

Memorial Day speech in honor of Christopher Morgens, 2014

Good morning, Exeter. It is my privilege to welcome you to this Memorial Day assembly. Those of you who have attended this assembly in the past will remember the order in which we will proceed. I will make some remarks, we will read the names of former Exonians who served their country and gave their lives in that service, we will observe a moment of silence, play taps, and then conclude with a few words.

Before I begin, I want to let you know that the Class of 1944 as part of its 70th reunion worked with a number of dedicated staff members to create a plaque in honor of the alumni who served in the American Civil War. That plaque was unveiled along the east wall of the assembly hall last Thursday, and I would like to thank the Class of 1944, along with Anita Bailey, Ed Desrochers, Jack Herney, Ron Johnson, Jeanne Moser, and Jan Woodford for making this possible.

Last year at this Memorial Day assembly, I told you about Jack Toffey, who had attended Phillips Exeter in 1926 and 1927 and went on to fight in World War II before being killed in Italy in 1944. Toffey had gone to war at age 36 and as a husband and father of two children. His determination to fight for his country was

not controversial, and it was a decision that he made of his own volition. While opinion about entry into World War II was divided prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, public support was overwhelming thereafter. Americans were fighting the “good war,” for what was moral and right, and those who served were part of what we often call the greatest generation. And they returned home as heroes.

Twenty years later, Americans of a different generation were embroiled in a very different war in Vietnam. This time the enemy was elusive, the goals much less clear. Public support was initially wide but shallow and as deaths mounted and confusion over national aims persisted, anti-war resistance became louder and more widespread. Unlike the image of World War II as the good war, Vietnam was characterized as the wrong war, in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and it was fought by a different kind of soldier. Whereas the average age of the World War II soldier was 26, the typical soldier in Vietnam was 19. Many men chose to fight in World War II, whereas boys were drafted into the Vietnam War. Those who volunteered to fight in Vietnam became fewer with each passing year. Those who sought to evade the draft grew. And some ended up fighting in Vietnam for reasons that were complex and that reflected personal struggles and generational tensions.

It was in this setting that Christopher Warren Morgens, Exeter class of 1965, found himself called to duty by his country to fight in a war the merits of which he questioned. Whereas the aims of World War II had become clearer prior to and during American involvement, the passage of time during Morgens's four years at Exeter and four subsequent years at college did nothing to clarify the country's goals or to explain to Morgens the purpose of his sacrifice. If anything, the deterioration of the American war effort between 1965 and 1969 made the purpose of the war even less clear, and his feelings diverged increasingly from the views of a previous generation, his father's generation.

Morgens's father was raised during the Depression and he served in the Air Force. During his father's youth, the country had won World War II and then opposed the communist menace around the world. For most American men of his generation, the virtues of military service and the benefits of it to the formation of one's character were unambiguous. Although his father's first name was Warren, many simply referred to him as "colonel," and the colonel's views were the dominant forces in Morgens's life. At the end of third grade, for example, the colonel determined that his son should skip the fourth grade. A disappointed eight year old Morgens wrote "two important things happened today. One of them was good and

one of them was bad. We found a cat! [My sister] Sadie named her Samantha. I don't like that name but she is very cute. Mom and dad are going to let us keep her! Also today dad told me I am going to skip fourth grade next year and go straight to fifth grade. I don't want to. I don't have a lot of friends in third grade, but I know I have even less in fifth grade. I told mom, but she just patted me on the shoulder and said it would be ok. I don't want to skip." Chris's protests notwithstanding, the decision had been made and he endured the difficult transition. By the time he was in the eighth grade, the colonel pointed him to boarding school at Exeter, where he enrolled a year younger than most of his classmates.

Although he was young, Morgens distinguished himself. He gained a reputation as a fine writer and an excellent student, particularly in French, and he was described by one instructor as exceptionally bright. He made friends with his McConnell dorm-mates and through various activities, including JV swimming and track, student council, and Dramat. On the whole, he was a successful and active student, quiet but funny. Despite these successes, his close friends also knew that Morgens struggled under the long shadow of expectation cast by his father. After his first month at Exeter, the colonel wrote "are you finding it possible to behave yourself? Or are you making your teachers and adviser angry, as in the past?"

