

"No man is entitled to the blessings of freedom unless he be vigilant in its preservation."

– General Douglas MacArthur

As we approach Memorial Day, it's the right time to think about the sacrifices of so many and remember those who paid the ultimate price for our freedom. While Veterans Day is the day we celebrate and honor those who have served our country, Memorial Day is when we remember those who lost their lives defending our freedoms. And so, on that note, I'd like to remind everyone that we don't say "Happy Memorial Day" because it's just inappropriate.

It is appropriate, however, in this season of Memorial Day and high school graduation to think about those leaving our community's relative safety to embark on exciting careers with the military. While I certainly hope and pray that NONE of them face danger in those careers, I know that military life is full of sacrifice, challenge, and adversity. So I applaud all those graduating as high school seniors one day and enlisting to defend our country the following day (some, of course, have already enlisted).

I'd like to take a few minutes this week to highlight some brave, patriotic and determined young men and women.

Luke Elmore, fourth in his class at A. Crawford Mosley High School will attend the United States Air Force Academy in the fall. According to Principal Brian Bullock, Luke has balanced rigorous academics with a busy athletic career and many other activities. He's just one of 15 Mosley grads going into the military. According to school officials, Classmate Duke Harris is securing his pilot's license while juggling football, tennis, swimming, and a demanding academic schedule. Duke is 6th in his class and will also attend the United States Air Force Academy.

Will Smiley, Class of 2023 from Bay High School, is another member of the Class of 2023 who is destined for great things. Blythe Carpenter, his principal, says that Will is "someone that other students look up to, and this has had a positive impact on our campus community as a whole." Will volunteers at Chautauqua Learn and Serve Academy, a school for adults with disabilities, and has been described as a "world changer" by that school's principal.

Will's high school path has not been easy as he balanced rigorous collegiate-level coursework with a dedication to excellence in athletics. "Will is a four-year varsity football player, but he suffered an injury early in his junior year that prohibited him from playing for the rest of the season. Despite this, he attended every practice and game, supporting his teammates as a leader and manager. After a successful senior year as quarterback, Will is going to continue his athletic career as he is signing to play football as a cadet in the United States Naval Academy," Carpenter said.

In addition to Will, eight other Bay High graduates are joining the military after graduation.

Deane Bozeman School Graduate Justin Wilson is one of six members of the Class of 2023 joining the military. Bozeman Principal Ivan Beach had this to say about Justin: "Justin has been a member of our JROTC program all four years of high school, as well as an active member of the Sound of the Roaring Thunder (Deane Bozeman's marching band). He is a leader in the

JROTC program and has enlisted to join the Army after he graduates.” His classmate, Caleb Wilson, is another graduate Bozeman is highlighting this year. “Caleb is such a wonderful student with the biggest personality. He is an active Buck Wild Pep Club member, Varsity Weightlifting and Varsity Soccer. Justin will be joining the Air Force after graduation and will proudly serve his country just like his father,” according to his principal.

J.R. Arnold High School is celebrating 12 military-bound graduates this year. Principal Britt Smith wanted to recognize two in particular. “Arielle McCall has accepted an appointment to the United States Naval Academy,” he said. “Arielle is currently the commander of Arnold’s JROTC program Marlin Company. She has served as an officer in this program for the past two years and has a cumulative grade point average of 4.58 while undertaking a rigorous course of study at Arnold High School.” Principal Smith also wanted to highlight Tristan Stickney. “Tristen completed his basic training before his senior year at Arnold HS. After graduation, Tristen will return to Fort Benning, Georgia, to complete his Advanced Individual Training (AIT). Tristen desires to serve his country as a member of the National Guard and the US Army’s Infantry,” Smith said.

Rebekah Leebrick, Class of 2023 from Rutherford High School, is another graduate who has balanced academics and volunteer work throughout high school. Rebekah, who received a prestigious appointment to attend the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, has maintained a 4.719 grade point average while actively participating in her school’s JROTC program. Currently a Colonel in the JROTC program, according to Principal Dr. Todd Mitchell, Rebekah is considered a role model for her peers.

I have no doubt other students will decide to join the military this summer, or even next year, and I want to take a moment to thank them in advance for taking on that responsibility and serving their community and their country.

I am so proud of all of our graduates in the Class of 2023, and I know the adversity they have overcome, and the challenges they have faced, have made them into strong, resilient leaders who will accomplish great things. So, again, congratulations to all graduates, and my sincerest appreciation to those moving on to the military ... thank you for your service!

Stay safe, and God Bless!