

**Speech given by General Sir Nick Carter
Ad Portas, Winchester College,
9 September 2021**

Prefect of Hall. I am very grateful to the Warden and Fellows and to my fellow Wykehamists for the honour you have bestowed on me today and to you personally for the generous words with which you have welcomed me.

maximas, aulae praefecte, gratias agimus, primo Custodi et Sociis sodalibusque Wiccamicis pro decore quod mihi hodie donasti, deinde tibi ipsi pro verbis benignis quibus me excepisti.

45 years ago, as a boy in the school I stood where you are standing and I remember Field Marshal Sir Michael Carver, one of my predecessors as Chief of the Defence Staff being received Ad Portas. I remember the opprobrium he received in The Wykehamist a week or so later for not having spoken in Latin. I hope you will forgive me if I follow his example - and as he put it – “speak in the language of Cromwell and Marlborough, rather than that of Caesar”.

I am sure it is a hackneyed observation for those received Ad Portas, but I am certain that listening to the Field Marshal that day I never imagined that I would one day be received Ad Portas - let alone that I would join the Army. My academic achievement at Winchester was so poor that my father suggested the only possible career I could pursue was the Army. And even that looked less than promising given a rather undistinguished career in the Corps that saw me reduced in rank from lance corporal to rifleman when Dick Massen caught me shirking successive Wednesday afternoons to play golf at Hockley.

When I look back now, I realise how fortunate I was to receive the education that I was given at Winchester. It is inspiring to be encouraged to pursue your own interests rather than being taught by rote. It develops an intellectual curiosity that encourages lifelong learning, and it obliges you to have the humility to listen to others, and to change your plan when you realise it’s all going wrong. And importantly it also encourages you to look at issues from the other person’s perspective.

I am certain that an education that develops these skills has never been more necessary. We are living in very challenging times. I cannot remember a point in my career when the global strategic context was more dynamic or more complex than it is now. We have returned to an era of great power competition not seen since the 1940s. The defining condition is one of instability as the threats to our country and our way of life become more widespread and more profound every year.

We are also living through a period of phenomenal change – more widespread, more rapid, and more extreme than humanity has experienced outside of world war. And it is more sustained than the two world wars of the last century combined – and the pace is forever quickening. Our fundamental and long held assumptions are being disrupted on a daily basis. Who knows what is around the corner?

This is challenging for any profession, but it is particularly so for the military where our business is about the violent and deadly interaction between people.

As our most eminent military historian, the late Sir Michael Howard, put it: *“No matter how clearly one thinks, it is impossible to anticipate precisely the character of future conflict. The key is to be not so far off the mark that it becomes impossible to adjust once that character is revealed.”* So, in the military we place a premium on adaptability. And this in turn emphasises the importance of our Servicemen and Servicewomen – who have always been, and always will be our adaptive edge.

As you think about what career you might pursue when you leave, I would encourage you not to dismiss public service. It is not as fashionable as the private sector, but for me the clue is in the word ‘service’. Because service is inextricably linked to leadership whether it is in the military or the civil service. I have found that being given the opportunity to lead others is not only a huge privilege, it is also immensely stimulating. And the life skills and values you learn at Winchester are the best possible preparation to be a leader.

Leadership it is about getting others to do things – and getting them to do them willingly. And in the military, these will often be very unpleasant and dangerous things. Leadership is a very personal matter – but there are certain qualities that I have found to be more important than others.

First there is Courage. As a leader you need to show more courage than your soldiers. You need to set an example; to lead from the front, and never expect your soldiers to do something you would not do yourself. This requires physical courage. But there is another kind of courage you need as a leader.

You must have moral courage. Moral courage is a much rarer quality than physical courage. Moral courage means you do what your values tell you is right, and you are prepared to deal with the consequences. It’s about setting out your stall - even when that may be unpopular, or risk ridicule or danger – because that is what is right. Courage - both physical and moral - creates the strength upon which fighting spirit and success in war depend – look at what has just happened to the government in Afghanistan.

Second there is Integrity. Integrity has a unique significance because it's about honesty, not only with those you lead but also with yourself. Integrity is the critical foundation for earning the loyalty and trust of those you lead and those you serve. It is about doing, as you would be done by. And the standard you walk past without taking action is the standard you accept – and how you will be judged.

Third there is Judgement. Judgement means being able to assess a situation, to assess it quickly in relation to your values, and under difficult circumstances. And judgment is only learned by practice and experience. Imagine the difficult calls those Parachute Regiment soldiers were obliged to make in Kabul a couple of weeks ago. And much of this comes back to having the humility to listen and learn – for this is how you gain wisdom and the ability to exercise judgment.

Fourth there is knowledge. If you are to have the confidence to lead others, you must have knowledge. And that is why a culture that inspires lifelong learning is so helpful. It keeps your mind flexible and your attitude adaptable. When you lead your first command you should not be satisfied until you have more knowledge than any member of that command. And those you are leading will expect that of you.

And, by the way, I think my first command was the best command I ever had. I have commanded at every level from a platoon of thirty to an Army of a hundred thousand, and a platoon is the only command in which I could claim to know properly all those under my command. When it comes to knowledge nothing is more important than knowledge of those you command. It is not enough to be the best soldier in your platoon, to be the strongest, the toughest, the most resilient, or the most intelligent.

You must be their leader, and this brings with it the absolute responsibility to put their care at the forefront of everything you do – that is why the motto at Sandhurst is 'Serve to Lead' – because it is through that sense of serving your soldiers, based on really knowing what makes them tick, and then genuinely caring for them - that real leadership is based. And I can think of nothing more rewarding than to be respected by those you lead.

There are many other qualities that make a good leader. But these are the four I would wish to commend to you that have served me well – courage, integrity, judgement, and knowledge. And these are all qualities that Winchester espouses. Inevitably Winston Churchill had an aphorism that captures the essence of my point: "we make a living out of what we get, but we make a life by what we give".

In salutem praesentium; in memoriam absentium.