Later the colonel expressed frustration with the spelling errors in Morgens's letters, and in the fall of his lower year the colonel admonished him to stop using the term "mom" in his letters, and instead to use the more mature term "mother." Over time Morgens wrote home less often, and in the fall of his senior year he wrote "Dear Mother and Dad, I haven't been writing for a number of reasons. I have very little to say.... It's very easy for me to sit here and know you want me to send you letters, but it is very difficult for me to believe that you would be interested in anything that I would say."

Despite the infrequency of letters to and from home, Morgens's relationship with his father continued to be the dominant influence in his life, and he struggled to balance his increasing independence with his desire for the colonel's approval. This difficult balance continued after he graduated from Exeter in 1965. Morgens was headed to Harvard and the colonel urged Morgens to join the Reserved Officers Training Corps, or ROTC. One can interpret this parental pressure as part of a continuum, from Morgens skipping fourth grade, to being sent to boarding school at Exeter, and in 1965 to making the fateful decision to join the ROTC. The colonel believed that military training would be good for Chris's maturation and professional career. At the end of his freshman year in May 1966, the colonel wrote to Chris "there is much to be said for earning your degree in three years,

serving as a lieutenant for two years, and then, at age 22 enroll for law, business administration, or some other field of graduate work." In 1966, it was possible, though increasingly difficult, to speak casually about two years of military service. Though American government officials and generals spoke optimistically in public about the war in Vietnam, often predicting that victory was near, the number of troops being sent to Vietnam continued to increase every year as did the number of dead and wounded.

As he neared the completion of his senior year of college in the spring of 1969, American troop commitments had exceeded half a million and images of fighting and death in Vietnam and anti-war protests at home were broadcast into American living rooms nightly. For Morgens, the timing of his college graduation could not have been worse, for being a member of the ROTC meant that he had earned a commission as a second lieutenant. With his writing skills, Morgens had hoped that he would be assigned to an occupational specialty, perhaps as an army journalist. Instead he was ordered to Ft. Benning, Georgia for basic infantry school. A despondent Morgens responded by writing "Dear mom and dad, I cannot readily conceive of anything more disastrous. My imagination boggles at the implications. My mind's eye is covered with blood."

His father tried to justify the war and its strategic, anti-communist aims, but Morgens argued back forcefully in response and insisted that all he saw was a horrible and risible waste of lives. In December 1969, Morgens was transferred to a base at Fort Riley where he participated in an anti-war vigil in nearby Manhattan, Kansas. The colonel was livid that Chris would protest against the government. He commented to his son "I should think you would feel like a sheep mindlessly following the shepherd or the Judas goat." More self-confident and determined, Morgens retorted that "I'm all for freedom and democracy, but I'm sure you will admit that that is not what the fighting is about. I am a sheep (a stupid one at that) because I am in the army. If I get killed over there, I will be a dead stupid sheep."

In July 1970 he received his orders to ship out to Vietnam for a war that he did not support, for an army to which he did not wish to belong, and for a purpose that was unclear. He wrote to a friend that "the thought of contributing to the death of a lot of people in Southeast Asia seems like the worst thing I can do with my life, and yet I fear that is where I am headed."

A month later, Morgens arrived in Vietnam, assigned to Company B, 1st Battalion, 52nd infantry in Quang Ngai province in central Vietnam, roughly halfway between Saigon and Hanoi. The province is best known as the location of the My

Lai massacre and also as the setting of Tim O' Brien's The Things They Carried.

When he arrived, Morgens encountered first heat and humidity, followed by mosquitoes and tall, sharp elephant grass, lots of waiting, more waiting, and dubious missions, a monotony broken only by the occasional shipment of New Yorker magazines. Morgens described his missions as "shoot anything that moves, blow up any bombs, bunkers, or booby traps." In populated areas "shoot anything over the age of 14 or so that runs from us during the day. Apprehend any military age males. At night, shoot anything that moves."

Despite his dim view of the war, Morgens was well-regarded by the troops.

Sergeant Kenneth Hooten recalled Morgens helping him with map-reading, a critical and potentially life-saving skill. Lieutenant Jon Graves described Morgens as "easily the most liked of us. If you would have had a vote by the enlisted men of who they wanted to follow, Chris's platoon would have been way too big."

