



# CROWNING THE HERITAGE TRAIL

The Class of 1970 dedicates the  
Southeast Asia Memorial Pavilion

Written and Photographed by **Lewis Carlyle**

**T**he four T-38's roar up from the south, their long sleek fuselages like black arrows against the deep blue Colorado Sky. They pass over the Heritage Trail and break into the Missing Man formation just as they cross over the newly-dedicated Southeast Asia Memorial Pavilion. A crowd of people, flush with crimson hats which sit atop members of the Class of 1970, cheer as the jets break away, the sound of afterburners diminishing into the distance. The flag stands at half staff, turning gently in the breeze. The deep black granite wall is polished to perfection, its lustrous

surface creating a reflection of the dedication attendees. In the distance to the north, a perfect view of the Air Force Academy completes the scene.

The flyover concludes the ceremonies of this special event. Graduates and friends alike break into conversation, their memories of combat sorties over Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia coming back to light after so many years. The dedication is a tremendous success; the feeling of pride permeates the air, tangible and electric.

In the hours preceding the flyover, members of the Class of 1970 gathered to tour the newly-finished Southeast Asia Memorial

Pavilion. The structure sits at the edge of the mesa on the north end of the Heritage Trail, where it overlooks both the golf course and the Academy campus. A long black granite wall forms the eastern perimeter, its polished finish a strong rendition of the National Vietnam Memorial in Washington DC. Fourteen bronze plaques—ranging from the Class of 1959 to the Class of 1972—adorn the granite to memorialize the graduates who were killed in action during the Southeast Asia confrontation. During an emotional portion of the dedication ceremony, one graduate representative from each class saluted his corresponding plaque, calling out the number



## COMPLETING THE HERITAGE TRAIL

Your Association of Graduates is proud to preserve and promote the heritage of the Air Force Academy. The graduate community has entrusted the AOG with the stewardship of the Heritage Trail. This scenic property which surrounds Doolittle Hall is home to the Challenge Bridge, constructed by the Class of 1959, the new Southeast Asia Memorial Pavilion, courtesy of the Class of 1970, and the Kevin Shea Memorial, provided by the Class of 1989. Each of these classes have immortalized their legacy with these fine memorials. The AOG would like to encourage all other classes to do the same by helping us add to the Heritage Trail. Spaces are still available, and your Air Force history is waiting to be recorded. For more information on how you can contribute, please contact Al Burrell. 719-472-0300, Ext. 11, [alan.burrell@aogusafa.org](mailto:alan.burrell@aogusafa.org)



North view of the Southeast Asia Memorial Pavilion

of men who lost their lives serving in the war. Overall, 150 members of the graduate community died serving their nation. The Class of 1970 has plans to add yet another plaque indicating the overall sacrifices made by all fourteen classes.

Adjacent to the wall, the map room serves as a place to reflect on the past, present and future. The climate controlled indoor facility is adorned with a large bronze map of the Southeast Asian theater of operations. Sculpted by Jim Nance, Class of 1971, the map is said to be one of the world's most accurate renditions of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. "I felt like sculpting

this map was my destiny," Nance explains, "and I overwhelmingly embraced the project. As a non-combat C-141 transport pilot flying in Vietnam, I have always respected and admired the crew members who everyday put their lives on the line, and I saw this map as a once in a lifetime opportunity to show that respect in a tangible way."

Opposite the map, the floor to ceiling glass walls offer a spectacular view of the Academy and the surrounding landscape. The Front Range mountains dominate the western view as they cascade past the Cadet Chapel and give way to the tree laden mesas which

stretch away to the north east. The view is second to none, and may soon be a coveted location for many commissioning ceremonies in the future. As fundraising continues, the Class of 1970 hopes to eventually add a computer kiosk which may offer a chapterized video history of the Vietnam conflict, of the Air Force at war, and of key Academy graduates who served.

Scattered throughout the pavilion are nine granite benches, honoring each of the nine members of the Class of 1970 who gave their lives in the war effort. The blue glass wall which extends across the northern perimeter of the pavilion represents the

The map, created by sculptor Jim Nance, '71, depicts the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Southeast Asia theater of operations

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Long Blue Line. The wall is bisected by the map room, an architectural metaphor showing how the graduate community was impacted by the war.

As the sun rose over the Heritage Trail—creating a beautiful warm day for the dedication ceremony—several key speakers stepped forth to impart their humble offerings to the attending graduates. President and CEO of the AOG, William ‘T’ Thompson, ’73, kicked off the ceremony with a warm welcome. “For our guests, it is a pleasure to host you this morning. For our graduates, it is a pleasure to welcome you back home. I’d like to thank the Class of 1970 for their vision and their fortitude

in doing what was necessary to complete this project and to commit this gift to the Academy and to the graduate community. This memorial pavilion recognizes the contributions of all our graduates in the Southeast Asia conflict.”

