

Remarks to the 40th Reunion Dinner
Air Force Academy Class of 1964

Thank you, Pat. Before I begin my remarks, Jim Shaw asked me to make a short announcement. Lurking will begin at 2200 hours followed by a scavenger hunt in the tunnels and the train for Soldier's Field will leave at midnight.

I've been thinking about all of you tonight; and though we're a little older and little grayer, some of us grayer than others, I can still remember a group of excited teenagers lining up at the base of the ramp, saying their good-byes, and if you were like me, very apprehensive. Most of us were away from home for the first time. We came from small towns and big cities. Big families and small ones. We were the sons of farmers and factory workers; lawyers and teachers. Some of us were athletes; some scholars; some neither. We were as different as we could be, but we shared something very important: our lives from that day forward, June 27, 1960, would be shaped by a set of values that would become the foundation of everything we would do, and achieve, in the years ahead.

It was a turning point for each of us because we were about to become part of something quite extraordinary; a brotherhood of honor the likes of which few of us, if any, would find in our lives again. The United States Air

Force Academy, and our sister academies, are like no other institutions in the world.

They train men and women of honor who are willing to commit their lives in the defense of this country. That's what it's all about.

I've had the opportunity to do a lot of things in my life and had a lot of experiences in the business world, but the four years that I spent at the Academy were the most remarkable and the most valuable. It started with that first summer of Basic Cadet Training. Has anyone in the room ever forgotten his least favorite red tag or, hell week, or ravenous hunger that made SOS and grits look good?

My most memorable moments came the first day of wrestling and boxing. I'd never wrestled in my life. I didn't have a clue what I was supposed to do. So, who do I draw for my first match? Terry Isakson. I stood there like a gentleman in the middle of the mat, and suddenly he gets all hunkered down like some kind of a gorilla and starts circling me. In North Dakota, where I grew up, something like that starts circling you, you get the rifle from the pickup and shoot it, but that option wasn't available. I can only tell you what ensued wasn't pretty. After recovering from that life threatening event, I was introduced to my first day of boxing. They didn't teach boxing in North Dakota either. I was the unluckiest s.o.b. in our

class. In my first match I drew Raleigh Garcia. I heard someone outside the ring say something about a Golden Gloves champion. That didn't mean much to me because I wasn't into boxing, but it didn't sound good. Shortly thereafter the lights went out.

Well that was a tough way to end my summer, but we all learned it was going to be a tougher year. By Labor Day, we were ready for parents' weekend. I told my parents to meet me on the North Road along side Vandenberg Hall at dawn on Saturday morning so I could be away from the place as long as possible. I did the same thing Sunday and Monday.

Monday night, I was standing at the Bulletin Board feeling a bit sad that parent's weekend was over when my squadron commander walked up. He welcomed me back to the Squadron, and said they had all really missed me at reveille Saturday, Sunday and Monday. I thanked him for his concern and told him I had been on vacation with my parents. That was not the right answer. Shortly thereafter I received a visitation from our AOC "press on" Smith. After a weighty chat about military discipline and rules and regulations I was given the opportunity to set our class record for consecutive confinements in the first semester of our 4th class year. I believe that record after 44 years still stands. I was released from confinement shortly before the Christmas break.

But looking back, it may have been the best thing that could have happened to me. I didn't have anything else to do but study. And when I had finally done my time, my grades were in good shape, which was important, because I clearly had no future in boxing or wrestling.

I learned a lot about myself the following four years, but I learned even more about fundamental values that paid off the rest of my life. We all did.

We learned about service before self, and ensuring excellence in all we do. We came to understand duty – its demands and its rewards, and a special responsibility to provide leadership for our generation.

But perhaps, most of all, we learned the meaning of integrity and honor. The honor code meant everything to us. You all remember it well. "We will not lie, steal or cheat nor tolerate among us anyone who does." Those weren't just words. They were a code to live by....over the next four years and over the course of a lifetime. Those fourteen words are integral to the kind of men we became – as husbands, members of families and communities; and, particularly, as leaders in our chosen professions.

The academy taught us that leadership simply cannot exist in the absence of character. That if you lose your integrity, if you violate your honor, you simply have nothing left with which to lead.

In 1955, General Nathan Twining told the first cadets, at the Air Force Academy dedication that, “Everybody will be looking over your shoulder, and they will be critical, for they have a right to expect great things.”

As Academy graduates, much has been expected of us, and the Class of 1964 has done its duty, met its responsibilities, and achieved extraordinary success, personally and professionally, and did it with honor. And that was my problem in writing these remarks.

There are so many in this class who could be singled out for their achievements over the years, but time simply doesn't permit that.

But there are some, who stand out for their sacrifice and courage, who best represent the values we learned that first summer in the foothills of the Rockies.

All of us knew Karl Richter. He was the quintessential fighter pilot... a big, tough looking kid. Karl wasn't afraid of anything... not the kind of guy you'd want to run into on the other side of a fight. You took one look at him and you knew that he was going to be one hell of a fighter pilot—and he was.