Graves noted that Morgens would walk the point, the most exposed and dangerous position because "Morgens would not put his men in any position that he would not go." When not on a mission, however, time would drift by slowly in stifling heat among countless insects, and Morgens found little to share in his letters that was new or different from the previous day.

On November 8, 1970, Morgens's 110th day in Vietnam, his unit was exhausted by action the previous evening—a small fire fight and the apprehension of a couple of prisoners. Lt. Graves reported that after the mission, most of the soldiers took a nap, and when he woke up, he felt a huge explosion that passed over him like a hot wind. Men started to race past Graves and toward the location of the explosion where several men lay on the ground with severe injuries. Captain Lee Grannis recalled that they had just completed a briefing of the platoon, and when Morgens walked out of the briefing, he stepped on a mortar round, either a dud or a booby trap. Grannis went to Morgens immediately and found him unconscious. The company medic, Chuck Kellogg, was about 30 or 40 yards away when he heard the explosion. He remembers getting to Morgens within 30 seconds, finding him on his back, silent, and badly wounded.

The unit quickly cleared a landing zone for the wounded to be transported by helicopter. The pilot Don West recalls weeping men carefully loading Morgens's body onto the helicopter. After the helicopter lifted off, West handed the controls to his co-pilot and went to assist the medic on board who had begun an IV. The medic looked at West and shook his head.

Two days later, uniformed military personnel arrived at Morgens's parents' home to inform them that Christopher Warren Morgens had been killed in hostile action in the Republic of Vietnam. Morgens was awarded the bronze star for bravery posthumously and a purple heart for "meritorious service in connection with military operations against a hostile force." His grieving father reflected on his son's brief life. "Our first born son: the most intelligent and handsomest of the lot. All those years; YMCA swimming teams, camps; three years of French lycee; Exeter, Harvard; our first born son was something special. And his handsome body is on the way back from Asia in a sack and we've got to bury him."

I now leave the final words of remembrance to one of Morgens's former classmates, Jerry Pritchard, and to his sister Sadie. Three decades after his graduation, Pritchard wrote, "I think of you often and my eyes tear up just about every time I do. I can see you in the dorm at Exeter singing happily in French, and I can see you walking to class at Harvard--always taking time to stop and chat. I named my first son after you, though he turned out to be not quite the scholar you were. Surprisingly, he has your "swimmer's build" and is a great swimmer. Chris, I hate it that you were taken so young. The world would have been a better place if you could have been here longer."

Finally, Chris's older sister Sadie left this memory:

“Dear Chris, We were only 18 months apart. You were my little brother, I loved you, I taught you to read, and I protected you, but I couldn't keep you from the ultimate harm. I still remember the last breakfast we had together before I dropped you off to report to Travis AFB. You left me with your pj's and a couple of other civilian items saying 'I won't be needing these anymore.' I felt a chill, was it a premonition? It was 40 years ago that you left us forever. Mom and Dad spoke of you until the very end. My family keeps your memory alive and we still cry for you. My oldest son is named Christopher. Peter's son David attended Exeter like you. For her USC Masters' program, my daughter Alicia did a multi-genre writing project about your life. We donated it to the Exeter library in your memory. Mom and Dad are with you now. We visit you every holiday. You and many more were taken too soon.

I miss you, Sadie.”

I now ask Student Council President Alice Ju to read the names of Exonians who lost their lives in Vietnam. We will have a moment of silence, Mr. Perricio will play taps, and then a final word.

RICHARD WARREN PERSHING '61

LANGDON GATES BURWELL '62

WILLIAM GRAND GILGER III '63

CHARLES EDWARD RYBERG '63

ARMOUR DAVID WILCOX III '64

CHRISTOPHER WARREN MORGENS '65

After taps... We are grateful to Christopher Morgens, all the Exonians, and the thousands of Americans who served and died so that we may enjoy the freedoms and the privileges made possible by their sacrifice. When you pass by this memorial, I hope that you will pause for a moment and think of them. I close with thanks to Augie Medina and Christopher's niece Alicia for providing the materials that made this speech possible. Senior class.

Ron Kim

May 26, 2014