

Interviewer:

Good afternoon, sir. Thanks for joining us today. It's the 21st of September, 2015, and we're here in Thayer Hall. My name's Lieutenant Colonel Rick Black, and sir, if you wouldn't mind introducing yourself and spelling your first and last name for us, please.

General Vincent Brooks:

Okay. I'm General Vincent Brooks; it's Vincent K. Brooks. I'm a graduate of the West Point class of 1980, currently serving as Commanding General of U.S. Army Pacific.

Interviewer:

Okay, sir. Thank you very much. And as you mentioned, class of 1980. Many of our viewers will also remember your brother from the class of 1979, Leo Brooks. But one person they probably don't know as much about is your father, so I was hoping you could start by telling us a little bit about your father and what you remember of growing up in a military family.

General Vincent Brooks:

Well, I did grow up in a military family. My father was a career Army Officer, and at the time I came to West Point, he was serving as an Army Colonel commanding the Sacramento Army Depot. Until I got to Beast Barracks, and then, as military orders go, he PCSed. So he got a Permanent Change of Station to Fort Hood, Texas, and I didn't know where home was all of a sudden. So by the time we came back up for air in the summer of 1976, you know, you had one of those feelings of being somewhat disconnected already as you're going through the new Cadet experience, and that was amplified. But I came up in a military family with the military tradition, military values. But that is really the front end of our military experience. We'd had some predecessors who served. For example, I think it was a great-great grandfather of my father's who served in the Civil War, and was on both sides. So he was at the Battle of Bull Run, and on the Confederate side, he was a personal servant - I think they used the term "œbody servant" at the time.

Essentially like an enlisted Aide type of an idea, who kept his uniforms, kept his weapons clean, and kept him ready for battle. And that Officer was killed on the battlefield. That old relative, Richard Brooks, ended up crossing the Potomac River on foot and trying to work his way down the C&O Canal, or is it maybe the B&O Canal, whichever one is alongside with the Potomac River, and was stopped by Federal patrollers along the way. And he's written all this into a book. He was literate at the time, and we have his memoir. So that's probably the earliest recorded part of our military tradition. There've been uncles and others who served along the way, but my father's experience really is what set the tone for me. And like many rebellious youth, I had no desire to be a part of it, at all. I didn't want to be a part of it. I always wanted to go into medicine. And frankly, as I became a junior in high school, I began to change on that, for some reason.

The good news is my father never pushed us toward the military. He had exposed us to West Point early on. We came for a visit when I was in like eighth grade or something. But what really tipped us over - tipped me over, and I would say "œus" when I'm referring to my brother as well - was a visit by an Officer from the Admissions Department. African-American Engineer named Joe Briggs. Major Joe Briggs came to our house, and brought West Point to us, expressed an interest in us. We were both excellent students. We were both strong athletes. We were student leaders. And we matched what West Point had, but had not really considered that as the option for us. And Joe Briggs brought West Point to us. He really was oriented on my brother at the time, who was a senior at that point. We were living in California, and as goes in military families, he had to PCS in his senior year, and I in my junior year.

We were both involved in athletics, so that's disruptive; part of the military family experience that I think you and others may appreciate. Then it caused my brother to decide to go to West Point, and frankly, seeing my brother changed so significantly in a six-month period, from when he left home in the summer of 1975 and when he came back home in

December of 1975 wearing his dress gray uniform, that had probably the most significant impact on me. And so at that point I was suddenly interested in being an Army Officer. I was going to be a doctor in the Army, and then I changed that to being an Army Doctor, where the Army part was more important to me. And I eventually began to drift away from that even more; I just wanted to be an Officer in the Army, and said, "Well, there's no better place than West Point. I like what I see from what it's done to my brother." I was a basketball player and my brother was a bold Plebe who went and spoke to the head basketball coach at the time, a guy named Mike Krzyzewski.

And said, "Hey, my brother's a basketball player, and he's pretty good. Are you interested? He wants to come to West Point." And Coach K., to his great credit, said, "Tell him to send me a tape." We actually used to use tape at that point in time.

Interviewer:

Right.

General Vincent Brooks:

I sent him a tape of a good game, and he reached out and communicated with me and we had a conversation on the telephone one day; I still remember it. And he recruited me to come in as a recruited athlete. I was originally not accepted to West Point. As the process goes, you know, you submit your application, and the normal application came back saying "Not accepted for entry class of 1980." And then a few days later, another letter came in, and says, "Congratulations, you've been accepted." And so it was two different processes that were working, and there was an at-large appointment. It happened to come from the state that I was in at the time, California. And I arrived in the summer of 1976, walking in with our brother, who immediately left me out on the Plain. He went out to Camp Buckner. I was left on the Plain all alone, and then away we went.

Interviewer:

That's a pretty fascinating story. The Coach K. thing's pretty interesting, too. Sir, just to go back to your father for just a second -

General Vincent Brooks:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

You know, I don't know the numbers off the top of my head, but I can't imagine that there's a large community of black Colonels in the mid to early '70s, at that point. So if you could give us, you know, maybe some insights on what you remember of your father as kind of a standard-bearer for many people of that generation as a guy who's reached that level that was certainly declared success at that point in terms of making Colonel in the '70s.

General Vincent Brooks:

Well, my father was commissioned from Virginia State University, then called Virginia State College, in Petersburg, Virginia, in 1954. And so it's a pretty early time in the desegregation efforts of the U.S. military, and while it was law in that point in time, it was not in practice. And so he, along with others who were commissioned around that time, in the '50s, were following the example of several who'd come before. And there were some distinguished families out there in African-American military history, like the Davis family, the Black family, the Robinson family, and several others that I was actually touched by as time went on. I got to meet members and leaders from each one of those families, who had a longer military tradition, and service as commissioned Officers. But my father was certainly one of those early ones as well. The situation at the time was he faced considerable prejudice, and I can remember some of those experiences myself. I was born four years later, after he joined the Army.

He was detailed as an Infantry Officer, 23rd Infantry Regiment in Alaska. That's where my brother and I both were born. But the kinds of positions he was given at the time were administrative positions, even though he was an Infantry Officer, and he would always have to fight to be acknowledged and to be able to be given a chance to demonstrate with

abilities he had what skills he had. That eventually worked its way through, and he was able to continue to rise through the ranks in spite of those challenges and pressures. The important part, though, is the way he raised us. He and my mother both raised us with strong Christian values that had been passed on by both of their parents. We had strong family values. I'm blessed as an African-American to know all the men in all directions of my family, so siblings of my grandparents, et cetera. And that's important, and I say that from a social perspective, because I had that degree of family structure and balance. And it helped me to understand what my role was, and what their roles were, and I think I was developed in a way that was reflective. And so the important set of Christian values, family values, and military culture values; he certainly had embraced that, the military culture. And while we didn't always live on military installations, we definitely lived the military lifestyle, where color was not to be a factor that either hindered or prejudged. It just wasn't going to be, and we lived that way. So whether it was in the neighborhoods that my parents fought, in some cases, for us to be allowed to move into.

