

Ad Portas 2008 – Prefect of Hall’s Speech

Summa laetitia, summa modestia, summa animi elatione vos salutamus, quinque et viginti Wiccamicos, viros militares, intra portas nostras hodie ingredientes ut summum accipiatis huius ludi honorem, insigne decus et praemium dignum pro munere officioque quod nobis et toti reipublicae praestitistis, omnia pro patria periclitantes, omnia pro amicis.

[It is with great joy, great humility and great pride that we receive you today at our gates, twenty-five sons of Wykeham, officers and gentlemen. We offer you this School’s greatest honour, a fitting accolade and worthy tribute for the duty and service you have done for us and for the whole nation, risking all in the service of your country and for the sake of your fellows.]

Long years of battle, bitterness and waste
Dry years of sun and dust and Eastern skies,
Hard years of ceaseless struggle, endless haste,
Fighting ‘gainst greed for power, hate and lies.

Field Marshal Lord Wavell, an old Collegeman received Ad Portas in 1943, wrote these words to conclude his anthology of poems that many here will know from Junior Part Div. His words in today’s context have acquired a timeless quality. They expose the curious enigma of a nation apparently at peace, yet in which this school receives twenty-five of its former pupils who have served in foreign wars in the last five years. Boys in the school may not think of Winchester College as an especially military establishment, yet it holds an eminent position in having one of the oldest school Corps in the country; and even a quick glance at history will show how profound an influence Wykehamists have had in the shaping of the Armed Services, so that their impact on the fate of our nation in military conflicts and in keeping the peace has been immense. We should note that six Victoria Crosses have been awarded to Old Wykehamists. Such a rich and extensive display of Wiccamical military service is an important example for us, embodied by those whom we honour today. Men in the school should be aware that their countrymen, some not much older than those in VIth book, fight today and will fight tomorrow.

As officers in all branches of the services and at all levels of seniority you have shown true leadership through direct personal example, bringing together soldiers, sailors and airmen into units where collective integrity and mission have triumphed over individual comfort and expediency. You have espoused the virtues of the good soldier: to strive through adversity to the limitsⁱ, to be second to noneⁱⁱ, for to be second in war is to have lost; to show insight and then to be swift and boldⁱⁱⁱ in action; for none may slight a soldier with impunity^{iv}, the ferocity he shows reflecting only the malice of the enemy who first conceived it^v. You have given the men and women under your command the inspiration of moral and physical courage and the selflessness to remain faithful, especially in adversity^{vi}. You have shown that it is better by far^{vii} to be meticulous in the training of those in your charge, these high standards enhancing survival and more importantly giving success in operations. You have employed humour and earthy dignity in the most atrocious of circumstances. If we as the current generation of Wykehamists can adopt these virtues, we shall be worthy^{viii} successors of your distinguished service.

Compared with the conflicts in which your forebears served you have pioneered a novel and sophisticated form of soldiery, present everywhere^{ix} in a nation, for all purposes and in all military roles. High intensity counter-insurgency, as it has come to be known, has seen British soldiers combating an uncompromising and violent enemy whilst simultaneously building the nation in which the fighting has taken place, all this accomplished under intense political scrutiny. This requires near saintly^x qualities of tolerance in nation- building; and as officers you have imparted resolution and faith^{xi} to your soldiers hour by hour and day by day, showing them that their risk and peril is not only valued but essential.

Celeriter agendo, fortiter audendo, ferociter dimicando huic civitati semper dederunt semperque dabunt copiae nostrae pacem et opes et prosperam fortunam. Qua fide, qua virtute illi quos hodie honoramus se gesserunt, se adhuc gerunt commilitones, illa adducti nostrorum multi divina providentia iam domum regredientur qui talibus decorentur honoribus, tales accipiant laudes.

[The wealth, prosperity and peace of this nation have always depended and will always depend^{xii} on the actions, both swift, fierce and courageous of those who serve in our armed forces. The conviction and fortitude which our honorands have demonstrated and which guides the conduct of their brother officers, will, with God’s providence, see more of their fellows come home to receive honours such as this.]

