

Office of the Commandant of the Marine Corps

University of Idaho Commencement Address

**General James F. Amos
Commandant
United States Marine Corps**

May 12, 2012

GENERAL JAMES F. AMOS: Dr. Nellis, thank you for the kind introduction. Ladies and gentlemen, I'm going to just deviate from my prepared remarks for just a second to begin with and make a comment about the hospitality of not only this great state, but in particular, the University of Idaho. We arrived yesterday afternoon after having been away for many, many years. In fact, the last time I was up in this part of Idaho was in 1988 when I took my family through just to show them where I'd gone to college. So it's been over 42 years since I really came back to this state even though I have family in southern Idaho, just because of my duties as a Marine. My wife and I have an opportunity to travel all over the world and all over the United States and we are met and regarded well and cared for well. Never in any single instance in my time as a general officer have we been as warmly received as we have here at the University of Idaho so that is a testament, Dr. Nellis, and congratulations to everybody in the audience that's taken such good care of us. Thank you.

Esteemed and faithful faculty, deans, administrators, fellow alumni, proud parents and guardians and grandparents by the thousands, families and friends, I am honored to join you here this morning on this grand occasion and most important of all, unless anybody thinks it is not their day, congratulations to the Class of 2012.

Ladies and gentlemen, when I left Moscow 42 years ago it was a cold January in 1970. The war in Vietnam was still raging, a schooner of ice cold Budweiser was 25 cents and Hoggy and the Blossoms played for a grateful crowd of us every Friday night at Morts. As I look back, life was pretty simple in those days. After graduation and commissioning as a new second lieutenant in the Marine Corps, I headed to Pensacola, Florida, and entered the big boy world of the unknown. I was a young bachelor and while the future was unknown, it was exciting nonetheless. Folks, I stand before you today as living proof that with enough motivation and enthusiasm anything in life is possible.

I am traveling today with my bride of 41 years, and I will ask her to stand here in just a second, who has been a key part of my adventures since the day I drove out of Moscow four decades ago. Speaking of Bonnie, a few of you know that she was born and raised right here in the Palouse. In fact, we had a chance after we arrived just yesterday afternoon to kind of drive around Moscow and walk down memory lane just a little bit. While we're out driving around, I ended up pulling into that Stinker Mart out there on Moscow-Pullman Highway to get some gas and while I was pumping gas, I sent Bonnie inside to get something to munch on. She was in there and it took longer than I thought. I finished pumping the gas and I got back in the car. I was looking in the rearview mirror and out she came with some fellow wearing cowboy boots and blue jeans and an old scruffy old T-shirt and about a three-day-old beard. They kind of walked side-by-side as they approached the back of our rental car. I was noticing that they seemed to know one another and then he reached up and touched her and as he was getting ready to get in the car, he gave her a hug and a little kiss and she slid in and shut the door. (Laughter) You can imagine what I was thinking. (Laughter) So I did the manly thing that every testosterone-filled man would do, I threw the car in gear, jumped on the gas, threw rocks and everything, pulled out onto the Moscow-Pullman Highway, and headed back to town and I said, "Who was that?" (Laughter) And she said, "Well, we went to high school together." "Well, you looked awful friendly, Bonnie." (Laughter) "Well, in fact, we were pretty close when we went to high school. In fact we were very close." Silence. Doing what every red-blooded

young man would do, I leaned over and I said, “Well, I’m guessing you’re glad you didn’t marry him.” (Laughter) She said, “How come?” And I said, “Because you’d be married to a gas station attendant.” Silence. I’m feeling pretty smug, driving along, I think I’m back in the driver’s seat again and she unbuckles her seat belt, slides over and puts her arm around me and she says, “No dear, if I was married to him, he’d be the 35th Commandant of the Marine Corps.” (Applause)

Ladies and gentleman, the first lady of the Marine Corps is up in that box. Bonnie, will you stand and wave so that everybody can see you. There she is, ladies and gentlemen. And the newest alumni of the University of Idaho, as of last night.