Interviewer:

Right.

General Vincent Brooks:

Even in the '60s that was the case. The schools that we attended. Learning to swim at Fort Leavenworth, when even in 1965 and '66, there was reticence to have my African-American body in a swimming pool with other children of other races. These things I remember as part of my youth, and so it was always present, but it got better over time. And of course, we had the cataclysmic period of the late '60s and early '70s that was tearing our nation apart. That was in a very formative period of time for me, as I was in elementary school, junior high school through that period of time. Compounded by my father being deployed to Vietnam for a second time. He went in the early '60s as an Advisor, and then went back again in the early '70s as a Battalion Commander. And so having that feeling in an America that was divided, that didn't seem to appreciate his service or the sacrifice that he and my mother were making on our behalf, was somewhat frustrating.

I don't know if that's part of why I didn't have an interest in going in the Army, or whether it was just being a rebellious child. But eventually all that began to align itself, and the values that they'd inculcated in me began to blossom. They really came out once I got to West Point.

Interviewer:

So going back to the coming back to West Point. You said your brother was obviously recruited a year ahead of you. You come in in the summer of 1976. I think it's obvious that, you know, your class represented a significant change in the history of West Point to that point, as women are first brought to West Point in 1976 with the class of 1980. So what were some of the things you heard from your brother over his first year, and kind of what were your expectations coming in, summer of 1976, about West Point in general, and maybe about how the introduction of women was going to change things, if that's the right phrase. I don't know that it is, but. What were some of your thoughts coming in, based on what you knew about West Point so far?

General Vincent Brooks:

Well, we'd certainly heard some of the stories about some of the treatment that he experienced as a Plebe, and I remember one particular story that comes to mind where my mother, being a good Army wife, sent a care package to him at some point in time. And he was allowed to receive it at that point in time, but his Cadet Squad Leader also saw that he received it, and said, "Cadet Brooks - I think he may have been a new Cadet at the time - what's that?" And he said, "Cookies, sir." "Good. Give them to me." He took them and ate them right in front of him, and you know, that is a small issue, but I was expecting that kind of experience when I arrived. I would add that not only did the class of 1980, arriving in the Bicentennial year of 1976, include women for the first time in all the Service Academies, but certainly in West Point's history - and it was a certain

pressure that came along with that.

This was a challenging time for our nation. We were still injured psychologically from the challenges of the 1960s that I already talked about, in terms of racial relationships. The gender relationships, as they were emerging with the broader inclusion, like women coming into West Point, and the post-Vietnam era. All those things combined to be a very chaotic time. On top of that, West Point experienced the honor scandal. And so as I arrived, I expected a very interesting experience with regard to honor. I knew I was going to be held to a high standard because the Honor Code still existed, and I had seen that Honor Code in writing. But I also knew that West Point was under severe pressure. I recall a "Time" magazine cover that I saw; it was either in late 1975 or early 1976, before I got here.

And it had a Cadet wearing a dress gray uniform, or a full dress, I don't remember which, but it was certainly one of the gray coats. I think it was the dress gray. With his back to the camera, and his right hand raised, and his left hand behind his back with his fingers crossed. And the title was "What Price Honor?" And that particular image I still remember, and while it may have faded in precision between now and then, the point of it was very, very clear. And we arrived in the summer of 1976 with all the challenges that were associated with having women. West Point did its best to be ready, but wasn't. Some of it was institutional overcompensation, excessive attention, and most importantly, a lack of experience.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

General Vincent Brooks:

And so we ended up doing a lot of things that were causing physical injury to some of the women. We caused emotional injury to my class. We just celebrated our 35th reunion this past weekend, and you know, there's still some scars within the class. But in the main, we're a cohesive class because of what we went through. There's still some division that exists because of that. For some Upperclass, they found that it was my class that was running West Point, because we brought the women in, and some of the Upperclasses took that out on us. And in the meantime, we see some of our Upperclassmen, especially the class of 1977, who were First Class for us, being - and I use a term as it felt to me at the time - being picked off by the Honor Scandal. So the investigation of what had actually unfolded, and the interviews that were being done behind the scenes - every member of that class - was unfolding as my class arrived. So the pressure that was on West Point was immense, as I look back on it right now. I can't imagine. And so I just have the highest regard for General Sid Berry, the late General Sid Berry, who was the Superintendent at West Point at the time; General Walt Omer, who was the Commandant of Cadets; General Fred Smith, who was the Dean of the Academic Board - in a time of significant social pressure within the nation, and then unique pressure inside of the experience at West Point. That's what was really happening in the summer of 1976, and should not be something that's overlooked as we really try to understand the history.

Interviewer:

And sir, just to put the context on the comment about the class of 1977, that was based on they were the ones that were in the Electrical Engineering class that was the basis of the Honor Scandal; is that correct?

General Vincent Brooks:

It was really 1976, but some of 1977 was also involved.

Interviewer:

Okay.

General Vincent Brooks:

And so the extent to which that was going on was really just unfolding.

Interviewer:

Gotcha.

General Vincent Brooks:

So that's the issue.

Interviewer:

'76 had just graduated.

General Vincent Brooks:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Okay. So they were kind of the -

General Vincent Brooks:

Hey, there were a lot of folks that were meeting us in the sally ports on that very first day, on Reception Day, we didn't see there after, and so we were losing Squad Leaders, losing Platoon Sergeants -

Interviewer:

Wow.

General Vincent Brooks:

Losing Platoon Leaders, during that summer. And there was a pressure was on them, that I don't know if it manifested itself in some additional special treatment.

Interviewer:

Right.

General Vincent Brooks:

Or whether they felt that they couldn't go far enough because we had the gender mix. It was a tense summer; really intense summer.

Interviewer:

So from your perspective, sir, as a new Cadet in the summer of 1976, did you ever feel that, as the males of the class, that you guys could just kind of keep low and stay out of their targets because they were focused on the females during Beast? Or was it they were focused on your class as a whole, as you said, because you were the first ones to bring women here - as if it were your fault.

General Vincent Brooks:

Well, I'll just throw out a few of the dynamics. I think that we had all sorts of responses to the pressures that came. Some tried to just lay low and stay out of it; just do their thing, and ignore the fact that they had women in class and try to not be affected by that. Some joined the course of the Upperclass of chastising women in our own class for being there, and accusing them of ruining the Corps of Cadets. Some did. Some were insensitive to the fact that women were here. We didn't have any objection, but we weren't going to make any exceptions. Some openly received and advocated for and championed women in the class, and others, like myself, moved around through those years, in terms of where I was emotionally and actively. I can remember initially being resistant. I bought the party line. I was resistant. I never acted out in hostility in that regard, but I know that I wasn't as accommodating as I could've been.

