

# GENERAL WILLIAM LOONEY III, CLASS OF 1972 DISTINGUISHED GRADUATE

# 2013



“EAGLE TWO-ZERO THIS IS THE TOWER. BE ADVISED, YOUR LEFT WHEEL JUST CAME OFF DURING TAKEOFF.”

THE COCKPIT OF THE F-15 IS FILLED WITH BEWILDERMENT AS MAJ. BILL LOONEY '72 AND HIS FLIGHT CHECK PILOT MAJ. SKIP BENNET '70 PROCESS THE CONTROLLER'S REPORT. A MISSING WHEEL? ABSURD. THIS HAD TO BE A MISTAKE. THE TOWER CREW MUST BE HAVING A LAUGH. LOONEY AND BENNET KEEP THE GEAR DOWN AND MAKE A LOW SPEED PASS OVER ROYAL AIR FORCE BENTWATERS AIRFIELD FOR VISUAL CONFIRMATION. “ROGER THAT EAGLE,” SAYS THE TOWER. “YOUR LEFT GEAR IS MISSING ITS WHEEL.”

The year is 1985 and Maj. Looney had just reported to his new duty station at Bitburg Air Base in West Germany. In the 29 years since, Looney has pinned on four stars and seen just about everything the Air Force could dish out—looking back on the situation, he counts the Eagle with the missing wheel among his most memorable experiences. “I'd flown the Eagle for almost four years when I was at Langley,” says Looney. ▶

“Later, when I was reassigned to Europe I’d been out of the cockpit for about three years. During my re-orientation ride, a fellow grad named Skip Bennet ’70 was my back seat instructor during my check flight. We flew from Germany to England to do touch and goes on some of the British airfields just to get acquainted with the area. After taking off from Bentwaters we got a call from the tower informing us that we had lost a wheel. In the cockpit, Skip and I are thinking *that’s impossible.*”

After the low speed pass, the tower confirms without a doubt that the Eagle had in fact lost a wheel upon takeoff.

“Needless to say,” Looney recalls, “The cockpit went dead silent. The F-15 had never lost a wheel to our knowledge. There were no procedures on how to land the airplane. This was a first. We had a nose gear and a right main wheel. The left gear was nothing but a stub.”

Looney took the aircraft up for a mid-air refueling, buying them time to have a conference call with the engineers back at McDonald Douglas. They were treading on uncharted territory and the possibility of punching out became a serious consideration. However, after careful deliberation, the two Academy graduates determined that they could bring the fighter down without having to eject.

Looney recalls making a pass over the airfield to case out the location of the arrestment barriers beyond the landing strip. “We made a pass to get a better feeling for the lay of the land before we put this thing down and, lo and behold, we see hundreds of people lined up to watch us try and land this jet with only two wheels! I guess the word went out that there’s an Eagle without a wheel and these guys are just crazy enough to try and land this thing. It was kind of a sobering event, as if everyone had come out to a NASCAR race to see a crash.”

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Miraculously, the two graduates were able to land the airplane safely. The Eagle sustained damage to the left wing and suffered a crumpled nose gear, but came to a stop on the tarmac with only two wheels. Both pilots walked away uninjured, checking off yet another notable first in the history of Academy aviation. “It was my first flight back in the F-15,” recounts Looney. “After we got out of the cockpit I remember being in such anguish over having wrecked that airplane.”

Crash investigators later discovered that the locking nuts on the left wheel had been installed backwards, causing them to loosen slightly with every rotation. It was only a matter of time before the wheel came off. “That’s an incident I will always remember,” recalls Looney. After all, it’s not every day that you walk away from a crash landing in a jet fighter. Only a handful of officers could have pulled off such a stunt, which takes our story back to 1967, when an ambitious young man set his sights on the Air Force Academy.

“The most difficult challenge I had to overcome was actually getting into the Academy,” says Looney candidly. “I grew up in an Air Force family. My father was a career officer who flew fighters and, like most young men, I idolized my dad. He was my hero. I saw how much he enjoyed what he did as a pilot so, from an early age, I decided that was what I wanted to do.”

