

2010 DISTINGUISHED GRADUATES

By Lewis Carlyle



EVERY YEAR, THE US AIR FORCE ACADEMY AND THE ASSOCIATION OF GRADUATES SELECT TWO INDIVIDUALS FROM THE RANKS OF THE LONG BLUE LINE WHO HAVE GONE ABOVE AND BEYOND SERVICE TO OUR NATION. THESE DISTINGUISHED GRADUATES ARE HONORED WITH THE ACADEMY'S MOST PRESTIGIOUS AWARD FOR THEIR SERVICE TO BOTH THE MILITARY AND CIVILIAN SECTORS. THE ROSTER OF PAST DISTINGUISHED GRADUATES INCLUDES CORPORATE CEOS, FOUR-STAR GENERALS AND EVEN A MEMBER OF THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS. THIS YEAR, TWO MORE OF THE ACADEMY'S FINEST JOIN THIS ELITE GROUP OF INDIVIDUALS AS MAX JAMES, CLASS OF 1964, AND GENERAL RALPH E. "ED" EBERHART, CLASS OF 1968, ARE HONORED WITH THE 2010 DISTINGUISHED GRADUATE AWARD.

Max James | Class of 1964

During his years on active duty, Max James was assigned to the astronaut recovery program at Patrick Air Force Base, Florida. After volunteering to become a rescue helicopter pilot in Vietnam, he was shot down twice over the course of his 200 combat missions. James holds numerous commendations for courage under fire.

The chopper pilot reflects pensively on his time at the Academy and how it played an influence on his military career. He recalls, "I think that understanding the purpose of what the Academy was providing in the way of training in all fields was critical, e.g., understanding the role of the Air Force in defending this country; understanding the necessity of mental preparation and strength for courage and endurance under stress; realizing the physical strength that was our potential to perform; respecting the chain of command and how to deal with disagreement within a military organization; and trust of those with whom you were performing any demanding task."

As all graduates know, before entering the academic year at the Academy, each basic cadet must first face the dreaded Basic Cadet Training. James shares a cascade of memories which began with his boots in the mud on those critical first days. "I loved the obstacle course," he says of BCT. "I did well enough to be chosen as a candidate for the Panama Games (though I didn't ever make it there). During BCT, an upperclassman told me he couldn't wait for my hair to grow back because the 'bumps and lumps' on my shaven head were disgusting. It was hilarious when a First Classman cut his ear with the saber during 'Present Arms' command on the parade field."

With BCT behind him, James delved into the Academy at full speed. Among his favorite memories are being President of the Cadet Officers' Club, receiving one of the distinguished cadet awards (sculpture of the Eagle and Fledglings) at one of the graduation ceremonies during June Week, performing at the National

Music Underwriters Convention at the Broadmoor Resort with his folk singing quartet, the Pikesmen, and being selected as the editor of the *Talon* Magazine.

Like many cadets, James had a life-changing experience during his time at the Academy. During his senior year, when serving as Squadron Commander, he awoke one morning to find his Air Officer Commanding at his dorm room door. The AOC was accompanied by a sweat-covered, frightened looking doolie in BDUs and holding a rifle. James quickly learned that the freshman was being punished by another upperclassman who did not personally oversee the punishment. This was a gross violation of conduct, and because all parties fell under James' jurisdiction, he was removed as Squadron Commander, demoted to Cadet First Class, physically isolated from the squadron, and placed on probation. It was during this time that the Group AOC and his mentor, Lt. Col. Ashmore, told him the story of two young lieutenants—straight out of pilot training—who had been placed under his command in the China-Burma-India Theater. After flying their missions, the two pilots, eager to bolster their cockpit experience as quickly as possible, would practice combat maneuvers against each other. Recognizing the added danger within an already dangerous war, Ashmore confronted the two lieutenants. James recounts the story in Ashmore's words, "When I finally got them on the ground I chewed them out, read them up one side and down the other. I thought the problem was solved. Two missions later, we came back and these two did the same thing again. Only this time, they crashed into each other. We lost both men and both airplanes. I was immediately removed from my command as a combat officer and was shipped back to the Pentagon. That's why I have this silver clover on my shoulder rather than something more significant." And then, James recalls the lesson that would change his life forever. Ashmore had said solemnly, "Here's



Max James, '64



General Ralph E. "Ed" Eberhart, '68

my point: You are always responsible for your men, whether it's your fault or not. You can delegate authority, but you cannot delegate responsibility."

James would go on to place this lesson amid his personal code of ethics, where it still lives in every decision he makes today (furthermore, he was eventually given a second chance and placed back on Ashmore's Group Staff with full privileges). James recounts, "The phrase 'You can delegate authority, but not responsibility' has been central to all the leadership positions I have held both during my military career and through all my business and philanthropic endeavors."

