

Two Memorable Commencement Speakers in Asia

Julian S. Jones
January 2024

The annual commencements held by the University of Maryland Global Campus (UMGC) overseas divisions in Asia and Europe have always been impressive affairs, not the least for the unique keynote addresses by some of their world-famous honorary-degree recipients. These notables have ranged from German chancellors to Japanese prime ministers, from renowned scholars such as Arnold Toynbee and Margaret Mead, to major public figures like Neil Armstrong and Chief Justice Earl Warren. One might wonder how adult-education programs for American service members in overseas locations attracted such “stars.” Some of the answers come from the accomplishments of the military graduates themselves who had often achieved their degrees under difficult circumstances. The speakers were happy to celebrate their success. For a few speakers, no doubt, the Heidelberg and Tokyo locations encouraged their acceptance of the honors.

During my tenure as director of UMGC’s Asian Division in the 1980s, I witnessed not only the shortest and most unusual commencement addresses in overseas history but also another that filled me with fear of a major public-relations disaster.

Emory Trospen, a long-serving, highly respected Asian Division senior administrator who knew Japan well, proposed the first honorary-degree recipient, Yoshitoshi Mori. Emory explained that Mori led the postwar revival of Japanese print art. His works were displayed in famous collections around the world, from London’s British Museum to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. I loved the Mori prints I had seen, and it didn’t take much convincing for me to agree. The university president’s office in College Park, Maryland liked the idea, too, so we proceeded to arrange a meeting with the famous artist at his Tokyo home.

It had never occurred to me that Mori spoke almost no English, but Emory had thought about that and worked out an innovative approach with Mr. Mori. Here’s how the commencement in Tokyo’s New Sanno Hotel proceeded. I introduced Mr. Mori, and he spoke a few sentences in well-practiced English, congratulating the graduates. His “speech” took less than one minute. Then he asked the graduates, their guests and the faculty to stand, turn around and face the back of the auditorium. As they did, curtains at the rear were opened and lights illuminated several of Mr. Mori’s most beautiful prints. He then said, “I hope my works speak to you,” and sat down. The applause told me that they did. Thus ended probably the shortest commencement address in history, and one no less impressive for its brevity.

Quite a different experience came when James Dickey spoke at a later Asian Division commencement. Already well known for novels like *Deliverance* and his role as US Poet Laureate, I had no worries in suggesting him as speaker. UMGC’s president immediately

approved. Dickey flew into Tokyo's Narita airport where I met him, and we drove to our offices at Yokota Air Base. He and I agreed to connect for dinner at the Officers Club after he recovered from his long flight. When I arrived, I found him in the bar surrounded by men and women listening to his war stories. I heard him say "The last time I flew over Tokyo" many times and soon learned he had been on a night fighter plane in WW II, targeting Tokyo. Many people bought him drinks, and he downed more than I thought anyone could handle. Yet he was in fine shape at dinner, a man who clearly knew how to hold his liquor. Dickey told me more about attacking Tokyo in the last year of WW II, but I didn't connect his stories with tomorrow's commencement address.

The next day we gathered in Tokyo for the commencement ceremonies. Emory Trosper organized these beautifully during my years in Asia, and that let me attend to the honorary degree recipient and special guests from the military and Japanese communities. As the platform party gathered, I did notice a hint of alcohol on Dickey's breath but assumed that was from last night's consumption. Still, it was a little worrying. After my introduction, James Dickey walked to the podium. For a moment, he said nothing, then he began "When I flew to Tokyo..." and paused. At that moment, I panicked, expecting him to continue with his tales of bombing the Japanese in the city where we had gathered for commencement. It was close to my worst moment as Asian Division director, anticipating embarrassing headlines in Japanese newspapers and criticism from our home campus in College Park if he continued as I feared. With great relief, I heard him describe his impressions of Narita airport and the city of Tokyo. No war stories! He continued with an excellent address and earned enthusiastic applause from the audience and graduates.

The honorary-degree recipients and the staff involved in overseas commencements deserve kudos for making these events memorable for Maryland's student graduates. Both Yoshitoshi Mori and James Dickey added greatly to the commencements in which they participated.