Not long after we graduated, Karl was in North Viet Nam flying F105's with the 388th Tactical fighter Wing at Korat Air Force Base in Thailand. This was incredibly dangerous duty. Forty-three percent of pilots in this

wing were shot down before finishing 100 missions.

Karl became the youngest pilot to down a Mig, and on October 13, 1967, he completed his 100th mission. But Karl turned down a trip home and volunteered to fly another 100 missions. When someone asked him about the risk, he just shrugged it off. He said he was “too mean to be shot down.” Sounds like Karl, doesn’t it?

On July 28, 1967, Karl Richter was on his 198th mission. He dove at a bridge and was hit by flak. Karl was able to bail out and was rescued, but his injuries were too severe. A hero of our class died that day on his way back to base.

On the statue of Karl at The Air University, it says, “Whom shall we send and who will go for us? Here I am. Send me.”

But Karl wasn’t the only one sent. Many from this class served with great distinction in that difficult war and some served under nearly inhuman circumstances. [Ten] members of our class suffered terribly as POW’s – for years, and I want to recognize their courage, their commitment to duty, but most of all their unwillingness despite torture, hunger and pain to give up the one thing the North Vietnamese wanted – their honor.

When captured, they were marched, wounded and bleeding, from village to village where they were stoned and spit upon. They lived in 7 by

7 foot concrete cells with a wooden plank for a bed. Spent 23 hours and 45 minutes a day in solitary confinement.

They were tortured in what they called the “Knobby Torture Room” with racks up above, meat hooks hanging from the ceiling, and old medieval irons, manacles and stocks. Their arms were locked up with rope, their wrists tied so tightly it cut off circulation as their shoulders dislocated.

They were beaten and starved. We can only wonder how they survived. Tom McNish credits that first year at the Academy.

He said it was the hazing, the harassment, and the hard training to teach us to think and react in a controlled manner that made it easier to endure the most difficult moments. And they had one other advantage. They had each other. They were a band of brothers.

Because they were held in solitary, they devised a tap code. Ron Bliss said sometimes the Hanoi Hilton sounded like “a den of runaway woodpeckers” as they tapped on the walls carrying on conversations in code. But that wasn’t all.

They swept in code. They shoveled in code and flashed pans across halls in code. In truth, the bonds that held them tightest were those of the brotherhood they formed in those dank, dark cells.

Despite demands from the North Vietnamese for written confessions to use as propaganda, the brotherhood held firm. One POW explained their refusal to cooperate when he said afterward, "The war was still on. The enemy was still the enemy, and our job was either to defeat him, or make his victory as difficult as possible." A National politician comes to mind who could have learned from that courageous statement.

So, they disciplined themselves. They set aside time for exercise. Time for prayer. Time for mental games to keep their minds sharp. They memorized the names of their fellow prisoners. And every Sunday morning, they would each stand up alone in their cells, but together, they would all say the Lord's Prayer and then recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

They called themselves the 4th Allied POW wing and their motto was "return with honor." And they did.

Last week I visited a military cemetery where my uncle, a World War II and Korean War veteran, is buried. I read a bronze plaque near the grave sites and thought of our ten classmates. The words on that plaque say it all.

"They served with honor

Not for self or glory

Not for riches or renown

But for country.”

Ron Bliss—seven years in captivity

Tom Browning—seven years

Kevin McManus—six years

Tom McNish—seven years

Ed Mechanbier—six years

Martin Neuens—seven years

James Shively—six years

Guy Gruters—six years

Don Spoon—six years

LeRoy Stutz—seven years

Please stand and let us honor you. You were brothers then as you are brothers now. The values and the camaraderie that bonded our class on that summer day in 1960, that helped these men survive long years of captivity, that helped all of us do our duty in the service and in the years after, endure today -- strong and true.

That brotherhood of honor must never change and must always form the backbone of the long blue line across time—forever.

Tonight, we have come home. We have come back across the years to renew old friendships and strengthen the bond between us. But, perhaps even more important, these few days remind us once more of the ideals, the fundamental values of honor, integrity, service, duty, and excellence that we pledged ourselves to, so long ago.

Forty years have come and gone, and tonight we can take pride in the remarkable story this class has written. Sixteen of our comrades gave the ultimate sacrifice in Viet Nam. Ten more gave 65 years of their lives as POW's. Our class has produced 31 general officers and received an Air Force Cross and 34 Silver Stars.

We can boast of an Ace and an astronaut. And in the private arena, our class has produced 31 CEO's, Presidents, and Vice Presidents who have become leaders in their industries. We are husbands, fathers and grandfathers, and so many of you lead efforts to improve your communities, and the lives of those in them, to better educate our children, to advance the cause of medical research and to support so many other charitable causes.

In this you have heeded Winston Churchill's advice, "*We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give.*"

The future of this country has been shaped by our dreams and our

visions, and I am proud to claim membership in the class of 1964, proud to have lived and learned and served with each of you.

President Reagan modestly summed up the accomplishments of his presidency in his farewell address from the Oval Office, and I think his words might apply to this class as well.

“Not bad. Not bad at all.”

Thank you all very much.