I know that, as I look back on it now. I can remember being really good at calling cadence, but the kind of cadences I was calling were not appropriate. So you might call it politically incorrect at the present time, but the fact of the matter is they were just inappropriate, and that's the reality as I look back on it now. I was really good at calling those cadences. In time, I realized that that wasn't strengthening the Corps of Cadets, and it wasn't making us a better class, it wasn't making us more military; and I was able to temper that. So again, I admit to moving, and ultimately, at least I see myself as having been trying to be a champion of the women in my class. I'm extremely proud of them. And what they went through is different than what I went through, and what I went through is different than what other Cadets went through, especially being the first African-American First Captain. I was with one of my women classmates just this past weekend, and she said to me, "You know, it's a shame that with the achievements that you had our Firstie year, being the first African-American First Captain, that that was overshadowed in many

ways because the class also included women.â€

And I said, â€œThat didnâ€™t overshadow it at all. That is part of the story.â€ So I got to be the first First Captain - not only the first African-American First Captain, but the first First Captain in West Pointâ€™s history to be the Senior Cadet over a Corps of Cadets that had women in all four classes. Now, West Point loves to have famous firsts, so Iâ€™m going to claim that one. That was my first. I was the first First Captain -

Interviewer:

Nobodyâ€™s going to beat you for that, sir.

General Vincent Brooks:

To lead the Corps of Cadets when there are women in every class, in every Company, and that was a privilege. Thatâ€™s part of my story; thatâ€™s not a counter to my story at all. And so this has been very important to me. It has had an effect on the way I view the Army, and the expectations that I have of our Army as being a leader of change, a leader for society. Even some of the things that are happening now, with -

Interviewer:

Absolutely, sir.

General Vincent Brooks:

With women going into Ranger School and succeeding, and having norms and standards that really have nothing to do with gender, but all have everything to do with performance. Iâ€™m an advocate for that, because of this experience.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Now, you mentioned, sir, that little caveat there a second ago: women in every class, in every Company. Now, again, to provide just a little bit of context for those who perhaps mistakenly assume that how things are today at West Point is how they always were, can you tell us a little bit about how West Point brought the women into the Corps, and how they were spread out around the Corps in the first couple of years, until they were in all four classes.

General Vincent Brooks:

Well, as you can imagine, the density wasnâ€™t great enough to cover all 36 Companies of the Corps of Cadets at that time, and so women, we tried to keep them in groups so there was some built-in support, or at least the perception that West Point had that that would be necessary for built-in support. Didnâ€™t always work that way. And my Plebe year, we had no women inside of my Company, so they hadnâ€™t arrived yet, â€˜cause I was the Third Company in the Battalion. Company I-4 is where I was, and it took two years before women arrived. And that meant that the women of my class got moved. So unlike the men of my class, who went into one Company and stayed there, the women arrived later, and that demanded a change in psychology in our Company that I think was really important. So we were a bit deferred; we almost got a by. We experienced it during Beast Barracks.

Many of us, including the women in the class, were frustrated by the extraordinary attention that was provided to the women, and not to the rest of the class. You know, there was a â€œwhat about the rest of usâ€ feeling among many of the men in the class at the time. And Iâ€™m sensitive to that, so sometimes when thereâ€™s an emphasis on African-American history, like this project maybe, thereâ€™s a â€œwhat about the rest of us?â€ But thereâ€™s a need to make sure that weâ€™re not ignoring groups that can be overlooked if weâ€™re not deliberately attentive. And that we donâ€™t do it in a way that isolates, but rather that truly integrates; that that is part of the whole fabric, and itâ€™s a unique addition. So thatâ€™s been the journey for me.

Interviewer:

So the women in your class, sir, if Iâ€™m understanding correctly, they moved around at least once - some perhaps more than once - over the course of the four years, while the males stayed in the same Company -

General Vincent Brooks:

Yes.

Interviewer:

For the four years. So some could say -

General Vincent Brooks:

Upperclass scrambled for us.

Interviewer:

Oh, okay.

General Vincent Brooks:

And that was part of the results of the Honor Scandal and its impacts, and the Borman Commission, that really restructured the way West Point works. The class of 1980 was viewed as having not been impacted by some of those cultures, so we were decreed part of the new culture of the Cadet Companies. And the scrambling that was done was to literally scramble the cultures that existed elsewhere. The integration efforts that were being done with women was running at a different pace, and by the fourth year, weâ€™d reached all three Cadet Companies in each Battalion of each Regiment, and it happened by the increasing classes.

Interviewer:

So it seems like that couldâ€™ve been either perceived as punishment or an opportunity to reset, perhaps, either some impression that had been made by the women of the class of 1980, as they were moved to a new Company. But at the same time, it could also tear down some of the support that they had established with the male classmates in that original.

General Vincent Brooks:

Well, as I said, they went through more than the rest of us did because of that. So they had to move. Whatever support base they had was disrupted. If they didnâ€™t have a support base, and were harassed and chastised inside of the Units that they were in - and several of them were - they didnâ€™t know whether they were going to have to go through that again by going to another Company, whether itâ€™d be accepted or not. And this is the whole matter that has to be understood when youâ€™re dealing with small populations, minorities, in a majority culture thatâ€™s a very, very strong culture. That moving from one place to another to be integrated is a door-opening experience every time, so that happened not only for the women in our class during their time here, but for every assignment they had after they graduated.

Interviewer:

Wow.

General Vincent Brooks:

So youâ€™re the first West Point graduate female that has ever come to this Unit.

Youâ€™re the first one whoâ€™s gone to Staff College. Youâ€™re the first one whoâ€™s been promoted to Major. Youâ€™re the first - everything for them has been a first.

Thatâ€™s why they deserve a great deal of credit, those whoâ€™ve been able to endure this and set such a positive example.

Interviewer:

I know when Dave and I were Cadets, that particular year the first was the first of your classmates to come back on the faculty our Plebe year, so another example to support what youâ€™re saying. Now, sir, Iâ€™d like to ask about one of the other minority subsets that you mentioned, in terms of the African-Americans in your class. And I think, if I remember correctly, you guys came in with a shade over 100 African-Americans. What do you remember about that group and how that identity fit in with the greater dynamic that youâ€™ve described very nicely for us in the class?

General Vincent Brooks:

Diverse, and so thereâ€™s sometimes a perception that the African-American experience and the African-American Cadets are entirely homogenous; that everyoneâ€™s the same.

Interviewer:

Right.

