

# George Lee Butler

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Class of 1961



DISPLAYED ON THE WALLS of Gen. (Ret.) George Lee Butler's garage are plaques, honors and memorabilia from a life well lived. His wife, Dorene, calls it the "Butler Museum."

But it's not the only room in the Laguna Beach, California, home dedicated to reminders of Butler's path from USAFA cadet to eventual four-star general responsible for the nation's nuclear arsenal.

On shelves in the family room are displayed a progression of headgear worn by Butler '61 throughout his military career — his dress whites cadet hat, his pilot helmet and his Air Force officer's hat from his years of career advancement.

In the living room, an impressive Oriental display cabinet protects a delicate piece of glassware given the Butlers by former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev.

Elsewhere in the house, family pictures, historic artifacts, military medals and books tracing the history of our nation's military are on full display.

It's interesting to note that the collection of memorabilia may never have been assembled — including the medal Gen. Butler is about to receive as a 2016 Distinguished Graduate of USAFA — if it were not for the investment of just two bits 50 years ago.

## **Opportunity Knocks**

The son of a career Army soldier, Butler was used to the nomadic lifestyle of a military brat. Whenever his father was deployed overseas, including during World War II and Korea, the Butlers would retreat to the small town of Oakland, Mississippi, to live with relatives.

Educational and athletic opportunities in the rural community were sparse, as Butler grappled with what his future would hold. But one day, a visit to the town's Post Office would imprint on his brain a thought that would later change his life. Right next to the FBI's Most Wanted list was a new poster.

"It was a big, beautiful white poster with someone in a blue uniform, saluting the American flag ... beyond which four airplanes were passing. And it said 'Welcome to the United States Air Force Academy.'" Butler didn't give the poster much thought at the time.

In a stroke of luck, Butler's father returned to the States and was assigned to the Pentagon as Butler was readying for his senior year in high school. Suddenly, he found himself at one of the best public high schools in the nation.

"I went from a class of 21 to a class of 721," he laughs.

Butler enrolled in numerous advanced classes, quickly improving his academic standing. He would end up ranking fourth in his class upon graduation — one spot short of being recognized as a valedictorian.



**“I was at 110, which I had weighed for a very long time.” The minimum weight for a cadet candidate, it turned out, was 115 pounds. The physician deemed Butler “unqualified” and threw his folder in the discard pile.**

Butler had also been elected treasurer of the school's student council, and he fared well as the coxswain on the school's championship rowing team. His extracurricular success and his academic prowess would pay dividends as he began to think about college.

Because his family had limited financial resources to pay for college, Butler would recall the Post Office poster he had seen some months earlier. He informed his father that he wanted to apply to the Air Force Academy, but Butler's father said there was no such place. “I said I was pretty sure there was an Air Force Academy now,” Butler recalls. “He checked and there was.”

Butler's father filled out the application for his son's congressional appointment, and some weeks later the acceptance letter would arrive. Butler was directed to attend a week of testing at a nearby military base.

### **Milk Money**

When Butler arrived on a Monday, he was put through a battery of tests to see if he was physically, academically and mentally prepared to become a cadet. He encountered no issues during the first two days of testing — until he stepped on the scale.

“I was at 110, which I had weighed for a very long time,” Butler reports. The minimum weight for a cadet candidate of that height, it turns out, was 115 pounds. The physician deemed Butler “unqualified” and threw his folder in the discard pile.

In a panic, Butler pleaded to have until Friday to get his weight up. “He agreed to this ridiculous request,” Butler says.

He contacted his father, who put him in contact with the base mess sergeant. The sergeant concocted a plan to feed Butler every waking moment over the next few days.

“By Friday morning I weighed 115 pounds,” he recalls. “I did not want to move.”

As he arrived at the test site, Butler realized that he still had one more physical test to complete prior to his weigh-in. Two hours later, he had dropped two pounds.

“You still don't meet the standard. Disqualified,” the doctor proclaimed.

As Butler sat in the waiting area, distraught over the turn of events, a clerk asked what the problem was. When he heard Butler's story, the airman gave the cadet prospect a quarter and told him to walk down the hall and buy a quart of chocolate milk.

“I'm thinking, ‘my life is ending and I'm buying chocolate milk for this young fellow,’” he says. “I brought it back and handed it to him. He said the milk wasn't for him, it was for me.”

The weight of a quart of milk is two pounds exactly. Butler chugged the contents of the carton and the clerk asked for one more weigh-in. Butler registered at exactly 115.

“The doctor pulled my folder out of the discards for the third time and marked qualified,” Butler says with a smile.

