

Happy Veteran's Day, IMSA! I am so thrilled to be here today – a lot has changed since I was a student here, and I can't believe how time has flown since graduation. I haven't actually been back to IMSA since I graduated in 2006, so thank you so much for inviting me back!

I am honored to join you all on Veteran's Day. I hope you've deduced by my uniform, and my being here that I am in the military, and a veteran myself. I am married to a veteran and I am the child of veterans. This day is near and dear to my heart, and dare I say it's a bit of a family tradition.

I am also aware that my "family tradition" is not the norm in this population, or the nation's population for that matter. In fact, veterans presently make up less than 7% of the total adult population in the United States. Similarly, our active duty military members make up less than 1% of all adults in this country.

So, maybe I'm the first veteran or active duty member you've met...or maybe I'm the last one you'll meet...and the military or veterans in general seem pretty foreign to your life here. Well, I'm here to tell you how my experience here at IMSA has shaped who I am as an Air Force officer, my experiences overseas, and my success thus far. And maybe when I'm done, you'll feel like we're not so different after all.

But before I do that, I did my research in preparation for this occasion, and statistics show that the most effective speeches are less than 20 minutes...Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address clocked in at 2 minutes...I can't promise to keep it that short, but I'll do my best to keep it under 20 for you guys.

First, I'll tell you how IMSA set me up for success, then I'll go over the key characteristics that I developed here that I have found most important in my career, then I'll tie it all up with a few pieces of advice.

After graduating from IMSA in 2006, I continued on to the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs where I studied Political Science, with minors in German and Russian. I attribute even getting into the Air Force Academy to my attendance at IMSA. There's no way I would've gotten in, let alone succeeded at the Air Force Academy, which has an acceptance rate around 10%, had I stayed at my hometown high school in Southern Illinois. That's because IMSA gave me so many opportunities to lead – whether through sports (I was the varsity volleyball captain and played varsity soccer), via clubs, or in community service projects. I was also the Yearbook Editor...which may not be the most glamorous of positions, but hey – it was before people could post all of their photos on social media, so documenting high school memories in the yearbook was a big deal! Anyway, the leadership positions I held in sports, clubs, and community service here, paired with the notoriously elite curriculum, made me competitive enough to

get into the Air Force Academy, and receive a nomination from my Congressman.

I actually interviewed with then Senator Barack Obama's staff for the required Congressional nomination, but I had already received a nomination from my local Representative. How cool would it have been to receive the nomination from the then – future president? Oh well...back to how IMSA set me up for success – at the Air Force Academy, I was able to test out of all the required math classes for my degree, which opened up my schedule to take both German AND Russian there. I was also able to participate in, travel with, and lead clubs – while my peers were just trying to keep up with the workload – I wasn't just surviving like so many of the cadets, I was able to thrive! I jumped out of airplanes, I participated in a cultural immersion to Egypt and Israel (because my grades could handle missing a few weeks of class), and I scored high enough in German to go on language immersion trips to Germany (two or three times, actually). Thank you

Herr Stark (I believe Herr Stark, my German instructor here is retired now...but I'd be remiss not to thank him in this forum).

I was also able to use my German skills later in life, when I was stationed in Germany for three years. Since then, I have lived in Tennessee, Hawaii, and now Texas...and it all started here at IMSA.

So what is it about this place that allowed me to thrive in the military – outside of the strenuous academics that is. Well, it's a few things...it's **effort, courage, and perseverance.**

Let me repeat those tenets that I developed here – **effort, courage, and perseverance.** I sat where you're sitting today between 2003 to 2006...and to many of you, that may seem like ages ago...

For reference, George W Bush was in office, the US invasion of Iraq had just kicked off, we were all reading the Harry Potter series (volume 5 through 7 came out while I was here), Martha Stewart went to jail, Pluto was redefined as a dwarf planet (not formally a planet). We were still getting used to the internet – had MySpace accounts, the precursor to Facebook. The iPhone didn't exist yet, Blockbuster was still a thing, and we binge watched shows via DVD sets because Netflix streaming didn't exist.

I remember it like it was yesterday, which is cliché to say, but it's true. I remember quite vividly learning about ethos, pathos, and logos from Doc Nok (who's in the crowd today), writing pithy history papers (for Dr. Skinner), preparing for an oral exam in German or Russian, and your principle Bob Hernandez worked in student life, and was actually my volleyball coach for one of those years! Perhaps it seems all too recent,

because a lot of the habits and skills I began while here, I've continued to hone during my Air Force career.

So let's talk about the first of those tenets - EFFORT. In the military, it's critical. Here at IMSA, it's required to even get in. You all know what effort looks like, or you wouldn't be here. However, what may have gotten us by in our high school (or junior high for you Shmen), might not be sufficient to get us to graduation here. Your level of effort has to rise to the occasion. When I was a student here, I realized quickly – that while I may have been the smartest kid at my OLD school that just wasn't the case here. It was humbling to my ego, and it was thrilling to be amongst similarly motivated classmates; that weren't just trying to get by, they were trying to really capitalize on their talents and interests. You may have heard of the popular quote – “If you're the smartest person in the room, you're in the wrong room.” Well, let's just say I was always in the right room at IMSA.