General Vincent Brooks:

And the first thing I would say is diverse. It was diverse then, and it's diverse now. People came from different experiences, some from military experienced families like mine, some from broken homes. Some from strong family relationships, some from the East Coast, some from the West Coast. Some from the North, some from the South. Some from mixed relationship families. It was diverse, and it was also diffuse, so this is a very interesting point. So the numbers are not that big, and it had only been a few years. I remember having a conversation with a graduate of the class of 1968 from West Point, and a later discussion with one from the class of 1965, about their experiences, and what the density was in the Corps of Cadets, and how sparse the number of graduates had been. From really as you come to Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., there was a huge gap.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

General Vincent Brooks:

From Charles Young to Benjamin O. Davis.

Interviewer:

Yeah, several decades.

General Vincent Brooks:

That's decades of time. And it was reflective of our nation. Well, different dynamic for our nation occurred in the early '60s, and a deliberate order to increase diversity at the Academies. So it was mandated; the numbers increased significantly for the class of 1968, and they paid a price for it.

Interviewer:

Right.

General Vincent Brooks:

That graduate of 1968 told me about being put in the wall locker and thrown down the stairs, you know? These kinds of things being done. And being chastised for the fact that they'd brought in all these black Cadets. There was still great animosity. There was still some from my class, but it was a diverse group, and we got to find each other, and got to know each other through things like the Contemporary Affairs Seminar, which is a very important activity. Now, maybe originally, to defuse some black political pressures, and the Black Power Movement that was ongoing at the time and creating some upheaval in campuses around the country. It was the equivalent of a black Student Union that was occurring in other mixed colleges and universities. West Point didn't have a student union, but it had the Contemporary Affairs Seminar. And that became an important place to meet people who at least had those similar experiences, yet diverse, coming from diverse backgrounds.

To get to know each other in the diffuse-ness of the Corps of Cadets, where you might not have had many other African-American Cadets in a given Company.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

General Vincent Brooks:

And then the Contemporary Affairs Seminar led to the Gospel Choir, which had been around for I guess five or six years at that point. And I was privileged to be a part of that, too; yet another outlet that was very important. And then the sponsorship of key members of faculty was very important, and their recognition that we couldn't ignore the fact that there were additional pressures on African-American Cadets, just as they had endured certain pressures in the Officer Corps. And that connection was a really important one.

Interviewer:

Sir, on that, one of the things in the diverse - you listed a bunch of different categories there, which I think are all very insightful in terms of the diverse group of African-Americans just within that group. But one of the things we've heard from some other of the earlier African-American graduates, '60s up through the '80s, was an inability to - at least

perceived at the time by them, an inability to communicate in the way that the Academy desired and the rest of their classmates communicated. Just in terms of, you know, how they spoke, the words they used, some of it weâ€™ve heard accent being a problem, in terms of â€œI have no idea what you just saidâ€ - those kinds of things. Did you see any of that, sense any of that with your classmates in terms of communicating with each other, based on background?

General Vincent Brooks:

I did. So some of that is regional dialects; it wasnâ€™t limited to racial dialects, by the way. There is a mainstream military language thatâ€™s spoken in terms of word choices, sentence construction, accent. And I remember as I was growing up, I was in high school in northern Virginia for my first two years of high school, and I would be chastised from time to time because I spoke proper. Thatâ€™s what the word was. â€œYouâ€™re speaking proper.â€

Interviewer:

Itâ€™s not a compliment.

General Vincent Brooks:

Wasnâ€™t a compliment. It was viewed as you were trying to make yourself something that youâ€™re not. And that was the comment that would come to me from fellow black students. The opposite also occurred, which was, â€œYouâ€™re so articulate.â€ And I still hear that from time to time, so, â€œHeâ€™s really articulate.â€ What am I supposed to be, illiterate? Am I supposed to babble? What do you expect of me? And so if Iâ€™m surprising you by being articulate, then itâ€™s possible that you prejudged me, and didnâ€™t expect me to be. And so thatâ€™s there also. I think that thereâ€™s still an expectation that people conform to the mainstream norm, and that can be a reflection of insensitivity within a mainstream norm that doesnâ€™t recognize that just because someoneâ€™s speaking to you with a different accent, or a different dialect, it doesnâ€™t mean that they lack any intelligence, or any capability. You should probably get to know them a little bit.

In other cases, itâ€™s a function of education, so that might be the case also; depends on what school system that people came from. And thatâ€™s a factor thatâ€™s taken into account in West Point admissions.

Interviewer:

Sure. And would you say that for example the white Cadet with a strong Southern accent, while people may make fun of him, would not be presumed to be as unintelligent as the black Cadet with the same accent in 1976? Or do you think they were judged fairly equally?

Interviewer:

Well, itâ€™s hard to universally apply an answer to that. I think that there were many who were presumed in any direction, so if itâ€™s anything thatâ€™s deviating from the mainstream accent or dialect or word choices or sentence construction, then it becomes a problem. I mean I recall that I thought I was a pretty good communicator. I always had really good grades in English in high school - until I got to West Point. So my English instructors during Plebe year did not like the way I communicated. Whether that was a function of my English language skills and the command that I had of English language; whether it was the way Iâ€™d been taught in Virginia and in California, both, in terms of writing, which had been well received in both those locations. It was not well received by some of my English instructors during Plebe English. Or was that a function of race? I donâ€™t know. I certainly had not experienced that before. I hadnâ€™t experienced any problem with communicating in the English language, or perceptions of that was usually the opposite. â€œYouâ€™re so articulate,â€ is what I heard more often, until I got to West Point. Then it was, â€œThatâ€™s a D. Thatâ€™s going to be a low score. Thatâ€™s a 1.9.â€ So these kinds of things may be reflections of society and prejudice that happens inside of there. The same apply - I recall one particular Cadet, when I was I guess a Yearling at the time, who had a very significant New England accent in my Company. And some who had

Southern accents, they immediately reacted to that Northern accent. Some who had mainstream accents reacted to both of those two accents. And so thereâ€™s the regional differences that happen from time to time. Does it lead to prejudgments? Probably. It certainly did in those cases, and there were reflections of that in comments that were made, but not universally.

Interviewer:

Okay. Letâ€™s go back to basketball for just a second, sir.

General Vincent Brooks:

All right.

Interviewer:

You said Coach K. recruited you as a basketball player, so how did basketball go for you initially, and how did that kind of serve as an outlet for you as a Plebe?

General Vincent Brooks:

Well, I joined a young team. We didnâ€™t have any seniors in the 1976-â€77 basketball season; there were no seniors on the team. Coach K. had been there I guess two seasons at that point in time, and was building the West Point basketball tradition as he knew it when he was a Cadet, playing under Coach Bobby Knight. He was an excellent coach, so he was able to bring the best out of the limited talent that we all had, and heâ€™s able to do that with great effect now when he has considerably more talent in his hands. But itâ€™s because heâ€™s a great coach. But the heart of what Coach K. is all about - and as it impacted me personally and professionally - was Coach K.â€™s willingness to invest in people. I still owe him a debt of gratitude, and Iâ€™ve told him this, and Iâ€™ve spoken about it in public. And while he very humbly says he doesnâ€™t remember quite being that way, the way I remember it is things like the English Department experience.