One regret Butler has to this day is he failed to catch the name of the helpful airman who gave him the quarter.

“He determined the course of my life,” Butler says. “He is someone whom I owe an enormous amount for taking that kind of merciful act on my behalf.”

### **Lowry Beginnings**

In 1957, Butler arrived at Lowry Air Force Base in Denver to begin his Academy training. He and his classmates were met by kindly sergeants who made sure each cadet candidate had the uniforms and gear they needed.

Then Monday morning came, Butler remembers, and upperclassmen took over the training of the cadet candidates.

“About that point, the world as we knew it ended,” Butler notes. “It's hard to remember exactly what happened after that. My mind kind of went blank. I do remember the panic that some of my classmates were sent into.”

Because Butler was the smallest person in the Class of 1961, it didn't take long for him to become a mark for several upperclassmen.

“Three upperclassmen decided I was not fit material for the Air Force and decided they would drive me out,” he recounts. “By the end of the month of September, I was within one demerit of mandatory rejection.”

Thankfully, Butler was recruited for the Falcon gymnastics team and he was proving himself as an accomplished trampolinist. One day, during practice, he injured himself while attempting a difficult move.

“I hit my eye with my knee and I kind of knocked myself out,” he says. “I broke my eye open and I was rushed off to the hospital.”

Despite the injury, Butler promptly returned the next day to successfully master his routine.

“That night at dinner, the hazing stopped. There was nothing,” Butler says. “I ate a meal without interruption for the first time at the Air Force Academy.” ▶

Apparently, Butler's squadron commander appreciated the Doolie's "never quit" attitude and called off the attack dogs.

### Learning Leadership

Butler's remaining cadet years were productive and eventful. He would do well academically and athletically, and he would even go on to complete Army jump school for good measure.

During his senior year, Butler was chosen squadron commander for Cadet Squadron 13. When selected for the duty, Butler told his air officer commanding that his goal was to lead the squadronmates to Honor Squadron status.

It was Butler's first chance to unveil his unconventional leadership approach of treating people "with dignity and respect, and to always do and say the right thing."

Butler says he was committed to treating his team well, including the fourth-classmen, and inspire all to tackle their collective mission with excellence.

"I watched classmates being forced out of the Academy for posterous reasons . . . reasons that were someone else's twisted vision of what an Academy graduate should be, or in some cases just for fun and games," he says. "That was just so unacceptable to me."

Not everyone appreciated Butler's approach, so he would ask to re-assign cadets who hung onto the culture of hazing that existed throughout the Academy.

"Everybody eventually bought into it," he recalls. "I was so proud of my classmates who signed up for this, too."

By the end of the first semester, 13th Squadron had ascended to the top of the rankings. Butler's leadership style had been so impressive that he stayed on as squadron commander for an additional semester.

"By the age of 20 or 21, I now had an outlook on life," he says. "I had an outlook on personal relations that involved responsibility, hierarchy and subordination to higher order. And, most importantly, a responsibility to the mission."

### Early Career

Butler would graduate 12th in his class of 221 Academy cadets. That year, 11 graduates were recognized as distinguished graduates.

"So I was the first of the non-distinguished graduates in my class," he laughs. "At that point, my opportunities to lead were cut to zero for the next 20 years. I didn't have the term commander after my name until I took command of my first B-52 wing. That had been my goal my entire AF career . . . I wanted to be in the lead again."

After he was commissioned, Butler would head to Williams Air Force Base for pilot training where he finished first in his class. He later became an instructor pilot as the Cuban Missile Crisis put the nation on edge.

Butler survived one major scare while training young pilots. A mechanical failure forced him and the student pilot to eject moments before the airplane crashed. Despite being well below the minimum altitude for ejection, Butler survived with just a knick on his knee.

In 1964, Butler was chosen for the prestigious Olmstead Scholar program and studied international relations at the Institute of Political Science in Paris for two years.

Butler next spent a year (1968-69) in Vietnam, serving two assignments. He flew 50 combat missions in F-4s and survived a refueling incident that forced his backseater and him to eject over the South China Sea. He then served as aide to the commander

of the 7th Air Force, Gen. George S. Brown, who would later become chief of staff of the Air Force.

"We had a relationship that would turn out to be very advantageous long term," Butler says.

When he returned to the States, Butler would become an instructor with the Political Science Department at USAFA. During his time at the Academy, he would conduct an honor scandal investigation and would write a report to help restore integrity and excellence to the institution. He also would become involved in helping grow the new Association of Graduates — at the time a fledgling organization serving the graduates of his alma mater.