Especially when sitting in the same room as my friend and super-human quad-mate – Kaleigh – who procrastinated so badly that she pulled too many all-nighters to count - writing papers or finishing projects – and then still managed to get an A on her work. I couldn't fathom how she could pull it off, but us mere mortals had to really work at thriving here through maximum effort.

I also found that attending IMSA took COURAGE (the second of those tenets). You might not think you have courage – but it takes courage just to step foot in this place. To go somewhere where you don't know anyone, you don't know what to expect, and it's guaranteed to be hard. These are all things I first experienced here at IMSA...but have practiced throughout my career, at EVERY new assignment, and ESPECIALLY on deployments...where I found myself alone and afraid in a foreign

location...just hoping to find a friend or ally as soon as possible. But IMSA taught me to embrace the unknown – because courage is not the lack of fear. It's being afraid and going anyways.

And all of you here have done that – you've come to challenge yourselves in an unknown environment with a bunch of strangers.

Those strangers will become friends, and a lucky few will become lifelong ones...that will show up to support you when you speak at an event more than 10 years after graduation. Shout-out to my classmates in the crowd today. Some of us have spouses and kids, all of us have a few new wrinkles...and so many memories of our time spent here.

Just while we're on the topic of friends – I want to specifically take this time to address how important it is to surround yourself with authentic people who will celebrate your triumphs, support you in the hard times, and let you know when you're screwing up. And be that for your friends...as the great JK Rowling wrote via Dumbledore "It takes a great

deal of courage to stand up to your enemies, but a great deal more to stand up to your friends.” And I think, it takes even greater courage to listen to your friends when they’re correcting you...and honestly self-reflect.

The last tenet I’ll discuss is PERSEVERENCE and by that I mean – persevering in the face of failure. First, you can’t avoid failure forever, because it’s going to happen. As long as when you meet it, you don’t just throw up your hands and give up. It’s not easy for us “gifted kids” to deal with failure. I know before IMSA, I hadn’t really faced much failure – at least not academically.

I know it’s easy to say – yeah, just pick back up after failure, and keep trying - in theory, but it’s much more difficult in practice. Somewhat recently though, I was up for a leadership position – competing against my peers – and a list comes out to say, according to all of these

people's records, these made the cut for who we think should be leading our Airmen. So the list came out....and I was pretty astonished when I couldn't find my name on it. Several of my friends' names were on it...and I'm thinking, well surely there must be some mistake.

Doesn't the Air Force know how SMART I am???

And then I made excuses, like...well, I guess the process is corrupt, or I guess that I should've sucked up a bit because THAT's who made the list. But after the initial shock wore off, I really thought about it...and you know what? I took a hard look at what I'd been doing, and I realized that I wasn't as close to the top of the pack as I'd originally thought...and those peers on the list really were outperforming me at that point. I had charged hard for a while, I was ranked 1st of my peers by my commanders, and I let it get to my head...and I'd allowed myself to stop trying as hard...and just coast for a bit.

So, then I had to really ask myself – do I want to give up? And I did think about giving up...I went so far as to ask my husband what he thought of me getting out of the military. He, of course, saw right through it...he asked if I was thinking about it just because of this TINY setback...

I was being a bit dramatic honestly, letting this one event make me think that I wouldn't make it to the next promotion, that I wouldn't ever amount to anything...and there were PLENTY of people who didn't make the list, or who never make that list for that matter and go on to have successful careers. When I was growing up, my parents always made sure that I knew failure was acceptable...as long as I had done my absolute best. After getting past my hurt feelings – I decided to reinvigorate my efforts, and do just that – by best, and continue to persevere.

You see, it's okay to fail, as long as you don't quit...if you quit, then you really have failed. But if you keep pushing forward, then what you thought was a failure is just a stepping stone to success. You have to channel Thomas Edison who said, "I haven't failed – I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." Commit to yourself – to be the best version of yourself, even if you fail 10,000 ways... so long as you persevere.

You've taken the first step in that direction by coming to IMSA...but don't stop there. Commit to yourself and to your goals, accept that there will be bumps along the road, and persevere through them.

So that's effort, courage, and perseverance – all of which were forged at IMSA...and tested throughout my career thus far. So, you might ask - what advice do I have to report back to you, after 13 years away?