The class standing that I had academically at the end of Plebe year, after having played basketball, and frankly, being exhausted the whole year. I found that I was not able to balance - I was on varsity, by the way, so I was on the varsity team as a Plebe, but was a second-stringer. I played behind an All-American named Gary Whitten, a great member of the Army Basketball Hall of Fame, I guess, but a superb player. So I didnâ€™t get a whole lot of floor time, but I was out there. I was kind of his punching bag every single day, â€cause Gary was bigger and stronger than me and was a superb player, but just an unbelievable peer leader. An unbelievable peer leader. so I was learning a lot on the basketball team about leadership at the time. I was perhaps more military than a lot of the Cadets on the team, and I used to get singled out a little bit on that, as being too gray, a little bit too warped. That was my tradition. That was my culture. I was accustomed to that. It fit me very, very well. But it didnâ€™t always fit the basketball team very, very well. And so at the end of the first season I played, I had to make one of the toughest decisions Iâ€™ve had to make in my life. And that was to request to not come back the next year. Here Iâ€™d been recruited to play basketball at West Point, and I knew that Coach K. went out on a limb to recruit me, when he couldâ€™ve recruited any number of other players. And I was on his team, and he was building a program, and I was not able to balance the academic, the physical - I was doing all right physically, but - and the military. I couldnâ€™t balance those the way that I was accustomed to achieving. And so I decided that my long-term goal was to be a leader in the Army, not to be a professional basketball player. And why it was very difficult to muster the courage to go to my coach and ask him face to face for his permission not to return the next year.

Coach K. had every right, in my view, to chastise me, and to tell me that I was ungrateful; that I was undermining the teamâ€™s future; that I was screwing up his plans. Any number of other things that he couldâ€™ve said, and he said, â€What do you think you really need to do?â€ words to that effect. In other words, he gave it back to me. And I told him, â€I think I need to stop. I think I need to concentrate on academics and military.â€ He said, â€Then Iâ€™ll support you.â€ Coach K. made an investment in me then; that was the second investment. The first one was to bring me into West Point. The second one was

to release me from the team. The very next semester I was on the Dean's List, and so I was able to concentrate more and balance better, and begin to move on the journey that ultimately led to me becoming the Cadet First Captain for the class of 1980. I know that that would not have happened if I had not had the investments that Coach K. made in me. So I'm grateful to him because of that.

Interviewer:

So you kind of steeled yourself for some sort of a butt-chewing, or something to that effect, of how you were letting him down. And instead, he came completely the other direction and said, "Okay, I gotcha; support you in doing what you think you need to do."

General Vincent Brooks:

Yeah. That's right. That's right.

Interviewer:

So -

General Vincent Brooks:

Of course, that made room for General Bob Brown. He took my number the next year, and so he's now an Army General, and I'm glad I got out of the way, 'cause he was a much better number 44 than I was, anyhow.

Interviewer:

Well, I was going to say, Coach Krzyzewski can certainly point to a number of successful both players and Officers, certainly, off of those teams. In the, what was it, four or five years that he was here, he's had an incredible number of people who have went on to great success, so you have to think he had something to do with that. And that story kind of simplifies that.

General Vincent Brooks:

He did. He did. Whether he acknowledges it or not, he did.

Interviewer:

Well, he won't acknowledge it; we know that.

General Vincent Brooks:

He won't acknowledge it because that's the great kind of American he is, and great West Point graduate. But he taught us all what it means to be a team of one. And you'll see a lot of basketball players that played for him, whether it's a Duke or at West Point, will talk about this [makes a fist], and not operating as five fingers extended from the hand, because there's no power in that. But really bringing it together. The power comes when they're joined together. That's what it means to be a team.

Interviewer:

What did you get from Coach K. in terms of your - and it may have just confirmed or affirmed some of the things you've already told us about your own family. But that sense of family, and character, and the other things that frankly are way more important than basketball. What was - how did he communicate those back then? 'Cause I know he talks about it a lot now in his public speaking, but was that something that he talked about a lot in 1977?

General Vincent Brooks:

He did more than talk about it; he demonstrated it. So I remember as I was walking up toward the football game on Saturday this past weekend, went right past where the housing area opens beside Lusk Reservoir. And I remember the first time I went down that road, and it was to go to Mike Krzyzewski's house. So he'd brought in the new players that year, and we met the Upperclass players. Guys like Gary Whitten, who'd be on there; Pat Harris, who was class of '79 and ultimately became the Coach of the Army basketball team, a few years later. He was Team Captain in his year. We met them. And he created the family then, and he was giving us that world, that experience, and he'd devote himself to us. And he was also - his lovely wife, Mickie, was our mom, there's no doubt about it, and she took great care of us. And even now, they view it as we were their kids, their boys. That's still how it's described.

Interviewer:

Yeah. That's impressive. So you mentioned that you don't think - or that you're very positive, I think is what you said - that you would not have become the First Captain had you stuck with basketball. So at what point did you start to get an impression along your Cadet progression that you had the chance to be a high-ranking Cadet? And let's just leave it at that wider for now, but.

General Vincent Brooks:

Well, my classmates from my Cadet Basic Training Company will tell you that when they first assembled all the soon-to-be Plebes of I-4 together on the side of Lake Frederick, we were asked a question by a Department of Military Instruction Officer at that time. I think it was Major Ryan, if I remember correctly. He says, "Imagine yourself four years from now. What are you going to be doing?" And kind of went around the circle, and I remember saying, "I'm going to be the First Captain." As I look back on that, I'm sure that it struck everybody as the height of arrogance, but it was really a reflection of the way I'd been raised, which was to pursue excellence in everything. And that was certainly a measure of merit and excellence at that point and time. I wasn't the only one who said that; there was one other Cadet in my Company who said that. And as it turned out, he became the First Detail King of Beast, and I was the Second Detail King of Beast. We were in the same Company.

Interviewer:

Wow.

General Vincent Brooks:

Company I-4, of our senior year. And so one can project that you have high expectations of yourself, of oneself. And that was what I said at that point in time, so while I may sense that that was facilitated by stopping basketball - and it was - whether I would've been it or not is hard to say. "Cause the road I took was the one that took me off the basketball team, and I continued on that pursuit of excellence, 'cause I was not achieving excellence my Plebe year, and that's really what caused me to make the decision and get back on the path of excellence.

