

Remarks by Chief of Staff of the Army
GEN Eric K. Shinseki
Upon receiving the Sylvanus Thayer Award, West Point, October 3, 2002

My name is Shinseki, and I'm a soldier — and so is SMA Jack Tilley. We are both extremely proud to join two other soldiers — LTG Roger Schultz, Director of the Army National Guard, and LTG Ron Helmly, Chief, Army Reserve — in thanking the members of the USMA Association of Graduates for selecting the American Soldier for the high honor of receiving the 2002 Sylvanus Thayer Award.

There are, as noted earlier, 44 distinguished Thayer Award recipients who precede tonight's honoree. Among them are presidents, congressmen, statesmen; leaders in science, in technology, and in industry; educators, theologians, humanitarians, peacemakers; and more than a handful of soldiers. The breadth of their achievements and the depth of their leadership are clear. We are indebted to them for their examples of service.

Traditional to the Thayer Award Ceremony is the recipient's response. Tonight's response is a bit more challenging. In selecting the American Soldier as the 2002 Thayer Award recipient, the Association has chosen to honor an ideal — an ideal that is magnificent in selfless service to country, long in its sense of duty, and deep in its commitment to honor. Our attempt to define that ideal, however, falls short.

Simply standing in our formations does not achieve the ideal of the American Soldier — it is not about rank; nor branch or specialty; not about gender, race, lineage, or position — the ideal of the American Soldier transcends all of those things. The ideal cannot be purchased — it is invaluable. And while we cannot adequately define it, its enduring spirit permeates the very fabric of our country's history.

Before the birth of our nation, the spirit of the American Soldier instilled hope in our noble dream of liberty. Twenty-three soldier-statesmen were among the 40 men who signed our Constitution 215 years ago — 17 September 1787. And through nine wars separated by years of restless peace, soldiers have remained on point — defending the constitution, preserving the hopes of a nation.

That spirit resides in the awards citations of the Army's 2,373 medal of honor recipients — soldiers who, through their deeds, have given themselves up to the ages. Ninety-one of those heroes are still alive; one still serves in uniform. We are

deeply honored by the presence of 10 of these men here tonight — a rare privilege. Their actions represent the highest examples of gallantry under fire, singularly outstanding displays of character and acts of heroism — the stuff of legend. Over the past year, the names of six more soldiers have been added to that roll of honor.

Corporal Andrew Jackson Smith — an African-American volunteer who fought in the civil war for freedoms he did not fully enjoy himself in order to realize that more perfect union.

Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Roosevelt — our 26th president — in the battle of San Juan Heights. He led from the front, the first into the enemy trenches, the first to kill an enemy soldier. His courage inspired his men to press the attack and seize the objective.

Captain Ben Salomon — an Army dentist in WWII. Captain Salomon gave his life defending his patients on Saipan, July 7, 1944. Testimony to his heroism and the ferocity of the battle were 98 enemy soldiers lying dead before his machine gun position — 76 wounds to his own body, his finger still on the trigger.

Captain Ed Freeman — in Vietnam in the Ia Drang Valley. He risked his life repeatedly, flying water and ammunition in and wounded and dying soldiers out of a deadly landing zone — the infantryman's only connection to the world outside the bloody battleground that was LZ X-ray. He kept faith with his fellow soldiers.

Captain Jon Swanson — above the jungles of Cambodia in the same war — flying his heavily damaged OH-6A helicopter time and again through a barrage of anti-aircraft fire, marking enemy positions. He saw it as his duty to remain on station, and he gave his life keeping faith with those who needed and trusted him — his body was never recovered.

And Captain Humbert “Rocky” Versace, whose heroism was reflected in his physical courage, deep moral conviction, and stamina while a prisoner of war — the Army's first recipient so honored for service in Vietnam. Only his execution at the hands of our enemies could end his more than two years of sustained, heroic resistance. The last time his fellow prisoners heard Rocky Versace, he was singing “God Bless America” at the top of his voice from his isolation box — in direct defiance of his captors.

Theirs is a standard of valor so profound that all of us feel somewhat uneasy about the commonness of our own humanity whenever we recall their feats of courage.

Yet what emerges out of the collection of episodes is the ideal of a soldier's trust for one's fellow soldiers. And trust is the very foundation of loyalty. It is intangible; we cannot quantify it — but their deeds are proof that it exists. That is part of the ideal we celebrate tonight.

