



123rd AIT Graduation Speech

Colonel Yanyong Phataralaoha, D.Eng., Prominent Alumnus delivered the Graduation Speech (Afternoon session) on 22 May 2015.

Thank you President Worsak, Your Excellencies, the trustees, the faculty, the administration, parents, friends and the School of Engineering and Technology (SET) graduates of the class of 2015 for having me sharing this memorable day with you. It's indeed an honor to be invited to speak at this 123rd Commencement. It's been 29 years since I graduated from AIT and I couldn't even remember who my graduation speaker was that day. While looking at the list of alumni who have spoken at the AIT graduation ceremonies, I wonder if I can come up with a speech comparable to them so that you all won't fall to sleep listening to me. And, I'll try to make it short.

When the Alumni Affairs Office called to inform me about the invitation to be an alumni speaker at this commencement, I immediately asked, "Why would AIT invite a retired Colonel from the Royal Thai Army to speak at an Asian internationally acclaimed technological institute?" Their answer was that the administration believed my background and past experiences in the military, academics, politics and business are interesting with their twist and turns. But as you know, the objective of a commencement address is to inspire and prepare you for the real world outside. So if you don't get any inspiration from my story, then sign up for another AIT degree, so you can attend the next graduation ceremony and be re-inspired.

Upon receiving your degrees today, some of you who are still looking for jobs may feel nervous and many of you who already have jobs may start thinking about where the degrees will take you next in your careers. I'd like to tell you that it's ok to feel that way because **'Life is a Mystery Adventure.'**!! Let me tell you my story:



I was born and raised in Bangkok to a business family 60 years ago during the time of military government. So being a military officer was a real prestige and brought honor to our family. On my father's suggestion, when I was 15, I passed the exam and got into the Armed Forces Academy Prep School. Little did I know, what awaited me. After 2 years, and ranking in the top 20 of the whole class of 500 cadets, I was accepted to study at the best medical school in the country under the military quota. However, my father didn't give his consent; he believed that being an army general is one of the greatest achievements a man can have in life. So I continued my study at the Army Academy and at the end of my first year, I was ranked 2nd in my class and was awarded the scholarship to study at a military college in the U.S. And this time, I accepted the offer. So what I had learned early in life is that **every decision you make will always lead to something big or small**. You don't know where it will lead to, but **with real determination you can move forward** and keep on carrying that forward momentum.

So my mystery adventure continued and my world journey had begun. In 1973, at the age of 18, I landed in Washington, D.C. to be picked up by a Thai Assistant Army Attaché there, who some 20 years later became the 19th Prime Minister of Thailand. I was sent to study electrical engineering and artillery at the Virginia Military Institute. It was a 24/7 education that needed good time management skill. It was a tough school. My VMI class of 1977 started off in the Fall of 1973 at about 400 cadets and graduated in the Spring of 1977 at about 200. Aside from physical and academic rigors, the school put emphasis on discipline, respect, leadership, integrity and most important of all **HONOR**. The values which, if you can uphold them, will definitely lead to your successful life.

Though I was living in the austere environment of the military college, every long summer break, I would travel through all the states from east coast to west coast and as far as Hawaii and Canada. After my graduation in 1977, I made



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the world tour through Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, Indonesia and Western Europe for the whole summer. **You will learn so much from seeing and meeting people from different cultures.** So if you have the time and, of course, money go see the world. Widen your perspective. Do it while you are still young, as family and work obligations will require most of your time later in life.

After finishing my masters in Computer & Systems Engineering, and Management Engineering from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in upstate New York in 1979, I came back to Thailand and was assigned to teach Electrical Engineering at the army academy. Three years later, the army again granted me a doctoral scholarship to study abroad. At that time, my 4 year American undergrad roommate was doing his Ph.D. in Civil Engineering at Stanford University in California. So I thought of joining him at Stanford. But due to the fact that I had never attended university in Thailand or in the east, the idea of studying in Asia captivated me. In the end, I chose to apply to AIT and was awarded the unbonded Japanese Government scholarship for doctoral study. Allow me to take this opportunity to thank the Japanese government for shaping a path of my destiny. Choosing AIT over other top universities in the world was one of the best decisions in my life. I have learned so much from students of many nationalities and made many friends. Most important of all, I met my wife here. She is a master graduate of Environmental Engineering class of 1984, and ironically despite my global adventures, she is a Thai. She is also here today. Maybe the AIT slogan should be changed from **“Learning beyond boundaries”** to **“AIT is for lovers”** 😊