Thompson concluded by offering a philosophical stance on the importance of time, how it should be cherished among friends and never squandered. “As we get older, we realize that *time* is the most precious commodity we have. You can make more money and you can always go out and buy more stuff; but the one thing that nobody can do—the great equalizer—you cannot buy more time.”

In closing, the AOG President handed the podium over to Gary Dahlen, class giving chairman for the Class of 1970. In his opening remarks Dahlen’s speech reflected on the importance of remembering fallen comrades, and of honoring the sacrifices graduates have made in service to the nation. “Southeast Asia was the first major conflict in which our graduates participated,” Dahlen reminded the crowd somberly. “Now, today is the time to honor them. Those of you who were here at the 35<sup>th</sup> reunion, we dedicated the replica memorial wall at the head of the Heritage Trail. Our class has a history of giving to the AOG and to the Academy.

During our 35<sup>th</sup> reunion, we made a commitment to design, build and dedicate a memorial to honor those graduates who served and died in the Vietnam War.”

USAFA Superintendent, Lt. Gen. Michael Gould, '76, followed Dahlen with an emotional speech to close the ceremony. “We’ve watched the pavilion go up over the past year,” Gould recalled, “and to see it take shape and finally be complete and to have the Class of 1970 here to dedicate it is truly special. What a gorgeous place—the setting, the design, everything—hats off to the Class of 1970!”

Gould went on to describe a trinity of purposes the memorial pavilion would serve. “As we’ve seen today,” he continued, “it will be a lasting tribute to the graduates who have fallen in the Southeast Asia war. It will also be a symbol, forever, of the gratitude of the Class of 1970, for all those graduates who have died in combat. And perhaps most important, it will be a reminder to our cadets of those who came before them, and why the cadets are here to serve in the future.”

The crowd listened intently as the Superintendent bestowed his final message. “I thank the Class of 1970, thank all the graduates who have had this vision, and of course the Association of Graduates and those who have generously given to make this a reality. Thank you all for being here for your reunion, and please, take the opportunity to give as much as you can to those cadets; because they’re trying to grow up to be just like you.” The Superintendent’s final words were drowned in a din of applause as all of the guests celebrated the accomplishments of the Class of 1970.

It is with great pride that the Association of Graduates undertakes the stewardship of the Southeast Asia Memorial Pavilion. Thanks to the generous donations of the graduate community, a generation of Air Force Academy graduates will be immortalized for their service, their bravery and their sacrifice. The latest addition to the Academy’s colored heritage, the Southeast Asia Memorial Pavilion stands as a reminder that the Long Blue Line lives to protect the nation, stand against tyranny, and to ensure freedom. ❑

## ARTISTIC TOUCHES: CREATING THE BRONZE MAP

By Douglas Clark

Standing as the centerpiece for the memorial pavilion’s map room, the bronze map depicts the Southeast Asia theater of operations with precise detail. Jim Nance, '71, created the topography by blending art and science. Using digital elevation measurements from NASA, he used a computer numeric controlled mill to produce the a basic landform in foam. Over that, he hand-sculpted every mountain, valley, shoreline and island in clay. It took four months of overtime sculpting to finish the clay, but when it was completed Nance had created a true work of art; something never before achieved by any artist. Adding a touch of humanity to the experience, Nance turned to 500 year-old nautical charts, which inspired the compass rose and sea monster at the bottom of the map. The compass rose is based on a F-105 Republic Thunder Chief, affectionately called the “Thud.” The Dragon was inspired by “Ha Long” which in Vietnamese means “dragon descending from heaven.” Ha Long is revered by the people as the bringer of rain and of Yang and is present on the US armed services Vietnam service medal.

Nance also decided to embed a secret message into the map, which he calls the Baldacci Code. The Class of 1970 has already extended a challenge to reward the squadron of the first cadet who can break the code.

After months of research, the artist realized that the famous Ho Chi Minh Trail was not a trail at all, but an elaborate network of rabbit warrens, paths, roads, and hiding places. With considerable help from outside sources, he was eventually able to piece together one of the most comprehensive maps of the trail in existence. The network is painted as a fine white line on the finished sculpture.

For the color patina, Nance again relied on ancient maps for inspiration to create a weathered look to give the map more character. Satellite photos were his palette. For the ocean, Nance sculpted a texture to the water and applied a complicated multi layered patina; the result is like looking into the real ocean. The dark purple of deep water gradually lightens through shades of blue until the shoreline, complete with sculpted waves, appears in a light blue green.

Visit Jim Nance’s website at [www.JamesNanceSculpture.com](http://www.JamesNanceSculpture.com)