Interviewer:

So as you said you were Second Detail King of Beast, so it would've been summer of 1979. Obviously, the system tells us that that gives you a pretty strong chance to be in the conversation for First Captain. Do you remember how late in the summer it was when someone - I assume they probably told you face to face that you have been selected?

General Vincent Brooks:

Yes. And as I say, E.G. Coleman went through this just a few weeks ago, was right at the same point. I happened to see him a couple of days before marching out to Lake Frederick.

Interviewer:

Okay.

General Vincent Brooks:

Okay? And that was the window of time where I was told - now, I have to back up a little bit. So my brother sets a pretty high example. I have a sister, too, by the way, who's a lawyer. She sets a pretty high example, too, and so does my mother, so I've got a family of -

Interviewer:

We shouldn't leave her out.

General Vincent Brooks:

No, no. I've got a family of high performers. There's no doubt about it. I'm the middle child, so my middle child syndrome comes out. But keeping up with my brother was one thing, and staying ahead of my sister, which I was never able to do, and still can't do, has always kept me motivated and inspired. My brother went to Ranger School and Airborne School as a Cadet; he was able to squeeze both of them in, in one summer, for example.

Interviewer:

Right - which means no recycles.

General Vincent Brooks:

No recycles, straight through, King of the Pits at Ranger School. Defeated a guy whoâ€™s 6â€™9â€. I mean itâ€™s just he was a superlative person, and athlete, and leader, and became the Fourth Regimental Commander my junior year, my Cow year. So he was my Regimental Commander.

Interviewer:

And youâ€™re in I-4, right?

General Vincent Brooks:

And I was in I-4.

Interviewer:

Oh, sir.

General Vincent Brooks:

He was in G-4, so we were in the same Regiment. He started in I-1 and got shuffled; as I mentioned, Upperclasses were shuffled.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

General Vincent Brooks:

And his last two years were in G-4, and he was the Fourth Regimental Commander. He was inspiring. So I, following his inspiration and that of the other Cadet Rangers, especially, went to Ranger School also as a Cadet. I didnâ€™t get into Airborne School like he did. Came back, and then ended up going into the position as First Captain. Second detail, King of Beast, as I mentioned. Then I recall being called in by General Joe Franklin, who was the relatively new Commandant at that point in time. He called me into his office and said that â€œCongratulations. Youâ€™re going to be the First Captain for the class of 1980.â€ And being youthful and having other motivations at that point in time, I was more interested in being the Fourth Reg Commander. And I remember saying to him, â€œIâ€™m grateful. Iâ€™m honored. But is there any chance I could be the Fourth Reg Commander?â€

Because thatâ€™s what I really wanted to do. I wanted to do that same position, like my brother. Now, when it was all said and done, Iâ€™m glad I accepted the First Captaincy, â€˜cause I finally got in front of him for once. But -

Interviewer:

I can imagine General Franklinâ€™s look.

General Vincent Brooks:

Thatâ€™s how it happened. He was like - I think he was probably a little bit shocked, but he was a gentleman in all things, and took it with a good sense of humor. He says, â€œNo,â€ and he always said things with a smile, so he smiled and said, â€œNo.

Youâ€™re going to be the First Captain.â€

Interviewer:

â€œYes sir.â€

General Vincent Brooks:

Two days later, weâ€™re out at Lake Frederick, and the news is - now itâ€™s been released publicly. One of the first things I was required to do as soon as we got out at Lake Frederick was go find a phone booth, and someone literally escorted me down out of the field training site to a phone booth on the side of a road near Central Valley. And I was to make a phone call interview, and so thatâ€™s when it exploded.

Interviewer:

With the media, sir, or?

General Vincent Brooks:

I think it was with the â€œNew York Timesâ€ or something, so it was media interviews that then exploded.

Interviewer:

Wow.

General Vincent Brooks:

And I remember class of 1980 had had its fill of cameras in our face.

Interviewer:

Absolutely.

General Vincent Brooks:

Or in the faces of the women of our class especially, but over time, in all of our faces. And nowâ€™s a new opportunity for another set of cameras to come in. Within a few days, the communications began, and the reactions to those communications began. So the press releases, the photos; African-American Cadet, first black Cadet, all these things were highlights. And it said things like, â€œFollowing in the traditions ofâ€ Robert E. Lee, and Jonathan Wainwright, and Douglas MacArthur, and all the famous First Captain names, which began to build an extraordinary pressure. Thatâ€™s the class that youâ€™re falling in with, and youâ€™re now expected to perform in a way that legends of West Point and legends of military history had performed. And not everyone in my class, and not everyone publicly, was in favor of this idea. You know, I had experienced pretty good warmth. A little bit of prejudice every now and then would show up here while I was a Cadet at West Point, as I mentioned. But for the most part, it was kind of like the military culture that I grew up in, where race was not the prime factor. It was there, it was acknowledged, but it wasnâ€™t to be a hindrance or a divider. And suddenly we started getting some external communications. So I have to dig them out of my archives at some point in time, but there were letters that came to me from various places. One of them was addressed, â€œDear Regimental Coon,â€ and it went on from there.

Interviewer:

Wow.

General Vincent Brooks:

Another one was addressed to â€œKokomo Babu Kasavubu.â€ I donâ€™t know what that means or where it comes from. â€œGo back to Africa with the black brains, where they need you.â€

Interviewer:

Wow.

General Vincent Brooks:

So there were those kind of letters that came in, but there were far more letters that said, â€œCongratulations. Weâ€™re so proud of you. Thatâ€™s great.â€ And it would be old graduates, members of the class, all sorts of things started flowing in. It was clear to me by that â€œDear Regimental Coonâ€ letter that - that was inside. That was an inside letter, because - and by inside I mean it had to have been someone who was familiar with the inside structures of West Point, because there was nothing in any press release that used anything other than the word â€œBrigade.â€ So for someone to know that there were Regiments within the Brigade meant that it was an insider. I recall within a day or two, the ropes on my leader tent that I was living in at Lake Frederick got cut during the night. No one ever admitted who did it. We repaired it, continued on the mission. Next day, after coming in from the training, came back and the tent pegs were in Lake Frederick. It was inside. It was in my class.

Interviewer:

Right.

General Vincent Brooks:

Now, when it was all said and done, you know, you can go forward looking behind your back to see whoâ€™s about to stab it, or doing the best you can to lead. And I remember asking General Goodpaster one day, who was the Superintendent, â€œWhy was I selected as the First Captain? Am I a token? Is this something that West Point needed to do politically?â€ And I really wanted to know, because I didnâ€™t feel comfortable that I was really the right guy, because of these reactions that were occurring. And I knew the great talent that was in my class, also. And he said, â€œYou need to understand, West Point is

an old institution, and it doesn't take decisions like this lightly. You're the First Captain because you're supposed to be. And that boost of confidence that that wise, extraordinary gentleman General Statesman gave me has guided me for a long time.