After later serving for six months in the executive office of the U.S. president, Butler would head to the next stage of his storied career.

"One unique aspect of the way my career proceeded was how varied my various missions were," Butler notes.

### In Command

Butler would leave the Academy to become the chief pilot with a C-141 squadron.

From 1969 to 1977, Butler was promoted below the zone to major, lieutenant colonel and colonel. By the end of that period, he was an action officer on the Air Staff with major responsibilities for strategy, policy, plans, weapons system acquisition and Congressional interaction.

"I became the chief fire-putter-outer," Butler explains. "It's a crisis . . . send Butler. Write the report and let's get on with the next one. At the end of that tour, I was almost a physical mess. I was so worn out."

When approached about his next tour, Butler told superiors that he wanted an assignment within Strategic Air Command. SAC rarely brought in outsiders to lead, but Butler was determined. He had a little help from Gen. George S. Brown to give him an opportunity at a SAC job.

His first assignment was as a B-52 wing deputy commander for operations. It was his first opportunity to lead in two decades, and he brought his "treat them with dignity and respect" philosophy with him. He next directed the Air Force Chief of Staff's staff group before returning to SAC to command a B-52 and then a B-1 wing.

Following promotion to brigadier general, he became SAC Inspector General. When he was promoted to major general, Butler would return to the Air Staff for a third tour, before moving on to the Joint Staff. As a three-star J5, he worked closely with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Colin Powell, to help plan for significant changes in military strategy as the end of the Cold War approached.

"We worked together extremely well," Butler says of Powell. "We both had exactly the same vision of where history was taking us."

### Nuclear Deterrence

As a key component of his strategy for change, Butler envisioned a re-imagining of Strategic Air Command. When he was promoted to four stars and was assigned as commander of SAC, Butler was in a position to act.



Pictured in 1983, George Lee Butler was then commander of the 320th Bomb Wing at Mather AFB.

“It was like giving a kid an ice cream cone on a hot summer’s day,” Butler recalls. “You talk about being prepared for a job. There was nothing I didn’t know. I knew the nuclear mission. I had this.”

He and his team worked to stand down the organization and replace it with the new United States Strategic Command. The birth of STRATCOM also spawned other changes within the Air Force, leading to the creation of Air Mobility Command and Air Combat Command.

“The whole Air Force had been affected by this proposal,” Butler says.

As STRATCOM ramped up, Butler started laying the groundwork for discussions about nuclear disarmament in a post-Cold War world. He would invite his Soviet counterparts to Omaha to discuss such matters over dinner.

Once STRATCOM was on stable footing, Butler retired and allowed his Navy deputy to step into the top role.

“I’d done everything that I could do ... to give some initial feet to the race ahead,” he admits. “I felt good about what I had contributed. I was going into retirement warmhearted and optimistic about getting on with the reduction of nuclear arsenals.”

### Speaking Out

Butler had hoped that nuclear arms reduction would quickly occur as the Cold War ended, but he wasn’t satisfied with the speed of the change.

He and his wife, Dorene, formed the Second Chance Foundation to carry forth the message that nuclear arms reduction was necessary for the future of the planet.

As a civilian, Butler went on to become president of Kiewit Energy Group in Omaha, Nebraska. But he also would continue to advocate for global arms control efforts.



Soviet Gen. Igor Sergeev (left) meets with Gen. George Lee Butler (right) meet at Offutt AFB to discuss nuclear deterrence.

“I was going to try and help that conversation along,” he notes. “We (the U.S. and Russia) had a responsibility, since we owned over 90 percent of all nuclear warheads ever made.”

Butler would eventually meet and work with Mikhail Gorbachev on their similar goals of disarmament of the super powers.

To this day, Butler enjoys collaborating with other advocates for responsible nuclear disarmament.

“Young people are beginning to see what this is all about,” he says. “But it (nuclear disarmament) is hardly on the radar anymore. It’s all about climate change.”

### Gratitude

After finishing just outside of the “distinguished” category at his high school and USAFA graduations, Butler says he’s grateful for being named a 2016 Distinguished Graduate by the Association of Graduates and the Academy.

“Someone has finally had a conversation that I did spend my life doing quasi-notable things,” he smiles. “It gives me a great deal of pleasure to have the Academy say back to me, ‘We think you’re great.’”

Butler specifically thanked his wife, whom he met at a gymnastics meet in California while he was a cadet, for her love and support through the years.

And he acknowledges the leadership philosophy that he developed as a cadet squadron commander at USAFA — and the quarter investment by an unknown airman — for blazing the path that would lead to career opportunities that surprised him at every turn. 