DISTINGUISHED GRADUATES
–more than over-achievers


BY KYLE DAVIDSON, AOG
PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY SARAH WRIGHT
must have been a slow news day,” Mech-
enbier joked. He added he was deeply
honored to receive the award, but he
believes that any one of the other candi-
dates could have been just as easily chosen.

To be considered as a nominee for a
Distinguished Graduate Award, one must
have made extraordinarily significant
contributions to our nation and/or their
communities. These remarkable gentle-
men definitely exceeded that requirement.

Throughout their careers, Mechenbier
and Beckel have personified the Air Force’s
core values of integrity, service and excel-
lence. Both flew more than 100 combat
missions during the war in Vietnam and
earned meritorious medals for their brav-
ery, including the Distinguished Flying
Cross, the Silver Star and the Bronze Star.

Beckel’s career has been full of vari-
ety—from combat to aerial demonstration
pilot; from numerous command and staff
positions to vice president of a specialty
chemicals company. He also served
as superintendent of the New Mexico
Military Institute and consultant to Sheik
Mohammed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi
of the United Arab Emirates. He was the
Deputy Chairman for the NATO Military
Committee and Aide-de-Camp to the
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.
Beckel was also the first grad to serve as
the Academy’s Commandant of Cadets.

Likewise, Mechenbier’s career has been
equally impressive. On his 113th combat
mission over North Vietnam, he was shot
down, captured and then imprisoned for
nearly six years by the North Vietnamese.
While captive in the infamously brutal ‘Hanoi Hilton’ prison, he developed a way to communicate with the other POWs, encouraging them to stay strong and to remember that one day they would return home. Mechenbier’s leadership within the POW camp was later featured in the 1998 documentary introduced by Tom Hanks, Return with Honor. After his repatriation, he transferred to the Air National Guard and then to the Air Force Reserve until his retirement in 2004. When he retired, he was the only former POW serving in uniform.

His final flying mission was as the aircraft commander of the celebrated ‘Hanoi Taxi,’ the same C-141 in which he and other POWs left Hanoi in 1974. The memorable mission was to repatriate the remains of two fellow service members lost in Vietnam in 1968. Looking back, he maintains he is one of the lucky ones.

“Those of us who were privileged or lucky enough to have come home from Vietnam, we owe it to those who were less fortunate to always remember and honor their commitment. And by doing that, by recognizing that, you know, that they’re still part of the fraternity. They paid, as the old trite expression goes, the ultimate sacrifice, but they and their families know that we don’t just write them off. The fact that somebody smacked into the side of the mountain in Vietnam in 1968 … that may not mean anything to most people. But to the family who knew the guy who did that, they still hurt, and they’ve got to know that we care; that we honor their service and we respect what they did.”

While Mechenbier’s final defining Air Force moment may have been about bringing airmen home, he and Beckel acknowledged that their careers have been about bringing airmen up; inspiring all in their charge to be leaders and proud of their Air Force.

“I firmly believe that because you wear a uniform you are justifiably held to a different, if not higher, standard than everybody else,” Mechenbier voiced. “There’s somebody always looking at you. You may or may not know it, but you’re either a hero to somebody, you’re an idol to somebody, you’re a mentor to somebody; I don’t care if you’re an airman first class with two stripes or a retired major general with two stars; you are always a leader or a role model to somebody.”

Both generals recognize that above all else, their careers have been about leaving a lasting legacy for airmen to follow.

“In my career I had the opportunity to fly airplanes, which I always wanted to do, but also to lead many fine men and women,” Beckel recalled. “I think any leader realizes that it is his or her responsibility to teach others or bring others over as well; to give them certain opportunities and challenges so that they can grow as you had the opportunity to grow, and mentor them and bring them up,” he added. When asked what one piece of advice he’d give new graduates and current cadets, Beckel replied, “Many times success isn’t recognized because it’s disguised as hard work. That is the key element. To be successful, you have to be motivated to chase certain goals and establish visions and so forth, but to reach those goals it takes drive and hard work to get there.”

Mechenbier said he hoped that if there is anything future airmen might take away from his Air Force career, it is that they will share the same enthusiasm and passion he had to be a part of the United States Air Force.