Interviewer:

Probably explains why they brought him back here to be the Superintendent in that situation.

General Vincent Brooks:

Oh, what an amazing man. He was such an amazing man. I try to model myself after Andrew Jackson Goodpaster in all the things that I'm doing, even to this day.

Interviewer:

Yeah. So obviously, a lot of people took the opportunity to say, "Oh, well, race was a factor," and probably might not have used the word "social engineering," like we would do these days, but. When you heard from people - you mentioned you heard from a number of people in a positive sense - was there a sense among African-Americans, the African-Americans who had preceded you, African-American graduates, especially, to reach out to you? Did you get a lot of letters from them, or contacts from them? Obviously, it's pre-e-mail, so.

General Vincent Brooks:

Yes, I did, and from Senior Officers who were serving. Some of the African-American General Officers who were serving at that time, some of whom are still in my life and remain as mentors, like Lieutenant General Art Gregg, who at the time was the Deputy Chief of Staff of Logistics for the Army. A friend of my parents as well. Certainly the faculty members who were here. Fred Black, a very important mentor and friend, who did so much here. Guys like Kip Ward, who was on Staff and Faculty at the time. I mean there are names - I could go on and on. Larry Ellis. So there was great support that was coming, and from those who came a few years before me, there was a great deal of pride. So my brother's classmates in the class of '79, that I'd known from Contemporary Affairs and the Gospel Choir. It was a victory for them. It was a sense that their efforts and their contributions had been made manifest in success. And I felt that I was carrying that, and wanted to do well on their behalf.

At that point, I guess my brother was the third six-striper that we'd had, and I may have this incorrectly, but as I recall, at the time, Vernon Crocker, Patrick Landry, and Leo Brooks were the three -

Interviewer:

Yeah, that sounds right.

Six-strippers in West Point's history, at that point in time. And there had been some five-strippers, like Mike Miles, and Tom Bostick, and Dorian Anderson, and Lloyd Austin, and Ron Johnson. These guys had done things as Cadets here as well, and I knew about that, and I felt like I was carrying them one step further. And they communicated with me, and they remained in contact through the years and still are a part of my life I'm grateful for.

Interviewer:

Now, on the backside, after you graduate is there a First Captains Club where you guys kind of stay in contact with the new guy each year, or reach out to him, or is that something you find yourself doing in some cases and not others, or?

General Vincent Brooks:

No, in some cases and not others. Sometimes you lose sight of it as you're out there. But certainly I came back up on the net when Kristin Baker was selected. I felt a certain kinship with her. First, it was ten years after my graduation. She was class of 1990. She was the first woman to be selected. I had communicated with Rick Morales, but had never met him until last year, and I felt like I'd known him my whole life. So he was my brother's First Captain when my brother was a Plebe. The other First Captains from my time I had gotten to know. Ken Miller, Jim Hoffman, and John Cook - those were the First Captains of my era that I admired, and looked up to, and wanted to be like, especially John Cook, who was my brother's classmate, and another Cadet Ranger. These were

connections. And I certainly reach out to the additional African-American First Captains, including E.J. Coleman this year -

Interviewer:

I think you mentioned him.

General Vincent Brooks:

Or Rick Turner, who was the second African-American First Captain during my brother's time as Commandant of Cadets. But now we're achieving at such a rate that it's difficult to keep up with it. I've had several First Captains that I've worked with and worked alongside, or had been in my Units at that point in time. Guys like General Bill Rapp, who's out there right now. General Mick Nicholson, who's from my era, but is out there now as a Lieutenant General. And there were others who were ahead of me at the time who reached out to me, so General Dick Chilcoat, for example, now deceased, from the class of 1964, was First Captain. Bob Van Antwerp, a tremendous leader and exemplar through the years, who kept me in mind, and kept me on the straight and narrow, and was always a strong friend and advocate when we were both General Officers together. All these were examples. General James Ellis, who retired as Lieutenant General, and had one of the commands that I ultimately had at Third Army ARCENT a few years back. They reached out.

I do recall a communication that Douglas MacArthur shared that he and General Pershing, when he first met then-Captain John J. Pershing, said, "Douglas, we First Captains must never flinch." And that has been adapted to some people say, "We First Captains must take care of each other." But there was a connection among First Captains, and MacArthur didn't flinch on things as he was addressing Jonathan Wainwright's needs as a former First Captain. And I pass that on to E.J. Coleman. "You First Captains must never flinch. You must do our duty. But we also know each other." I wish we actually had a bit more of a kind of a connection that brings old First Captains back together. I was here for the Four-Star Conference last year, and that's when I met Rick Morales, the first Latino American First Captain. And I met John Tien a few years later, the first Asian-American First Captain.

By the way, John Tien, Kristin Baker, and myself were all assigned to Fort Hood at the same time, so it was a great Founder's Day when they started going through the superlatives and we had three First Captains stand up, and all three of us were famous firsts at West Point. It was great. That was a great moment. But I had a discussion with Rick Morales at that time, and with Bill Rapp, who was also there - there were five First Captains at that particular game that day - that we really ought to do something, so that's work yet to be done.

Interviewer:

Okay. Well sir, either then or now, what's your response when you hear people say, "Oh, well, he only got in because he's African-American," or "She only got in because she's a Hispanic female," or whatever, and "Surely she must've taken a spot from a more qualified candidate." Whether it's getting into West Point, a Promotion Board in the Army, or a Command selection - doesn't matter. But how do you respond to those kind of people, or those kind of thoughts?

General Vincent Brooks:

Well, it does happen from time to time, and my response to that is, first, I'm just doing the best I can, and the institution chose me, and I'm privileged to have been chosen, and I'm honored and humbled to have been chosen. If individuals believe that, I can't dissuade them from that entirely. All I can do is demonstrate excellence that may give them a reason to believe that it may not have just been that I am an African-American. It is true that I'm African-American, so I can't deny that that was a factor, 'cause the institution has to decide whether it's time to demonstrate that. 'Cause there may be certain pressures that come with that, so the institution isn't ignorant of that. When I say the institution, I mean everything from West Point to the Army to the nation. It's not

something that is ignored. It is considered, but it is not, in my experience, the reason. At the same time, I do realize that because those thoughts do still exist, the institution must deliberately act if it is to create diversity in the choices that are made for moving into positions of prominence and importance, to demonstrate that race is not a factor. Sometimes you must choose those who are representative of minorities to demonstrate that's the case. It's not because of the race, but since there's race and excellence, it's easy to demonstrate that it's not just about race. That may be a little bit hard to follow logically. And so when someone achieves, and they have these other dimensions, that's strength for the institution. It's not because of the race; it's not because of the gender. It's in spite of that, because there will be head winds against the institution to make that choice.

