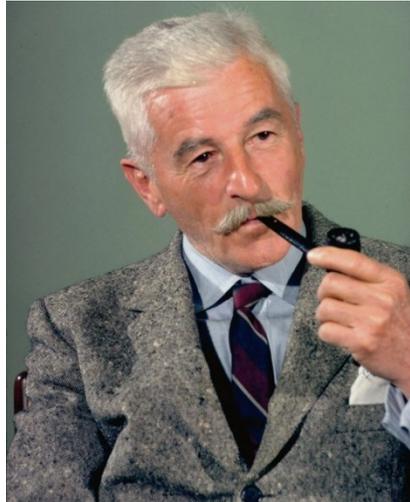


# William Faulkner Address at West Point Military Academy (April 19-20, 1962)

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Essay by Robert W. Hamblin (guest post)\*



*William Faulkner*

William Faulkner held a lifelong fascination for war and the military. He grew up hearing stories of his great-grandfather William C. Falkner's heroic actions in the Civil War and used those stories as the source for the exploits of the character John Sartoris in "*The Unvanquished*" and other narratives. As a teenager Faulkner idolized the pilots of World War I and sought to emulate them by enlisting in the Canadian branch of the Royal Air Force. Although the war ended before he completed his training, Faulkner returned to his hometown proudly wearing an RAF uniform and displaying an injury which he claimed he received in actual combat. Some of his earliest poems and short stories, as well as his first novel "Soldiers' Pay" and his later novel "A Fable," deal with pilots and other soldiers of the Great War. Too old to serve in World War II, he found expression of his patriotism in Hollywood by writing movie scripts such as "The De Gaulle Story" and "Battle Cry," which supported the Allied war effort. Late in life, as writer-in-residence at the University of Virginia, Faulkner enjoyed accompanying his friend Joseph Blotner and author and historian Shelby Foote on visits to Civil War battlefields.

Enamored as he was with all things military, Faulkner gladly accepted an invitation to visit the United States Military Academy at West Point on April 19-20, 1962. The invitation, extended by Major General W.C. Westmoreland, commander of the Corps of Cadets, had been proposed by Major Joseph Fant, an English instructor at the Academy. Fant contacted his former West Point classmate, Faulkner's son-in-law, Paul D. Summers Jr., now a Charlottesville lawyer, who reported that Faulkner would be happy to accept the invitation.

Summers accompanied Faulkner on the visit, as also did Faulkner's wife, Estelle, and daughter, Jill, Summers's wife. Upon arrival the guests were given a tour of the Military Academy buildings and grounds and then treated to a formal dinner hosted by General Westmoreland. For the main event of the visit, Faulkner presented a reading from his forthcoming novel, "The

Reivers” (which would be published six weeks later), conducted a question and answer session with the cadets after the reading, and held a press conference. Some 1,400 people attended the event, including more than 1,000 of the West Point cadets. The next morning, after rising early to participate in reveille, Faulkner guest-lectured in two literature classes, answering questions from the cadets about his novels and stories, other authors, and the craft of writing.

Faulkner’s comments to the cadets included some of his most insightful remarks about his writing. Echoing his Nobel Prize acceptance speech from more than a decade earlier, he said, “It’s [the writer’s] privilege, his dedication too, to uplift man’s heart by showing man the record of the experiences of the human heart, the travail of man within in his environment, with his fellows, with himself, in such moving terms that the lessons of honesty and courage are evident and obvious.” Stories, he said, come from “three sources: one is observation; one is experience, which includes reading; the other is imagination, and the Lord only knows where that comes from.” Faulkner added that he relied more on memory than on research for his details: “[The writer] has a sort of a lumber room in his subconscious that all this goes into, and none of it is ever lost. Some day he may need some experience that he experienced or saw, observed or read about, and so he digs it out and uses it.”

Faulkner also expressed a general optimism about the future of the human race, again reiterating his point from the Nobel Prize speech that “man will not merely endure: he will prevail.” Faulkner told the cadets, “The immortality is the fact that frail, fragile man, a web of bone and nerves, mostly water, in a ramshackle universe has outlasted most other forms of mammalian life. He has outlasted his own disasters, and I think that he will continue.”

Back home, Faulkner wrote to General Westmoreland, thanking him and the Corps for their gracious hospitality—and for the personal honor that had been his in “watching our youngest daughter being fetched back to visit his alma mater by her husband (Paul Summers, Class of ’51), not as a guest of the Class of ’51 but among the very top brass hats themselves.”

After his visit to West Point, Faulkner made only two more public appearances before his death—a reading at the University of Virginia on May 17 and a trip to New York on May 24 to receive an award from the National Institute of Arts and Letters. He died on July 6, 1962.

Faulkner’s reading and remarks at West Point were tape-recorded, and the transcript of those tapes, edited by Joseph L. Fant and Robert Ashley, was published as “Faulkner at West Point” by Random House in 1964. The book was reissued, with additional commentary, by University Press of Mississippi in 2002.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.