During my time here from 1983 to 1986, AIT had 9 Divisions of study with a total of no more than 700 students all at master's and doctoral levels with a very low student to faculty ratio. I first stayed on the 5th floor of Dormitory D and later moved to student village sharing a unit with a heart broken French Canadian and an architect from Papua New Guinea. The Canadian was an interesting character. He told me that he came to this part of the world because “his girlfriend dumped



him for a pair of skis “. Before coming for his master study at AIT, he was a CIDA volunteer in northeast Thailand for 2 years. He could speak Thai, Laotian and even a little of Cambodian. He went as far as becoming a Buddhist monk for 2 weeks just for experience. While the Papua New Guinean was the star soccer in AIT intramural sport and would tell jokes about cannibalism in his island. Some of my Indian friends would shake their heads from side to side while talking and they didn’t mean to disagree with me. The first batch of students from mainland China came in 1984 with Chairman Mao dress, wearing big white oversized shirts and oversized gray pants. And they never seemed to understand any of our jokes. Where could you encounter great diversity in such a small place? When I was here the student body consisted of more than 30 nationalities, now there are more than 60. So you graduates are lucky to have greater exposure to diversity and connections. **Keep in touch with friends; you will need each other later in life.**

At age 33, I thought I had it all made. I was a major in the army working as the Assistant Director of the Command and General Staff College graduate program. I had a doctoral degree, a beautiful wife and a daughter, and was financially secure through my father’s wealth. I thought I could contribute more and change the world for the better. So in 1988, I left the army to run for a parliament seat in the general election. I lost while coming in as the first runner up in Bangkok Constituency 9. Anyway I remained working for the party, responsible for the development, reconstruction and administration of the Chatuchak Weekend Market. It is one of the world's largest weekend markets covering the area of 27 acres with more than 15,000 booths selling goods from every part of Thailand. I believe most of you have visited the market. Do you think you can apply what you’ve learned in Operations Research or Systems Engineering courses to the place? That will be a real challenge. You can’t manage it according to the book. The bottom line is how to manage the concerning group interests in the market, which most of the time are not for the benefit of the general public. I’ve found out that you really have to be a good actor to be a



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politician and that's not me. After 2 years in politics, I went back to the army and was one of the young staff officers attached to the Army Commander in Chief who later became the 19th PM of Thailand for a short period of time that ended in the riot of May of 1992. That was the final chapter of my military career and public service. So in life, sometime things may not come as planned. But don't worry, **life itself is a journey, an adventure, with mystery; enjoy it. Seize the moment. You will learn from doing and always remember to stay true to yourself.**

For the past 20 years, I have worked with Thai Pipe Industry, the company that my father founded in 1963. We have 6 factories located throughout Thailand. With the total production capacity of 250,000 tons/year, it's considered to be one of the biggest PVC pipe manufacturers in this region. Our policy is not only focusing on growth, but also on **corporate social responsibility**. We put high priority on contributing to education as it is the foundation of national development. Since its inception, Thai Pipe has made donations to schools as well as granted scholarships to students across Thailand. And last year, we set up Thai Pipe scholarships and a research fund at AIT for students with financial difficulties, particularly from our ASEAN neighbors.

I'd like to conclude with a quote from my favorite movie Forrest Gump, 'Life is like a box of chocolate, you never know what you're gonna get'. Life is nonlinear in nature. It is chaotic, unpredictable and sometimes counterintuitive. So be adventurous, make each moment count, and optimize your effort. Take some risks though you will fail at some points in your life. But keep pushing, don't quit, be resilient. You'll learn from your mistakes and failures. Be unique and make some change for a better world. Have a sense of duty, HONOR, and doing the right thing. And when you succeed, give back. You will find happiness in giving back.



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Don't forget AIT. Come back and visit if you have a chance. President Worsak will assure you that AIT won't forget you, especially during the fundraising campaign 😊

Finally to the SET graduates of the class of 2015, I congratulate you on your achievements and good luck on your journey into the real world. ... Thank you.

Col. Yanyong Phataralaoha, D.Eng.

22 May 2015