distinguished leaders. (**If there are** **any individuals you want to mention, do that here**). I’d like to acknowledge \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for their contributions to the United States Air Force and for their dedication to its students, graduates, and fellow servicemen (**Is there a more appropriate word? If** **so, use it**). To \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, I want to thank you personally for asking me here today. It’s a privilege to have the chance to go back and remember; to get in touch with the time when my own foundation was being formed and nurtured, when the lessons were new and raw and not quite comprehensible. I’m grateful for the education and training I received and every day I am reminded of what I’ve learned and how I’ve grown as a man, a member of my family and community, and as a proud member of this Air Force. I cannot imagine where I would be today had I not attended Leadership School.

Graduates, I want to congratulate you on your accomplishments and remind you that even though today you celebrate, tomorrow begins the greatest adventure of your lives-but you will **also** learn that every day has the capacity to bring you that great adventure. I encourage you to maintain an openness and an awareness that accepts the unexpected and works to serve you with an adaptable capacity that allows you to find your way in any situation. You’ve been prepped and trained to continue onto the next step in your military careers. The education you’ve just received will serve you in situations in life and within the military and civilian contexts. You’ve spent the past several weeks (**or mention the length of the course**) identifying and examining the characteristics required of a leader, and whether you are just beginning or eventually moving up in the ranks, the most important thing to remember is to honor the uniform, serve the people, and fulfill your potential as a teammate and leader in the US Air Force.

It was General Douglas MacArthur who said, “A true leader has the confidence to stand alone, the courage to make tough decisions, and the compassion to listen to the needs of others. He does not set out to be a leader, but becomes one by the equality of his actions and the integrity of his intent.” During this course you’ve been taught how to lead, how to follow, how to listen and how to be heard. Yes, you’ve been **taught**. Now it is up to each one of you to prove that you’ve **listened.** It’s time to show your colleagues that as part of a team, you’re an essential link no matter where you find yourself situated. You’ve started the process of learning what it means to be a supervisor, a leader, a defender. It takes intuition, intelligence, wisdom and compassion. General Colin Powell has said, “Great leaders are almost always great simplifiers who can cut through argument, debate and doubt to offer a solution everyone can understand.” Notice he said “great.” Now I’ll be honest, to all of you graduates, there will be some more lessons you’ll need to learn and more ”mileage” you’ll have to “rack up” before any **ONE** of us might be referred to as “great.” but that is the context we all must maintain, no matter who we are or what responsibilities and duties form our current challenges. If we are truly aware, intelligent and focused, every day becomes an opportunity to expand on what we have experienced in the past. You know more right now than you did this morning, but it is those people who naturally keep their ears and eyes open who will succeed in this world and in this Air Force. Pledging yourselves to a career in the military says something about you. You’ve already “self-identified.” You’ve already had a light shine on you that says, “Give me more. I’m ready, willing and able to present myself for the good of my mission. Let me learn. Thank you for the opportunity to grow. You’ve taken the time and dedication to teach me. It’s time for practical application of the lessons we’ve learned. And as I learn and grow, I will devote myself, my skills and my knowledge as I set an example for others.” I think if President Dwight Eisenhower were here he might share some of his thoughts with you. Remember he was a general in World War II who went on to be President of the United States. He **CLEARLY** had experience with all of the attributes this course is about. I think that first he’d remind you, “The supreme quality of leadership is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, whether it is on a section gang, a football field, in an army, or in an office.” He also taught us, “Plans are nothing; **planning** is everything.” and “You don’t lead people by hitting them over the head-that’s **assault**, not leadership.”

Six weeks ago you might have begun your course with a question mark. “What am I doing here? What am I supposed to be learning? Is this **REALLY** necessary? And here you are on the other side of the challenge. Acknowledge yourselves for completing and accomplishing a critical goal. You placed your considerations aside and allowed yourselves to operate with an open mind. This is one of the most basic and fundamental lessons you will have earned in this course. And where fear of the unknown may have colored your perspective six weeks ago, you’ve learned to manage those fears and are now more prepared to “expect the unexpected.” You are more prepared to be resourceful, diplomatic, and service oriented. Right now you are more in touch with your capacity for integrity and the pursuit of excellence. And you are more prepared to coordinate, calculate, anticipate and implement your ability to plan and strategize. You’ve gained valuable experience and insights about yourself and the way you relate to others as you learned to handle situations through community outreach, team based projects, physical training, and working within study groups. The main point that distinguishes your learning experience here from those you may have had at civilian schools is that while you were here, all of the hours and effort invested were specifically for the advancement of your knowledge, versatility and skills, all to be accessed throughout your Air Force career and ultimately in life.

As you go on to your next assignments, whatever they may be, keep your lessons close to you. They will work to inform you as you chart your course. Remember that you do not work alone. You are part of a team, and every team member is important. As you lead and as you partner your fellow airmen and women, keep in mind that your team is a reflection of your ability to communicate. Always try to assess your performance and ask yourself, “What could I have done more efficiently and effectively? How much more of a difference could I have made if I had only \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ … fill in the blanks. What more could I have done to encourage the success of my team?” Be willing to face the unknown and banish negativity, self-doubt, arrogance, and embrace the potential you **KNOW** you possess, or to paraphrase Bill Gates, “As we look ahead into the future, leaders will be those who empower others.”

Graduates, once again I congratulate all of you and I welcome you into this next, new and exciting level of your Air Force career. I hope what I have said serves to inspire insights and action. Remember the adage that tells us “Leaders are born, not made.” It is your innate gifts that inspired your service. Each one of you has what it takes to lead. Think of your time here at \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ as an incubation period, one in which you grew stronger and more aware of your environment, what’s expected of you, and how to use that new knowledge to make an impact and accomplish personal and military goals. The time has come for you to fly… literally and figuratively and I look forward to learning of your accomplishments and how you prevail in all that you might encounter. Thank you all and remember… “**Aim High…Fly-Fight-Win!”**