Foremost in my mind, is this – never miss a chance to gain some PERSPECTIVE. One way, and personally favorite method, is through travel. I was permitted the opportunity to visit Kazakhstan when I was 13 yrs. old, and it was an eye-opening experience. I realized quickly that I'd been taking a lot of things for granted – for example, I stayed with a host sister and mother – but there were not any men in their household. So every time we wanted to go out, they had to call an uncle to escort us for safety reasons. Since then, my life has taken me to places in Europe, Asia, Central America, Africa, and the Middle East. All of these experiences helped me to expand my comfort zone, and as a result bolstered my confidence and resourcefulness. It taught me that while I may do something one way where I'm from, people do things completely differently in other places – and that's ok. I also take very little for granted – things that I didn't even question before, I'm extremely thankful for - feeling safe in my environment, access to clean

drinking water and food, indoor plumbing, INDOOR PLUMBING, and shelter (even if I find myself sleeping in a tent from time to time).

Another method to gain perspective is through lifelong learning, which you can always access through reading – even if you’re not in a formal academic setting. My husband and I like to joke about who’s smarter.

He went to a public high school and an average college, joined the Army (which is not traditionally known as the most intelligent branch of the military). However, he adopted this practice of lifelong learning much earlier on than I...

He’s currently working on his second graduate degree, and reads avidly.

So, he equates the two of us to the tortoise and the hare – where he was the tortoise...and I’m the hare. I don’t know if you know the end...but the tortoise wins. When I didn’t get picked up for leadership list, I realized I had wrested on my laurels for a bit too long...and maybe there was some truth to that fact. So, like I said – I’ve reinvigorated my

efforts – so that I can overtake that tortoise. And at this point, he might be winning – but I’m catching back up quickly. See, that’s the whole point of having that trusted support group who can hold you accountable.

General Mattis, the former Secretary of Defense had this to say about reading, “If you haven’t read hundreds of books, you are functionally illiterate, and you will be incompetent, because your personal experiences alone aren’t broad enough to sustain you.” I now try my best to abide by his words.

Finally, you can gain perspective through diversity of relationships - if you surround yourself with like-minded people, you put yourself in an echo chamber where you really aren’t exposed to any opinions or perspectives outside your own....which is dangerous, because then you might think that everyone shares your beliefs. So, surround yourself

with people that think differently, and have opposite opinions from you. Then, learn to converse respectfully. You might come away from the conversation understanding another viewpoint – even if you don't agree, at least you will understand their point of view. This is a very diverse population at IMSA, so take advantage of it. I remember going to the Chinese New Year parties, learning about Diwali, learning about Eid, attending European Cultures club events – all during my time here. My friend and roommate Pooja also immersed me with her Indian heritage while at IMSA – I learned about her religion, her family's traditions, and ate a ton of amazing (albeit SUPER spicy) Indian food. I was able to broaden my perspective because of people like her, as well as the massive number of opportunities here.

My second piece of advice is this - YOU determine WHAT SUCCESS MEANS TO YOU. To some, it means inventing the next Uber or YouTube, to others, it's getting filthy rich, to others maybe it's having a

family or lots of cats, or being the best at Fortnite... Just know that YOU decide what success looks like, and nobody gets to define that for you....

My final piece of advice is broader, and more long-term. Nearly a decade in the military compels me to say this - the military and academia can and should be valuable partners...because education plays a vital role in growing the next generation of talent to defend our nation and secure the future. And you don't have to be in the military to contribute to this cause.

This might seem like a strange pairing to some – what could we possibly have in common (academia and the military)? Well, according to the Pew Research Center, almost all active duty officers have an undergraduate degree, 42 percent of those hold an advanced degree, and they are four times as likely as average adults to have completed a

post graduate degree. So, you see, the military and academics are very much intertwined. We also have a common cause – we all want to preserve or improve our way of life. That alone can unite us – and we need not wait until crisis strikes to form partnerships. We are arguably already in a period where wars are fought in the cyber realm, via space, and via civil sabotage. Many of you will pursue careers in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) – all of which touch on those realms – space, cyberspace, and industry.

Who knows what your contributions might add to our nation – one of your classmates may develop technologies that counter cyber intrusions that an adversary would use against our nation, or your pursuits in engineering could enable us to stay one step ahead of our competitors in space, or you could take human lives out of danger via the development of artificial intelligence, or you could protect our citizens via medical research and discoveries.

The way in which “wars” are fought are moving more and more towards STEM topics...and to delineate between the efforts of the military and those in STEM and industry would be foolish. We’re at a juncture where partnering ahead of crisis is vital. Thucydides said it best around 400 BC - “The society that separates its scholars from its warriors will have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting done by fools.”

So, no matter what field you go into, or where your passions lie, just remember that you define your success. You’ve already proven you’re capable of effort, courage, and perseverance. Continue to broaden your perspective through travel, reading, and diverse social networks. I’m so excited to see the impact you will have on each other, this country, and the world.

Thank you all for your time today – I know it was mandatory, but I hope it was worthwhile. I'll stick around to chat if you'd like afterwards. Have a great Veteran's Day.