Folks, Bonnie and I are very excited to be back here in the Palouse. As you probably already figured out, we live in Washington, D. C. In fact, we live right up on Capitol Hill and for us it’s always a pleasure to be someplace other than Washington, D. C. It’s the only place where you’ll see a prominent person walking down Lover’s Lane, holding his own hand. (Laughter) You’ve got to work with me a little bit here this morning. It’s a place where some people are lost in thought mostly because it’s such unfamiliar territory and finally it’s where some folks say “I’ll double cross that bridge when I get to it.” Alright. Enough foolishness here this morning.

As I thought about the future and what the world might have in store for you, I couldn’t help but first think about the importance of character. Character both in us and in the great country wherein we live. In my job, I’ve seen both the best and the worst of what other countries have to offer. I’ve lived around the world and every time I return home to the United States I thank God for the nation that I call home.

Let me take you back a mere 11 years ago to this fateful Tuesday morning that changed our lives forever. Most of you in the Class of 2012 were in the sixth and seventh grades when the airplanes hit the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and in the fields of Pennsylvania. While young, I’m confident that you remember those events well. Not since the attack on our fleet at Pearl Harbor in 1941 had our nation’s true character been so clearly tested.

Come with me back to that clear, crisp fall Tuesday morning. I remember it well. I was a young one star general serving in the Pentagon. My office was on the fourth floor in the outside ring overlooking Arlington Cemetery. For a one star, it was pretty good digs, but more importantly I had a terrific view. I had the news running on the TV in my office and I remember as we sat amazed at what was going on in New York City. It wasn’t clear what had caused the first crash and then came the second and we knew instantly that our country was under attack.

I was out of the office at the time when American Airlines Flight 77 plowed into the side of the Pentagon where my office and my staff were located. Terror followed quickly by explosions and smoke and then fire consumed our spaces. My staff miraculously escaped. We never re-entered our offices again; they were completely destroyed. While a modern generation’s day of infamy, just as Pearl Harbor was 60 years earlier, I saw the attacks bring out the best of America’s character. While it was clearly the worst of times, in many ways it became the best of times. The devastating toll of the attacks were eclipsed only by awe-inspiring stories

of heroism that emerged from those days when our nation responded to tragedy with an indomitable spirit, unconditional compassion, fierce national pride and an unshakable resolve. You remember it well.

Heroism and exceptional selflessness were commonplace across our great nation. In New York City, Marines like Staff Sergeant David Karnes, an off duty reservist working in Brooklyn and Sergeant Jason Thomas, a veteran Marine who had been out of the Corps for just four months, put on their uniforms and went to Ground Zero, to the very epicenter of the collapse. These Marines along with citizens would join the throngs of police, fire and medical first responders on the scene to help many victims. Yelling out the words “United States Marines, is anybody down there?” to the forbidding mountain of twisted and smoldering steel, melted rebar and broken glass, these two Marines uncaring of their personal safety and devoted to a calling greater than themselves eventually heard the voices of two men beneath the rubble. They called back to them and as a result, two New York City port authority police officers trapped underneath tons of rubble are with their families today.

Knowing that their lives might well be lost, what caused the firefighters and the policemen to willfully enter the burning north and south towers? It was their character. It was a strong sense of selflessness and fidelity to a cause more important than themselves. For you see, it wasn't about them. It was about their fellow Americans. When Bonnie and I visit New York City, which is often, we never fail to shake the hands of every policeman and fireman that we can possibly get to and simply say, “Thank you.”

On the day of these attacks and in the weeks and months that followed, we saw the best of America's character all across our country. Who can forget the flags draped across every bridge and overpass. The flags attached to every car and truck. The solemn gatherings of remembrances across our great nation. At that moment strangers became neighbors. Partisan politics disappeared as partisans became partners. We set aside our personal differences and we were only defined by one word -- Americans. Most importantly this tragedy reinvigorated the selflessness, the character and the patriotism of our great country. It demonstrated to the world just who we are and what we stand for. The impossible happened. It changed overnight. All of a sudden, it wasn't about politics anymore. The tragedies of September 11th galvanized Americans and gave us a resolve and a commitment to something greater than ourselves. Our nation and our neighbors became important again. It really was the best of times. For me, 9-11 demonstrated the very best of what America has to offer. I saw many young men and women, your age and younger, dutifully answer the call to arms in a war that continues and persists to this day.

