

2006 DISTINGUISHED GRADUATES

—more than over-achievers

THE USAF ACADEMY AND THE ASSOCIATION OF GRADUATES RECENTLY ANNOUNCED THE WINNERS OF THE AIR FORCE ACADEMY'S 2006 DISTINGUISHED GRADUATE AWARD. LT. GEN. ROBERT BECKEL, '59 AND MAJ. GEN. EDWARD MECHENBIER, '64 EARNED THIS PRESTIGIOUS HONOR FOR THEIR SINGULAR AND DISTINCTIVE CONTRIBUTIONS TO SOCIETY AND THE NATION. HONOR, DUTY, LOYALTY, INTEGRITY CAPTURE THE ESSENCE OF THESE TWO DISTINGUISHED GRADUATES. THEIR ACCOMPLISHMENTS ARE TESTIMONY TO THE VALUES THE ACADEMY INSTILLS IN ITS GRADUATES. ▷

BY **KYLE DAVIDSON, AOG**

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY **SARAH WRIGHT**





Retired Lt. Gen. Robert Beckel's career has provided him with many great opportunities. His family has been there to support him every step of the way. As an Air Force officer, Beckel says it's important to give those airmen under your command opportunities to learn and grow.



Take a walk down the Heritage Trail that flanks the Association of Graduates' Doolittle Hall, read the plaques honoring the Academy's distinguished graduates and you may feel inferior in comparison to such great achievement.

This April, coinciding with the Academy's Founders Day celebrations, the AOG and the Academy will add two more plaques to the trail as retired Lt. Gen. Robert Beckel, '59, and retired Maj. Gen. Edward Mechenbier, '64, join an illustrious group of Distinguished Graduate Award recipients.

"It's a deep honor to be considered for this special award," commented Beckel. "The Academy gave me the foundation to build upon as I traversed through my career. Needless to say, I've been very fortunate also."

For Mechenbier, news of the award came as a shock. "You just look at the other people who got it and say, 'Why me?' From a personal inspection of my career I don't think it stacks up real well with a lot of those guys who have done some pretty neat things. But at the same time to think that somebody thought enough of me to even nominate me ... It

must have been a slow news day," Mechenbier joked. He added he was deeply honored to receive the award, but he believes that any one of the other candidates 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 gentlemen definitely exceeded that requirement.

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

Beckel's career has been full of variety—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.



Retired Maj. Gen. Edward Mechenbier's career has seen its share of challenges. Throughout, he's made it a point to make the best of any situation. Even as a POW, he always stayed positive and encouraged other POWs that they would make it home. He says that the one thing he hopes airmen like his son and daughter take away from his career is that you must be passionate about the Air Force and what it is you do.

While a 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. ▣