ⁱ Per Ardua ad Astra, Royal Flying Corps, predecessor to the Army Air Corps

ⁱⁱ Nulli Secundus, Coldstream Guards and Royal Scots Dragoon Guards

ⁱⁱⁱ Celer et Audax, The Rifles

^{iv} Nemo me Impune Lacessit, Scots Guards and Royal Scots Dragoon Guards

^v Honi soi qui mal y pense, The Life Guards, Grenadier Guards, Royal Horse Artillery

^{vi} Faithful in Adversity, Royal Army Medical Corps

^{vii} Better by far, Queen’s Royal Hussars

^{viii} Merebimur, Light Dragoons

^{ix} Ubique, Royal Engineers

^x Marabout, Devonshire and Dorset LI

^{xi} Animo et Fide, Adjutant General’s Corps

^{xii} Charles II, Articles of War, Royal Navy

Response by Lt Gen Robin Brims

Domine Custos, Domine Informator, Domine Aulae Praefecte, summum nobis redditis honorem qui nos sic hodie ad portas vestras salutatis. Omnes sumus viri militares, alii signa adhuc sequentes, alii otium quietemque modo adepti; omnes in Afghanistan, ut dicitur, vel in Iraq, vel in utraque regione intra hos annos stipendium meruimus; omnes praefecti sumus, quos oportuit milites nostros in pericula ducere quae atrocissima compluribus cognovimus lustris. Adsumus hodie, alii milites, alii nautae; omnes tamen hoc uno vinculo in unum consociamur, quod hoc in loco educati Wiccamici sumus.

[Mr Warden, Mr Headmaster, Mr Prefect of Hall you pay us the greatest honour by giving us the very special privilege of being received Ad Portas. We are all current or recently retired members of the British Armed Forces, and we all have served in Afghanistan or Iraq – in some cases both these countries – in the last few years. We are all commissioned officers and it has been our duty to lead British Servicemen in some of the toughest operations experienced by our Armed Forces for several decades. We represent our different Services and Regiments, but we are bound together because we are all Old Wykehamists.]

War must not be glorified; it is a nasty, brutal, bloody business carried out by, and between, humans. But it remains a necessary last resort when all other means of resolving international disputes have failed. This is not the time and place to make the case for the operations with which we have been involved, but they have been highly controversial. The rights and wrongs have been debated in public, internationally and insatiably over these last few years. And our military actions have been recorded, reviewed and judged in haste or at leisure and from a comfort that has not been available to our soldiers, sailors and airmen. But we are all professional members of the British Armed Forces and we have to deal with the situations in which we find ourselves to the best of our ability. All of us would agree that whatever the circumstances, no matter how difficult, we must always conduct our business legally and morally.

Many would say we are no different from earlier generations who have fought and died for their country. They would be right. And we are no different from other Old Wykehamists who fought in the harsh climates of Afghanistan and Iraq for these have been very troubled places for centuries. None of us received Ad Portas today have had to endure the depravities and carnage of World Wars. So we would never compare without contrasting and we certainly do not compete with those who went before. The horrors endured and the sacrifice of those earlier generations are remembered and honoured in the beauty and tranquillity of War Cloister.

Like them we were hugely fortunate to have been given the values and standards of Win Coll. The ability to analyse, challenge received wisdoms, and balance the frequently irreconcilable: logic, perception and emotion. These are skills that are encouraged here up to Books, up to House and on the playing fields. More than this we learned respect for others, the courage to choose in making a plan and determination to overcome obstacles in implementing these plans. So we have a great deal for which to thank this most special school in giving us the foundation of our subsequent careers in the Armed Forces.

Our troops have been magnificent in the most demanding circumstances; many have paid the ultimate sacrifice and the toll of dreadful injury is appalling. A few, very few, have failed to live up to the values and standards of military life and committed crimes, not in the heat of battle but over a sustained period. We have faced up to this because we must; we are empowered to take life. We must live up to those standards. Indeed it is living to those standards in the heat of battle that has led to very many of our young soldiers being awarded the full range of gallantry awards including the Victoria Cross.

