For every student who crosses our stage today there is a story, a story that includes parents, family and friends who supported them, teachers on all levels who have educated, challenged, and prepared them and personal commitment, effort, and sacrifice that has helped transform them. In the successes, triumphs, and achievements of these graduates we see our hopes and dreams for the future, a future that is bright and promising and filled with opportunities that are yet to be discovered.

Over the past few weeks I have taken time to visit with our graduates, learning about their experiences and hearing their stories. As I have listened, I have developed an even deeper appreciation of the students we have at Ferris State University and the power of the educational experience we provide here.

These are more than outstanding students crossing our stage today. These are extraordinary people, individuals who I would be proud to have as son or daughter, brother or sister, father or mother. I want you to know how impressed I am with these graduates. Perhaps the easiest way to illustrate this is to share one of their stories with you.

This first graduate is not your typical university student. He is from Fulton, South Dakota and headed to Jamestown College after high school graduation, but did not apply himself and dropped out to work full-time. After a series of poor choices he found himself with few options, but realized he needed to get away from his so-called friends and change his lifestyle if he was going to be successful. As a result he enlisted in the Navy, serving for nine years. Wanting to spend more time with his wife and children, he settled down in Pennsylvania. Unfortunately, his wife had struggles with cancer and they lost both their house and car, and were forced to move in with her parents. Discovering that he missed the military he re-enlisted in the Reserves.

As a veteran he did not have problems finding employment, but without a college degree it was difficult to earn enough money to cover the bills, his options and earning potential were limited. The post 9/11 GI Bill includes support for housing which made it possible to attend college. Unsure of his future he began first in business, but transferred to Criminal Justice, which had been his dream since he was five. He chose Ferris because the Criminal Justice program was the top in the state and among the top five nationally.

He thanks the veterans’ coordinators who have provided exceptional support to him and faculty who have been terrific. He describes Ferris State University as a place that truly is veteran-friendly,
unlike other schools he has attended which claim to be, but are not. He describes the experience here as tremendous. His wife is also a Ferris student, has earned her associates degree in Business, and is working on her bachelor’s degree in Management.

He graduates today with his associate degree and will be deploying to Afghanistan, but intends to continue work on his bachelor’s degree and return to finish it.

The story of how this graduate and I connected is unique and special. He was referred to our office because he wanted to wear his uniform to graduation today. In speaking with him I learned that he does so today as a salute and thank you to each of you in the community and taxpayers for supporting his education.

I am honored to present to Master of Arms, and Petty Office Second Class Jeff Wahl and would ask that he stand and be recognized. I would ask that his wife Amanda, family, and friends also stand.

Graduates, on behalf of our university I wish you great success, meaning and fulfillment. As each of you sets out on the next step on your life and career you will face times of challenge, heartbreak, and disappointment. In those times when you might consider giving up, I’d encourage you to remember the example of Jeff Wahl, his desire to make a better life for his family and to serve his country. His determination to use education to succeed is an example to us all.

Congratulations and best wishes, class of 2011.