

To early USAWC grads: ‘You have what it takes to make decisions for toughest problems’

By Carol Kerr 04 June 2018



Army Col. Aaron Barton, Marine Lt. Col. Bret Hyla, Army Col. EJ Irvin, and Lt. Col. Mike Ponchak each received a U.S. Army War College diploma, the master's degree of Strategic Studies, and congratulations from the USAWC military and academic leaders



USAWC Commandant Maj. Gen. John Kem poses with USAWC Class of 2018 graduate Marine Lt. Col. Bret Hyla immediately following an early graduation ceremony, May 22, scheduled to address selected students early-report requirements for follow-on assignments



USAWC Dean of the School of Strategic Landpower Dr. Richard Lacquement congratulates Marine Lt. Col. Bret Hyla, one of the first graduates of the Class of 2018, May 22.

The calendar identifies June 8 for formal graduation of the full student body of the USAWC Class of 2018. However, the needs of the force changed the timeline for four students and their family, friends, faculty, seminar colleagues, and college leadership. They created a small but no less significant event to mark their accomplishments.

Army Col. Aaron Barton, Marine Lt. Col. Bret Hyla, Army Col. EJ Irvin, and Lt. Col. Mike Ponchak each received a U.S. Army War College diploma, the master's degree of Strategic Studies, and congratulations from the USAWC military and academic leadership, here in Bliss Hall May 22.

“It’s a testament to your drive and ability,” said Kem, about completion of the 10-month graduate school. He drew a parallel to 1998 USAWC



USAWC Commandant Maj. Gen. John Kem shakes hands with new graduate Army Col. Mike Ponchak who received his USAWC diploma and master's degree in Strategic Studies on May 22, 2018.

RELATED ARTICLES

08 Jun 2018

[Army War College graduation speaker Perna: Our task, purpose is in support of warfighters](#)

08 Jun 2018

[Army War College graduates honored with writing, speaking, leadership awards](#)

graduate Damir Krsticevic, Croatia's Deputy Prime Minister, who was honored earlier in the day with induction into the elite International Hall of Fame. Like Krsticevic, the new graduates succeeded in this experience of self-development. Like Krsticevic, they don't know what awaits them in their career, but they have developed skills and attributes, and are armed with the tools for future decision-making.

"In a world of increasing complexity and change – we see that every day -- this is really an opportunity to stop and reflect ... about what needs to happen, and how to drive change.

"Before the war college, you've been in the business of action, and you controlled the things in your domain in your unit at your level. Now, you're changing gears. Now you're entering the ugly world [where] you don't own the space. The decisions aren't yours alone – often they're way outside of your lane, but you still need to get things done.

"So how do you do that?" he asked, rhetorically.

"You're at the point of your career when the easy problems have been solved below you," said Kem. The reality is colonels and above, captains in the Navy and above, GS14s and 15s and above, only tackle the hardest things because if it was easy, somebody already did it, money was already there to accomplish it. They come to you when there isn't enough resources. They come to you when you have to decide between mutually bad things. ... [Options are] not feasible, acceptable and suitable to somebody, but you've got to decide ... or help your senior leader."

"I, personally, and the faculty are confident that you have what it takes," Kem concluded.

We don't see the changes in ourselves but someone who dealt with you a year or two ago will see a big leap if they were to see you in action in another year or two, he said.

"I'm amazed at the capacity you're taking back out to the Service, and I'm proud of you," said Kem, in closing a series of personal comments to the four grads.

Ponchak was recognized as a distinguished graduate.

The Army War College schedules early graduation, as needed, to formally recognize the graduation of students with immediate deployment requirements.