It might be unfashionable to say this, but our witness of the young Servicemen of today reveals physical and mental robustness combined with humanity and humility. They are worthy successors of their military forebears, and splendid representatives of their country. It is thus our great privilege to represent them here today. We do not choose our campaigns, and political controversies are for others: we must deal with the realities of the day. We need public support and it is there; often silently and privately. But today you have treated us to this very public reception and we are immensely grateful on behalf of those Servicemen we represent. We are also very proud Old Wykehamists.

Response by Lt Richard Watkins

Mr Warden, Mr Headmaster, Mr Prefect of Hall, I feel that I must echo General Brims' feeling of gratitude to you for honouring us with this reception Ad Portas. As the Jun man standing here in uniform, junior in terms of service if not in age, I, and undoubtedly those who had the misfortune to teach me, feel that I must be the most unworthy recipient of this singular honour. We have already had several references to regimental mottos, but I hope that I can slip in that of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst without overdoing things. For those of us who have never spent hours polishing belt brasses, cap badges, or indeed anything made of metal at that august institution, the immortal words are: 'Serve to Lead'. General Brims has touched on the notion of service to the state and nation, and it is one that I feel is dear to the hearts of all those Wykehamists who have gone before us, and will continue to be so for generations to come.

This school was founded on the notion of service: -service that required an education which, to repeat my regimental motto, was 'Second to None'. From St. Mary College near Winchester were to flow the clerical and legal minds needed to administer the state, initially through service to the monarch, and latterly to the people of this nation. Very little has changed in over six hundred years, with the possible exception of the addition of military service to the clerical and legal spheres. Whether it is the fictional, and yet archetypal, Sir Humphrey Appleby, the very real wartime triumvirate of Earl Wavell, Lord Dowding, and Viscount Portal, or the recently received Lord Jay of Ewelme, the role of the Wykehamist has been that of someone who has put his education to use for the benefit of the nation, rather than for personal aggrandizement. Those of us standing here before you are merely the latest in this line that stretches back to the foundation of this institution.

Behind you, hidden in the shadows, lurks the Trusty Servant, standing there, in Windsor uniform with wig on his hog's head. The verse to his side reads:

*This Emblematic Figure well survey:
The Porker's Snout, not nice in diet shews:
The Padlock Shut, no secrets he'll disclose.
Patient, the Ass his master's wrath will hear.
Swiftness in errand, the Stag's Feet declare;
Loaded his Left Hand, apt to labour saith;
The Vest, his neatness: Open Hand his faith.
Girt with his sword; his Shield upon his arm;
Himself and Master he'll protect from harm.*

Whereas in the past this described the servant of the man in College, it can equally be used to describe the modern soldier on operations and the privations he continues to endure. The porker's snout is still required if one is to live on what are admittedly improved ration packs for months at a time; the padlock in the mouth is essential to ensure that in this age of instant and mass communications security remains paramount; the Asses' ears are symbolic of the way the Serviceman patiently serves, while leave and the family are sacrificed to the operational tempo that demands ever more time away. The swift feet of the Stag take the Serviceman across the globe and ensure he is fit to fight when the need arises, and when he gets there the tools in his left hand prepare him for the reconstruction and development with which he must engage once the battle is over. He must be of irreproachable behaviour when dealing with those of other cultures and must approach each and every situation with good faith, even though it places him in greater danger. Yet despite the reconstruction, aid distribution and medical provision which he brings with one hand, the Trusty Serviceman remains girt with shield and sword ready to fight for himself, his mates, his honour, and that of the nation that sends him to war.

The Trusty Servant, has served his master for over six hundred years. The nature of that service has changed, whilst we, the leaders of men that stand before you now, continue to serve not only our masters in government, but also the people of this nation. May this College, the birthplace of the servant of the state, armed with pen or sword, continue to produce leaders for another six hundred years to come.

Summum honorem, Wiccamici, nobis offertis sic hodie ad portas salutatis. Plurimas vobis gratias agimus omnes.

[Fellow Wykehamists, in receiving us today Ad Portas you bestow on us your highest honour. We are all very deeply grateful.]