After high school, Looney applied for the Academy, waiting eagerly to begin his journey to the cockpit. “Thank you for your interest in the United States Air Force Academy,” Looney recalls of the Academy’s response to his first attempt to get an appointment, “but unfortunately you did not qualify for admission this year. I can very candidly say that this was a crushing blow. I was considering my options among civilian colleges when I got a letter from the Falcon Foundation, offering me a scholarship to attend the Millard Prep School in Oregon. My SAT scores were lacking, and this was my chance to try again. Fortunately, I was successful the second time around and I entered the Academy in June of 1968 with the Class of 1972. Just getting in was my all time biggest challenge.”

Looney recounts a slew of memorable experiences during his first days at the Academy, including several from BCT. “Everybody in the group was a big somebody in high school,” he says. “We had national merit scholars and all-state athletes, kids of all shapes and sizes—long hair, different clothing—by the end of the day we all looked the same. We had no hair, none of our uniforms fit properly, and we were all walking around in a daze because we were completely overwhelmed by what was happening to us. I remember that first night as

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they played taps. As the lights went out I’m certain that every last one of us was thinking to ourselves, *what in the hell have I done?*”

Looney remembers those first days as a rude awakening. Yet, despite the hardships, he began building powerful bonds among his fellow doolies. “One of my most memorable experiences came toward the end of basic training,” Looney says. “All summer long we had been told that we were not allowed to receive any packages from home until the end of BCT. My mother, bless her heart, despite my warnings, sent me a huge box of chocolates two days before the end of basic. At the time, we were required to turn all packages over to the upperclassmen. So I gave the package to my element sergeant and went back to my room. Not five minutes later I was summoned by two second-classmen who proceeded to abuse me with pushups for the next twenty minutes for my brazen disregard of the no-package rule. My element sergeant was Harold Strittmatter ’70 (we ended up as wing commanders together 20 years later). Harry and his roommate, C2C Greg Popovich ’70—Distinguished Graduate and coach of the San Antonio Spurs—proceeded to eat my entire box of chocolates while I did pushups on the dorm room floor.”

Over 46 years have elapsed since the fateful chocolate caper, with Looney and Popovich remaining good friends in their home town of San Antonio (to this day, Pop denies taking part in the abuse and grand larceny).

At the Academy, Looney went on to be selected as Cadet Wing Sergeant Major, First Basic Cadet Training Commander, and Cadet Wing Commander during his junior and senior years at the Academy. After graduation, his aptitude for command continued into his military service.

During his career, General Looney commanded a flight, a fighter squadron, two fighter wings, a joint task force, an air expeditionary force, a military college, a warfare center, a numbered air force, a combatant component command, two acquisition centers, and a major command. During his 36 year career, he served on the Air Staff, the

European Command Staff, and the Joint Staff and logged more than 4,000 hours in a number of aircraft, with more than 2500 hours, including 62 combat hours, in the F-15 Eagle.

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After retiring from service, Gen. Looney became the President of Integration Innovation, Incorporated (i3), a highly successful defense services company with U.S. and international clients. He also is a national security consultant to many Fortune 500 companies, and sits on a number of corporate boards. Additionally, he serves as a Governing Trustee for The Falcon Foundation—the very institution which gave him a second chance at the Academy. He holds the distinction of being the first Academy Falcon Scholar to reach the four star rank.

“Be positive,” Looney advises cadets today. “The glass is always half full and many times it’s even overflowing. That’s the approach you have to take in life. When you approach the mission, your people and your challenges with that kind of an outlook then you’re already on your way to success. Rely on all those wonderful lessons you learned at the Academy. It’s not about you, it’s all about the mission and the airmen and their families who carry out that mission. It’s the team that succeeds. You may not be the one who scores the touchdown, but that’s not important. What’s important is that the team scores. One of the greatest values to embrace throughout your life is the concept of Service Before Self. You will lead a great life in this United States Air Force. It’s not a job, it’s an exciting, challenging adventure that is a true calling.”