

COMMENCEMENT REMARKS – EMBRY RIDDLE AERONAUTICAL UNIVERSITY

4 MAY 2013

Dr. Ayers, distinguished guests, faculty and staff, parents and families of our graduating class, good morning and thank you all for participating in this tremendous milestone event. To the Embry-Riddle Class of 2013, congratulations on this special achievement. I am extremely honored and thrilled to be asked to speak at this commencement ceremony, and my wife, Karin, and I truly appreciate the wonderful hospitality you have all shown us. I do get back to the campus on occasion, and am looking forward to my 30-year reunion at OctoberWest next year, but being asked to speak today is a particular thrill. This is also a continuation of a great tradition started last spring of having Air Force helicopter pilots as commencement speakers. Col. Alvin Drew, who spoke last year, and I actually served together in Panama and in the first Gulf War, when he still worked for a living. Of course, he went on to become an astronaut and fly Space Shuttle missions, while I became a glorified financial manager, but that's another story.

When I transferred here from the Daytona Beach campus half way through my sophomore year, with the handful of other January new students, I started to re-think the decision I'd made. This is still a small school today, but it was really small then. I lived in the old dorms up on the hill, which were brand new then, and was in a 6-person suite for a couple days all by myself. But it only took a few days to get into the routine, and be taken in by the engineering department and the ROTC Detachment, and the rest of the school. Little did I know that I was rapidly building the network that I still rely on today. I met the best friends I have today while I was a student here, and some of them are here now. Thank you all for coming. It was a great and stressful time and looking back now, it is amazing to see the skills that I developed then, are still the basic core skills I rely on every day. It was about solving problems, meeting deadlines, accomplishing task

after task, all while learning life lessons on and, sometimes, off campus. Professor Tracy Doryland, who some you may know and is here today, not only helped me find my path to flying helicopters in the Air Force, but helped us all through many of the trials and tribulations we were going through. The biggest lesson he continued to constantly remind me of, was to focus on what I could control, and let go of those things I couldn't control. We spent so much time worrying and complaining about things that were beyond our control. That single piece of advice got me through Structures III and Double-E, but has continued to help me through one challenge after another.

So what to do now as you take off into the world with your Embry-Riddle degree? I had a plan to fly helicopters, and when people told me that "you'll never make it past major as a helicopter guy in the Air Force." I thought hey, a major makes almost \$40,000 dollars a year and gets to keep flying! That sounded pretty good to me. Having a plan for your life and career is critically important, but it's just the beginning. Here is where a particular military axiom can be useful. We say that "No plan survives contact with the enemy." In January of 1991, I was a Special Ops helicopter pilot and was on Combat Rescue Alert on the 5th day of the Air Campaign against Iraq. We had planned and planned; we had alternate route plans, threat avoidance plans, alternate air refueling plans, survivor authentication plans. We'd spent months trying to think of every possible surprise. On that particular morning, nothing seemed to go according to plan. The weather had fogged-in our airfield in northwest Saudi Arabia, in the desert. Instead of our standard two-ship formation, as the only two helos at our location that could launch in the fog, we would take off single ship, each going after separate Navy pilots that had been shot down. The Surface-to-Air Missile network which was supposed to be knocked out by now was up and aggressively searching for a rescue effort. And the initial coordinate we received was over 50 miles from the actual location of our F-14 pilot. Over the next 8 hours, we made one deviation after another from our detailed planning, went to three different wrong coordinates, ended up north of the boundary highway that was supposed to be a no-go area, dodged one missile shot, and managed to get to our survivor

at the same time as the Iraqi search party. Our A-10 escorts quickly took care of that, and we managed to bring that pilot back home to fly 30 more missions off the USS Saratoga.

The lesson that I've taken away from that experience is that even if things don't go exactly according to plan, the plan is still terribly important. The plan becomes a point of deviation from which you can act. It allows you deal with one unexpected obstacle at a time. The act of planning provides you the opportunity to practice decision making. I think that this principle applies to every part of my life, from how I deal with my kids or my wife, to my career plans, to operational war plans. Graduating today, with a degree from Embry-Riddle should be a very important part of your life plan. But remember: no plan survives contact with enemy. That means that you need to be prepared to make deviations, and not feel like you failed to execute the plan. On my rescue mission the goal, or the end state, was to bring that pilot back to fight again, and we kept focused on that end state. The same applies to your life plan. Define your end state. Maybe it's to become a CEO or become a triple-seven captain, be a great Dad or become a General, contribute to society, or just be happy. If there are deviations along the way, that's ok. It allows you to take a chance, and follow a path you had not thought of before. You can take advantage of an opportunity that was not there before, but that doesn't mean that you're abandoning your plan, as long as you keep the end state in mind. That goal, or end state, may change with time as well, but you should always know what you're working toward. So if you haven't thought about it before, consider this day, the culmination of this experience, and the award of your degree today, as the point of departure for your life plan.

Today you begin the newest version of your plan. Earning your degree doesn't mean that you've learned everything you need to know about your field, or about your major. In fact the large majority of you will end up being successful in something that doesn't exactly fit into your major. When young people ask me what they should major in, I tell them that it doesn't matter that much. Find

something you have a passion for; something that will give you the motivation to learn. Some of your professors here may not be thrilled with that answer, but I think it's more important to focus on the process. I think what you really learned here was how to learn. Consider your degree a "license to learn." Particularly in aviation, I can guarantee that in 5 or 10 years, you'll need to know a thousand things that are not knowable today. I believe Riddle taught us how to teach ourselves. The ability to accomplish the tasks and missions you accomplished here will translate into almost any field of endeavor you may choose. You've met deadlines, solved problems, and learned to express your thoughts and ideas, each critical skill that will make you successful. It should give you confidence that you can tackle any problem or situation. You can be the choice when your boss is looking for someone to handle that tough task that no one has ever done before. In the military, I consider Special Operations the force you go to when there is a mission that no unit is trained for, and as a Embry-Riddle Graduate, I've always felt very comfortable in that situation.

The challenges that await you now are unimaginable. Our nation and the world face problems that seem immense, from the impact of social media, to the health of our planet, to violent extremism, not to mention the threat to the global economy of a superpower with 16 Trillion dollars of debt. So I think there is plenty of work for all of you. The opportunities, however, are just as plentiful. Some of you will be job creators, some of you will be problem solvers, some of you will inspire others to greatness, and I guarantee that every one of you will have the opportunity to make a difference. In order to do it, you'll need a plan, but remember that no plan survives contact with the enemy, so don't be afraid to take a chance, or follow a path you'd never thought of. Again, it is my absolute honor to be here today to share this day with you. I wish you well as you take off on your lives and careers. You will find a road that has been prepared by a long line of Embry-Riddle Grads before you. Find us, and use us, and together, we'll reach heights you've never imagined. Thank you all very much.