After serving his tour of duty, James finished his military commitment and moved on to the civilian sector, where he quickly became a tenacious business man, even serving as the Executive Vice President of Days Inns of America. He owned 18 hotels in the western United States along with seven ReMax territories in northern California. He is also the owner of American Kiosk and North American Kiosk, a special retail operation with almost \$200 million in annual sales.

A true believer in service before self, James applies the Air Force core values to his philanthropic efforts as well. He is a generous supporter of the Boys and Girls Clubs, and is founder of Camp Soaring Eagle, which provides free medically based camping services to chronically ill children. He is also on an advisory board of St. Jude's Children's Hospital and a major supporter of the Muhammad Ali Parkinson's Research Center.

Today, James is also a proud supporter of the Academy. "My most satisfying role as an alumnus," he says, "is the role I have been honored to play in the development of the new Academy icon: The Center for Character and Leadership Development. That responsibility ranks right up there with serving as a rescue

pilot with the Jolly Green helicopter force in Vietnam."

James is excited for the future of the Academy. He, along with many others, is devoted to maintaining the high standards which gave him the tools to become successful in both the military and civilian fields. Today, he is setting an example to others by giving back to the institution which has given so much to him. "The most popular book ever written," James says thoughtfully, "states that when you give, it comes back tenfold. Philanthropy will continue to be my major work, which will require that I manage and monitor my personal assets and resources to provide the best possible outcome for service to my fellow man."

General Ralph E. "Ed" Eberhart | Class of 1968

A true leader from the very beginning, Ralph Eberhart served as Cadet Wing Commander his senior year, the highest rank available to a cadet. Reflecting back on his time at the Academy, Eberhart remembers how it shaped him as a person and as an officer. "Without question it established the foundation," he recalls sharply. "Every graduate of the Academy, whether they made a career of the military or went on to the civilian world, would have to say that their experience at the Academy paved the way for their success."

Eberhart details his experience at USAFA as challenging in many ways. "It certainly wasn't insurmountable," he clarifies, "but the Academy challenged us in ways that built character. As cadets, we developed a work ethic that was key to getting things done. Basic Cadet Training was a real eye-opener. When we fell out on the first morning the cadre played 'You Were a Big Man Yesterday' over the PA system. That song captured our plight at the time. Outside I wasn't laughing, but inside I was grinning."

While the Academy presented its challenges, the cadets still managed to make room for morale-boosting activities. "I was there during the Commandant change-over from Brig. Gen. Ted Seith to Brig. Gen. Robin Olds," Eberhart remembers, "two remarkable leaders who were so very different. Having the privilege of being the Cadet Wing Commander for both of those individuals is an experience I cherish to this day. I still remember when the spirit committee drove trucks across the terrazzo and dropped off cases of beer. The dorms emptied and the cadets went out and drank the beer. The Deputy Commandant didn't think too much of this and it almost cost me my job as the Wing Commander. But Gen. Olds thought the whole thing was funny and he had a good laugh."

After receiving his commission, Eberhart flew 300 combat missions in Southeast Asia as a forward air controller. During the span of his 36-year career, he logged more than 5,000 flying hours and finished his service as the Commander, U.S. Northern Command and NORAD. During his final command, he worked to form a stronger cohesion among our air, land and maritime defenses in the wake of the 9-11 attacks.

Looking back over the history of his storied career, Eberhart cannot help but reflect upon the changes which have shaped the Academy over the years. "The Academy has changed a lot in terms of the disciplines offered and the academic structure," he begins. "The co-educational movement is also a very positive change. I applaud all of these changes as necessary and appropriate. I don't think that an institution can afford to be stagnant or to be content with the status-quo."

Eberhart is very happy to see that while many things have changed, the core values of integrity, service and excellence have remained. In considering the most essential gifts he received from the Academy, he explains, "I think the most important is integrity. Your word is your bond. The work ethic you develop is a close second. You have to work just as hard and just as long and do whatever it takes to get the job done. The importance of the team is another factor—it is all about the team."

Today, Eberhart is the President and Chairman of Armed Forces Benefit Association (AFBA). In addition to his duties at AFBA, he also serves as director for the National Homeland Defense Foundation and is an advisory member for Segs4Vets, a grassroots program assisting wounded veterans. Having a lifetime of experience in both military and civilian sectors, this Distinguished Graduate has amassed a wealth of experience that any young graduate would be wise to listen to. "I'm very careful about providing advice these days," says Eberhart thoughtfully. "The next generation of cadets is going to be living in a world that is vastly different from the world that shaped my career. However the basics remain the same: integrity, excellence, service before self, work ethic, and that life is a team sport."

Much like Max James, Ed Eberhart is committed to supporting the Academy which shaped his career. "The USAFA Endowment and the Falcon Foundation are both important organizations that support our alma-mater. I will continue to look for ways to give back, through government service and charitable organizations." ✓

Max James and Ralph Eberhart are currently members of the USAFA Endowment Board of Directors.

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