

Duty, honor, country. For Johnny O'Connor and all who sacrificed, and all who fell: Patrick M. McLaughlin

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U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Anthony Ellis with the 3d U.S. Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard), places a flag at a headstone for "Flags In," at Arlington National Cemetery, in a Thursday, May 25, 2017, file photo in Arlington, Virginia. He and other soldiers placed nearly a quarter of a million American flags at the headstones in the cemetery in a Memorial Day tradition. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon) AP

CLEVELAND – Just days ago, I received a message that John “OC” O’Connor, a member of First Squad, Lima Platoon of Dogface Charlie, will be interred at Arlington National Cemetery on Sept. 19. In a rubber plantation near the Cambodian border, on Oct. 29, 1967, Johnny O’Connor saved my life, so I’ll be there to offer a final salute to an “old soldier.”

Johnny O’Connor and I, along with less than 10% of the males of our generation, answered the call and served the country during the Vietnam War. Our fathers are the men that America celebrates as “the greatest generation.” We grew up with an understanding of the importance of the words “**Duty, Honor, Country.**”



This photo was taken the morning of Nov. 2, 1967, at the Dogface Battalion NDP (Night Defensive Perimeter) following a battle that began just after midnight and lasted until daybreak. Johnny is strumming his M-14 since he did not have a guitar. (Patrick McLaughlin)

Recently, the Superintendent of West Point announced a major change in West Point's mission statement governing the Corps of Cadets. The academy's motto, "**Duty, Honor, Country**," was removed from the mission statement and replaced by the words, "Army values." The optics on this in today's heated national environment, including the Army's failure to meet recruiting targets, are both tone-deaf and self-defeating.

The concept of "Army values" (which I, in no way, seek to diminish) can be transitory — subject to change with each new group of leadership, military and civilian. But the words "**Duty, Honor, Country**," and that for which they stand, are timeless.

After learning of the Army's decision, I found a quiet place and listened to the audio of Gen. Douglas MacArthur's Farewell Speech given to the Corps of Cadets at West Point on May 12, 1962. When MacArthur spoke to those Cadets neither they, nor their Superintendent, had any idea what they would face in just a few short years.

Here are select excerpts from MacArthur's speech. Before him sat the 4,000 member Corps of Cadets, and the Superintendent of West Point, a two-star general named William Westmoreland:

"**Duty, Honor, Country**: Those three hallowed words reverently dictate what you ought to be, what you can be, what you will be.

And what sort of soldiers are those you are to lead? Are they reliable? Are they brave? Are they capable of victory?

Their story is known to all of you. It is the story of the American man at arms. My estimate of him was forged on the battlefields many, many years ago, and has never changed. I regarded him then, as I regard him now, as one of the world's noblest figures; not only as one of the finest military characters, but also as one of the most stainless. ...

"He needs no eulogy from me, or from any other man. He has written his own history and written it in red on his enemy's breast. ...

"I do not know the dignity of their birth, but I do know the glory of their death. ... Always for them: **Duty, Honor, Country**. ...

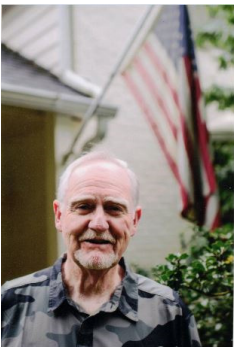
"Yours is the profession of arms, the will to win, the sure knowledge that in war there is no substitute for victory, that if you lose, the Nation will be destroyed, that the very obsession of your public service must be **Duty, Honor, Country**. ...

"The long gray line has never failed us. Were you to do so, a million ghosts in olive drab, in brown khaki, in blue and gray, would rise from their white crosses, thundering those magic words: **Duty, Honor, Country**. ...

"But in the evening of my memory, I come back to West Point. Always there echoes and re-echoes: **Duty, Honor, Country**."

On Memorial Day 2024 at places like Arlington, Ohio Western Reserve, Lakeview, Normandy, Manila, and thousands of cemeteries here and around the world, American patriots, men and women, rest under white crosses and stars, and simple headstones. Many went to their graves as young soldiers. Others since, and in the years to come, like Johnny O'Connor, will go as "old soldiers."

Most of those patriots were not members of the Corps of Cadets in May 1962, but Gen. Douglas MacArthur was surely speaking to them all: "**Duty, Honor, Country**."



Patrick McLaughlin, an award-winning author and Vietnam veteran, is president of the Greater Cleveland Veterans Memorial Inc. and a former U.S. Attorney for Northern Ohio. His first nonfiction novel, "Cheerful Obedience," was published last year. For more information, go to: pmmclaughlin.com.