That takes the courage of folks like Joe Franklin and Andrew Jackson Goodpaster, to decide that the time is now to make that choice, when they could have made other choices. They could've. Sometimes the choice is made, sometimes it's not.

Interviewer:

Yep. Sir, you've mentioned that you're here a lot in different capacities, and over the years you certainly have been. But when you talk to Cadets at any point along the last several decades that you've been associated with West Point, what's the - do you have a common piece of advice you give Cadets in terms of keys to success, those kinds of things?

General Vincent Brooks:

There is one that I just talked to the class of 2016 a few moments ago, and highlighted my three Ls guidance that I give to them. And in a nutshell, there's three things that will help them be successful, especially as they begin their journey: listen, learn, and lead, the three Ls. That's one that I tend to highlight from one class to the next. I do tell the story about the value and the strength that comes from my class, and the diversity that's at West Point, and how that has impacted our Army, and our nation, without a doubt, and has set a great example, and not to look back on that. That was a wise decision. That was a tough one to make, and it has changed the way our nation is, our culture is; so I do tend to highlight that. I hearken back on the experiences that I had, because people want to know what was the experience like on becoming the first African-American First Captain. Some of the challenges that came with that, but also the extraordinary experiences.

Like on Graduation Day, when it was time for me to be handed my diploma, and my class gave me a standing ovation. I remember the tent rope and the tent pins, and I felt that it was okay. It was okay, because those incidents, the cutting of the rope, the throwing of the tent pins, wasn't the class. The class stood for me, and the class was with me during the challenges of being Cadet First Captain. It was sometimes pretty challenging. These are the things that I try to share.

Interviewer:

It's impressive.

General Vincent Brooks: I also shared back, I remember as we began to do the Henry Flipper dinners, the inspiration of Henry Flipper for me, for that whole time of my Cadet experience. And having been on the plane the day that we had that ceremony in December of 1976 where his name was cleared, finally. And being inspired by people like Charles Young, and all that he did through the years, and his example. Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., and then being able to meet people like Mitten Francis, Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., and getting to know them, and have a conversation with them, when I was a Captain in Washington, D.C. Or General Roscoe Robinson - I mean all these people that I had the privilege of meeting that were part of my legends, in addition to the MacArthurs, and the Robbie Lees, and the Sylvanus Thayers of West Point, and its broad history. I got to touch them also, and I was carrying a different inspiration with me because of that.

And so that's been part of what I highlight to groups as I talk to them through the years.

Interviewer:

Sir -

General Vincent Brooks:

And also choosing Infantry as a Branch.

Interviewer:

I donâ€™t see any Infantrymen in the roomâ€¦

General Vincent Brooks:

I see some Artillerymen right here.

Interviewer:

I wasnâ€™t going to bring that up, sir, but since you did - no, just kidding. Just kind of a wrap-up question, sir. What does West Point mean to you after all these years, and we could go all the way back to the beginning where you said, â€œGee, I wasnâ€™t even thinking about being in the military,â€ and then obviously that changed, and youâ€™ve been wildly successful at every step of your career. So how would you answer the what does West Point mean to you?

General Vincent Brooks:

Maybe Iâ€™ve been wild and somewhat successful. The wild part is in there. No, I would say West Point was - Iâ€™ll just throw a couple words - life-changing, the right decision for me, a great start, a lifelong foundation, an extraordinary experience that continues, another family, a lesson in how to make history by simply doing your duty every day. Itâ€™s so much. For those who are contemplating West Point, and arenâ€™t sure what it is, I hope those words will resonate with them.

You donâ€™t know until you come. For those who are still in the Corps of Cadets, and are trying to see the future, trying to discern whether this was the right call for them, and maybe youâ€™re even a little bit tired of West Point and ready to leave, which is part of the natural growth and maturation that happens over the four years here.

Interviewer:

Absolutely.

General Vincent Brooks:

It will grow on you, and the seeds that are planted here will suddenly blossom on you, and you will not realize where it came from until you come back one time, or you run into a group of classmates that you havenâ€™t seen in a while. And suddenly, thereâ€™s this feeling, and this is when the spirit of duty and honor and country really begin to come out, and it really makes sense to you. So you have to go away for a little while. I came back as a Lieutenant, I guess two summers after I graduated, on the Camp Buckner detail.

Interviewer:

Oh, fun, fun.

General Vincent Brooks:

And it already was beginning to show up, â€˜cause I was ready to leave by the time I finished that first year, and everything that come along with that, I was ready to be a Lieutenant.

Interviewer:

Itâ€™s got to be an exhausting year.

General Vincent Brooks:

I was ready to go out and be an Airborne Lieutenant, and didnâ€™t want to look back. But that coming back two years later as an Airborne Lieutenant began to expose me to something happened to me up here that was pretty deep, and I felt a connection. Then I came back for my ten-year reunion, which happened to be in the middle of Desert Storm, so some of my classmates were not present. Weâ€™d already lost some. While they were not killed in action in Desert Storm, that was the first warning that you have to treasure the moments you have to get back together. And suddenly that ten-year blossoming really surprised me in how much emotion I felt for this place, this institution, this history thatâ€™s here. And so since then, Iâ€™ve tried to come back whenever I can, and at the present time, I come up multiple times in a given year, and weâ€™ll keep doing it until itâ€™s my

final roll call. I recall General MacArthur's last visit. I hope I'm as prescient as he was, to know when it's my last one. But in the meantime, I'm trying to make an impact, and give something back, and share that as much as I can.

Interviewer:

And sir, we thank you very much for your time today, and I know there's a whole - I'm not even going to do the math, 'cause I don't do math well. But there's a number of years of your career we didn't even touch on, so maybe that'll give us an opportunity to do something some other time in a later interview. Maybe it's a chance for us to get to Hawaii. I don't know; we'll see.

General Vincent Brooks:

Come on out. You might find me there. You may have to go a little bit further to find me, though, but that's great. Thanks very much.

Interviewer:

Might stop at Hawaii, sir; I'll wait for you to come back.

General Vincent Brooks:

Yeah, that'd be good to come.

Interviewer:

Yeah. So we do appreciate your time, though, sir; we know your time is valuable, and we're also looking forward to interviewing your brother and your father, too. That would be a great series for us to have the three of you, so thank you very much, sir.

General Vincent Brooks:

Any deviations and he might say, 'I'm the one who's correct.' No, actually I'm the middle child, so I'm just trying to keep up with the other two.

Interviewer:

Fair. All right, sir, we'll -

General Vincent Brooks:

Being the third among those three Generals is a pretty tough thing to keep up.

Interviewer:

I understand.

General Vincent Brooks:

All right.

Interviewer:

You're correct. We got it.

General Vincent Brooks:

Right.

Interviewer:

Thank you very much, sir.

General Vincent Brooks:

Thank you, Rick.