

# AJAHAME QUIRING

## SOUTHERN UTAH UNIVERSITY STUDENT COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

May 1, 2021



I want to start off by saying congratulations for being here. This is our day after a year like no other. Our individual journeys through college have been very different, but I am sure there are some similarities. Many of us have switched our major multiple times, probably considered dropping out, and we've gone through a period of eating ramen noodles or finally deciding to splurge some money on a decent meal. Some of us have become a True T-Bird, we've worked on campus, we've gambled too much at casino night, or skated our hearts out at the ice rink. We've been to football, basketball, soccer, and baseball games cheering on the sidelines with paint on our faces or playing on the field trying to bring home the win. Maybe your time was spent on the stage singing, dancing, or acting. Whatever your story is, we're all now in a place of asking "what's next?"

The story I am about to tell you taught me what it means to be deliberate and excited about your life. It teaches that what you do is not as important as how you treat people.

In 1941, Jack was 20 years old and wanted to join the Air Force. He wanted to fly. By this point in time, World War II was in full swing. He was turned away to begin with because you had to be 21 to enlist as an officer. Jack told the recruiter, "I only own this trumpet and a little sack of clothes over here and I haven't eaten in two

days.” Relatable? Jack worked hard eventually became one of the best fighter pilots during the war.

In 1944, the night before D-Day Jack and his squad were assigned a mission. It came with challenges and losses. But Jack found comfort in playing his trumpet that he always had attached to his parachute wherever he went. That night after their mission his captain told him not to play his trumpet. There was still one more German sniper out there that they could not find. The sound of the trumpet would make Jack his next target. But Jack played anyway. His thought was that the sniper was just as homesick and scared as he was. No shots were fired.

The next day Jack was told of a German prisoner captured on the beach. The prisoner kept asking who was playing the trumpet the night before. The prisoner was the sniper. He said to Jack that the German love song he played was the tune to which he married his fiancée and said, “I thought of my mother and father, my brothers and sisters and I couldn’t fire.” Retelling the story later, Jack’s next statement being so kind, he says, “I shook the hand of the enemy.”

After the Liberation of Paris occurred in 1944 Jack and his squad were assigned to guard the area as the French General, General De Gaulle, had a victory parade through Paris. The Americans were the ones that liberated Paris, but General De Gaulle loved attention. Jack and his squad decided to put on an improvised air show as some entertainment for the people that were there. And Jack flew his fighter jet underneath the Eiffel Tower. After General De Gaulle’s attempt to court martial Jack and his squad, one of the American generals tore up the paperwork and said, “We’ve got to have spirit like that.”

There are many lessons that I have learned from this short part of Jack’s life.

Jack was fighting in a world war. Kindness and empathy were difficult to come by. But he took the time, risking his life, to reach out to an enemy he thought was struggling just as he was. We are entering a world that is pretty divided. But we can choose to shake the hand of our enemy. We can choose to see the best in others. We can do better in cheering each other on, rather than tearing each other down. We are all leaving college on level one. Be kind to yourself. It will take some time to adjust to our “big kid” jobs, but more importantly, we get to remember and use every other life lesson we have learned here. I hope we have learned the most important lesson to never suppress a kind thought or action. A religious leader once said that, “if only we had more compassion for those who are different from us, it would lighten many of the problems and sorrows in the world today.”

Jack loved being a fighter pilot. He loved playing the trumpet. That spirit and passion he had in doing what he loved brought joy and hope to others. Spirit is defined as “enthusiastic loyalty” and “having a special attitude or frame of mind.” So, let’s have enthusiastic loyalty to our goals. Let’s work hard. Let’s frame our perspective to help us climb up, jump over, crawl around, or plow through any roadblock in our way. We will discover that plans can and will change. But how we respond to those changes says a lot about ourselves, because we can still have hope rather than despair. Hope is desperately needed in our world today. If we can choose to keep our spirits up, we can always feel successful and find that hope, even if the outcome is not what we anticipated. We can find possibility in every small victory.

Whether graduation feels like the beginning of the rest of your life, just a new chapter in your book, or something in between, I hope we never forget the triumphs and challenges we have had here. They have made us who we are. Like Jack, we can be persistent in living what we have learned and what we believe. So, let us be purposeful in our choices and actions. Cliché sayings are cliché because they work,

so I'm just going to say it, dream big! It takes just one step at a time, even if those steps take you backwards or sideways, we can develop the motivation to move forward again. Dig deep to find where your motivation comes from, whether it be from someone believing in you, proving the haters wrong, or living a legacy. I hope we can all stick with it, not give up on ourselves, and change a little part of the world for the better.

Congratulations Class of 2021.