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West Point grads observe ‘Founder’s Day’ at Q-West

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CONTINGENCY OPERATING BASE Q-West, Iraq — The long, gray line from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., got a little longer when it stretched to this logistics base in northern Iraq during an observance of “Founder’s Day” here March 15.

Maj. Gen. Robert L. Caslen Jr., class of ’75, “courage and drive,” and Commandant of Cadets from 2006 to 2008, was the guest speaker and oldest graduate at the event.

Caslen, commander, Task Force Lightning, Multi-National Division – North, said it was important to take a moment to remember the legacy, traditions and brotherhood of West Point.

“It is truly an honor to take some time to celebrate the proud heritage we all share, the heritage of not only being Soldiers in the best Army in the world, from the greatest country in the world, but also the heritage of the shared experience that is West Point, that which marks us members of the ‘Long Gray Line,’ defenders of freedom and democracy, the protectors of the innocent and weak,” said Caslen to the group of West Point alumni and guests. “You are leaders, Soldiers, patriots, Americans.”

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West Point, the oldest of America's five service academies, was founded on March 16, 1802, after President Thomas Jefferson signed the document that established the academy. The history of the Founder's Day observance is more obscure, though often attributed to the period after the Civil War when West Point graduates from both sides met several times to re-ignite old friendships and to help rebuild and restore the nation.

The youngest West Point alum at the event, 1st Lt. John McGinn, civil affairs officer, 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment, 3rd Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, and class of '07, "always remember, never surrender," said the observance was special for him.

"It's kind of cool that everybody, even in Iraq, can get together and recognize Founder's Day," said McGinn, a 23-year-old from Commack, N.Y.

McGinn, who is three months into a 12-month deployment, said his job in Iraq wasn't what he expected, but that he enjoyed the challenge.

"I'm enjoying it," McGinn said. "It's definitely a cool job. You have to think on your feet and meet challenges. A field artillery officer doing civil affairs — the curve balls abound."

First Lt. Sarah Noyes, brigade adjutant, 16th Sustainment Brigade, who organized the event, said she felt that it is important to get together with other "old grads" and honor the traditions of West Point and catch up.

"It's even more meaningful in the deployed theater, seeing classmates and hearing about their deployments," said Noyes, class of '06, "never falter, never quit." "For some of us, being deployed means missing formal reunions, so any chance to get together and reminisce is always memorable."

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Caslen, the third highest-ranking general in the Iraqi theater of operations, discussed the successes of operations in Iraq, and gave the crowd of few of his personal reflections on the Army and Iraq.

“First, I will never, ever, apologize for being an American and don’t you ever feel that you have to,” Caslen said. “I will also never, ever, apologize for being a Soldier in the U.S. Army. There is no more noble profession than the one of which you are a member. It is a life spent in the numbing cold, the blistering heat, or the drenching rain, facing danger during peace and war, while making the best friends you will ever have, guys and girls that will have your back no matter what life brings.”

Caslen told officers to not be discouraged by criticism of the war in Iraq.

“I will also never apologize for going to war in Iraq, and you should not either,” Caslen said. “History will sort it out whether it was strategically correct or not, but the fact is none of that matters anymore. Iraq is one of our enemy’s chosen battlegrounds.”

Finally, Caslen told the academy graduates not to doubt themselves.

“You have what it takes, and do not for a moment doubt that you lack one bit of training or preparation necessary for success, for you are the steely-eyed, knuckle-dragging, flat-bellied, Oakley-wearing, door-busting, and when appropriate, compassionate and kind United States Soldier.”



Maj. Gen. Robert L. Caslen Jr., commander, Task Force Lightning, Multi-National Division – North, wearing his West Point ring, addresses a crowd of U.S. Military Academy graduates during a Founder’s Day observance at Contingency Operating Base

Q-West, Iraq, March 15. Caslen, class of '75, "courage and drive," and Commandant of Cadets from 2006 to 2008, was the guest speaker and oldest graduate at the event. "You have what it takes, and do not for a moment doubt that you lack one bit of training or preparation necessary for success, for you are the steely-eyed, knuckle-dragging, flat-bellied, Oakley-wearing, door-busting, and when appropriate, compassionate and kind United States Soldier," Caslen told the alumni. (Photo by Keith M. Anderson)