The ideal of the American Soldier is also about uncompromising excellence in an adherence to standards. Our noncommissioned officers, the best in the world, preserve and perpetuate our standards. During a family's recent final farewell to a loved one at Arlington Cemetery, it was that adherence to standards that caused an Old Guard company first sergeant to refuse to accept an imperfectly folded American flag at graveside services — it did not meet the standard. The colors were quickly refolded properly and then presented — standards. Those standards also allow our youngest soldiers to act with calm confidence in the midst of conflicting guidance and competing demands. At another Arlington ceremony — instructed by a kindly civilian priest to place a funeral shroud over the flag-draped coffin of one of our 11 September victims, an Old Guard soldier responded, "We never cover the national colors." and even when the priest persisted, that young soldier adhered to the standard he had been taught by his noncommissioned officer — "This is a military funeral. We never cover the national colors."

We see it in our NCO of the Year — SFC Jeffrey Stitzel, Old Guard — and our Soldier of the Year — SPC Justin Brown, 95th maintenance company, Baumholder, Germany — who have dedicated themselves to the highest standards of excellence.

The ideal of the American Soldier is evident in the actions of those who battled Al Qaeda in Operation Anaconda — reflected in their toughness and determination in fighting from 8,500 feet to more than 11,000 feet while carrying seventy pound loads on their backs — never giving in to winter and the altitude, and never taking their eyes off the objective.

That ideal is also reflected in the ingenuity and expertise of our Special Operations soldiers, riding into combat on horseback, leveraging the capabilities of U.S. technology to help the Northern Alliance collapse the Taliban in weeks — American soldiers leading the offensive to take down a brutal, repressive regime.

We celebrate the ideal of the American Soldier — active, guard, and reserve — who tonight and every other night of the year defends the homeland; fights and wins the war on terrorism; and preserves the peace in places like the Sinai, Kuwait, Korea, Bosnia, Kosovo, and some 115 other countries around the world. They are what make us the land of the free and the home of the brave.

And even as we celebrate the courage and determination of the American Soldier in furtherance of that ideal, we also acknowledge the strength and generosity of Army families who embrace and support soldiers and send them off to do tough missions. Mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, husbands, wives, and children whose courage, sacrifice, and steadfastness inspire us all.

Strength is sometimes reflected in the words of an all-too-young Army widow who assures that she will always be a Ranger's wife; or, in the words of another widow, "He was a soldier before I knew him; he taught me to love the Army; I will always be a soldier's wife." Or in the words of a Ranger's mother who, in the moment of greatest pain when informed that she had lost a son, asks that her thanks be conveyed to the President of the United States for his leadership. Strength and generosity — Army families — we know we do not soldier alone.

To the cadets — your presence here tonight is a product of the countless thousands of American Soldiers who have preceded you. We all stand on their shoulders. They set high standards for you because they know what awaits you — the privilege of leading the American Soldier. Prepare yourselves well, and begin by endeavoring to be a good soldier. The rest will fall more easily into place.

Internalize the values of our profession. They capture the spirit of the American Soldier — loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage. Guided by them and the time-honored motto of this great institution — Duty, Honor, Country — many of the complex decisions you will surely face will become less difficult.

Learn to love your soldiers. You are preparing to lead magnificent men and women out there in the force. Rise to their expectations; be equal to the task. Train them to succeed in battle; grow them into the leaders of the future. Care for them and their families with the deep and abiding love they deserve. And when you inevitably ask your soldiers for what seems impossible, they won't let you down. They will inspire you each and every day.

Finally, do not forget that each of those soldiers represents a proud and enduring legacy of preserving the freedom of our nation — they are precious for who they are, individually and collectively. People envy them for their courage, their skill, their perseverance, and their raw determination. In them, that envy is well founded.

We may not be able to define the ideal of the American Soldier — but we sense its dimensions. It is evident in the spirit which has inspired our soldiers for more than 227 years — from Valley Forge to the Shah-e-Kot Valley, from Korea to Kosovo, and beyond. The American Soldier does what no one else can, at a time when there are no other solutions and the fate of the nation hangs in the balance.

God bless each and every one of them. God bless each of you. God bless our magnificent Army and our great nation.