I was with one of those young Marines just yesterday morning down in San Antonio, Texas, at Brooke Army Hospital. His name is Corporal Ronny Porta, an immigrant from Lima, Peru, who joined the Marine Corps right after high school in 2005. He lost half of his face, his entire right arm and was burned over 75% of his body from an IED blast in Iraq in 2007. Ronny was one of my Marines. I was in the intensive care unit 5 years ago when he arrived and I remember wondering if there was even a possibility that he might survive. I was privileged yesterday to medically retire Ronny in front of his entire family. He did survive; he survived in spades. He did this to include being in front of his newborn son who arrived just this past

Thursday. He endured 125 surgeries all in an attempt to regain his life back. You see, Ronny Porta displayed that indomitable spirit and that high character.

Bonnie and I were out in Colorado Springs two weeks ago at the Olympic Training Center watching over 500 wounded young men and women compete for their service in the Wounded Warrior Games. It was there that I recognized that same indomitable spirit that I saw in Ronny Porta over the past five years and that I've seen across America the days following September the 11th. I watched the fierce swimming competition in the Olympic pool between a completely blind U.S. Navy Lieutenant and an Army Staff Sergeant who had lost both legs and an arm in an IED blast. I thought a lot about the character of these wounded warriors and of the character of the men and women who have so faithfully helped them rebuild their lives.

9-11 reminded me that the American spirit and the American character are thriving in the countless hardworking individuals and in the communities across our great nation. I have seen the best of selflessness and patriotism in the lives of humanitarians. Men like Mr. Ron Katz a philanthropist and a member of UCLA Medical where he personally financed the rebuilding of burned patients' faces, using the world-class skills of UCLA's plastic surgeons. Ronny Porta was an early beneficiary of Ron Katz's generosity. Doctors like Andy Lee at Johns Hopkins and Tony Atala at Wake Forest, who are working faithfully around the clock in regenerative medicine to perfect arm and hand transplants for amputees and on stem cell technology such that they can grow entire organs and whole body parts to replace the ones of our young men and women that have been so severely wounded.

I am reminded of Dan Wallrath of Forth Worth, who founded Operation Finally Home, an initiative that builds brand new homes for our critically wounded so that they will never have to worry about where or how they will live the rest of their lives. It is this indomitable spirit that has arisen from the tragedy of September the 11th that has brought out the best in our fellow Americans by reminding us of who we are and what we stand for. It's done the same thing for our great nation as it reignited the true character of America. Much like a blacksmith's furnace and anvil, out of the fires of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, America has been annealed, its character has been steeled. Graduates, this is the America who's welcoming you home today. It stands waiting for young men and women of character.

Finally, as we send you off today, I want to leave you with something to think about -- your character. I challenge you to think about who you are and what you stand for. Ask yourself what defines you. I want you to think about how your character was formed and by who's fingerprints and understand that it will continue to be a work in progress for the next four decades. You've witnessed the resilience of our nation as we work to overcome challenges that haven't been seen in generations, many recorded in the newspapers, on TV and talked about in the streets of Moscow and around the campus of this great university. Our nation will continue to face challenges and adversities in the future and will continue to overcome them. That's who we are. That's the indomitable character that is the backbone of the United States of America. All of you will face these and yet to be defined challenges head on when you leave here today. How you handle them will shape your character, define this Class of 2012 and your generation of Americans. As you leave this great institution, I ask that you think about Corporal Ronny Porta, Staff Sergeant David Karnes, Dan Wallrath, Mr. Ron Katz and Horace Axtell who will be

honored here later this morning. No one asked them to step forward and overcome or to give of themselves. They just simply did it. Character that had been formed years earlier kicked in to ignite their indomitable spirits. Ask yourself, would I have done it if it had been me? I encourage you to allocate a portion of your life in some measurable way to a calling greater than yourself, something that may not make you rich, but will certainly enrich your life and the lives of others. Whatever you choose to do in life from this moment forward, serve others, your community, or humanity in some way. In his call to national service, President Bill Clinton perhaps said it best, "There is a whole world out there that needs you, down the streets or across the oceans. Give. You don't need to be wealthy or famous to make a difference. Every action matters, big or small. The point is to do something to make your community and our world a better place."

To you, the University of Idaho Class of 2012, I welcome you as fellow alumni. I wish each of you the very best. Congratulations, go Vandals, God Bless America and Semper Fidelis.

(END)