

Gen. (Ret.)

Charles R. Holland

Class of 1968

AS A CHILD GROWING UP in the mountains of West Virginia, Gen. (Ret.) Charles R. Holland '68 witnessed the harsh realities of rural life.

The chores were never ending on the Holland family farm — milking cows, taking care of chickens, planting Christmas trees to sell during the holidays and tending to the crops.

“You never knew what was going to happen with the crops and you couldn't control the weather,” Holland recalls. “Seeing my uncles — with raccoon eyes — coming out of the mines, and I had uncles who worked with the railroads, which was a tough business. I knew there had to be better options for me.”

Holland headed to West Virginia University to pursue a chemical engineering degree. During his freshman year, Holland signed up for the school's ROTC (reserve officer's training corps) program. That's when he seriously thought about attending the United States Air Force Academy and taking advantage of its world-class education.

The next summer, Holland departed on his first ever airplane flight aboard a DC-3 to enroll at USAFA and pursue a degree in aeronautical engineering.

“I can guarantee you, there was no way I could anticipate the life change that would result,” he smiles.

Holland would go on to enjoy a long Air Force career, including numerous special operations assignments and a stint with the newly emerging Space Shuttle program. His successes along the way led to his selection as a 2016 Distinguished Graduate.

Heeding the Call

Born and raised in the Methodist Church, Holland says his parents instilled in him a solid sense of “right and wrong.”

His religious instruction also led to a Bible passage that would help inspire and guide him through each step of his career.

“Isaiah 6:8 says, ‘Here am I, Lord, send me,’” he notes. “Our nation was at war, and when that call came, we answered it.”

That commitment to serve his country, no matter the cost, came easier for Holland because of the example set by those who answered the call before him.

Holland's table commandant when he was a Doolie was Lance P. Sijan '65, the Academy's only Medal of Honor recipient so far.

“I have great respect for what he accomplished,” Holland says. “Sijan was an inspiration to us all.”

Holland and his classmates also revered Karl Richter '64, whose F-105 was shot down over North Vietnam in 1967. Holland was privileged to be part of the honor flight to recognize



Richter when the aviator was later buried at the U.S. Air Force Academy Cemetery.

“When you think about Karl, he had already completed 100 missions and he volunteered for another 100. He was shot down on his 198th mission,” Holland recalls. “Truth be told, there were probably a lot of sorties that he didn’t count because he wanted to continue to be in combat.”

A third Air Force officer who helped mold Holland’s warrior ethos was Maj. Jack Espenshied, the Air Officer Commanding for Cadet Squadron 21 when Holland was at USAFA. Espenshied would go on to fly combat missions in Vietnam and was shot down in 1969. He was listed as “missing in action” for many years, until his remains were returned to the U.S. in 1988.

“Maj. E imparted to us our sense of duty, our sense of responsibility and our sense of commitment,” he says. “He was an inspired leader, and very much a motivator.

“When you think about integrity, service before self and excellence in all we do ... and then you combine that with the Honor Code ... it’s a very powerful message. And I was witnessing all these people who answered the call.”

For Maj. E’s role, the Blackjack Squadron of 1968 established the annual Espenshied Award for the cadet who has done the most to promote the spirit of camaraderie among each year’s graduating Blackjack class.

Key Lessons

As a member of the Falcon basketball team, Holland would learn important lessons about being part of a team.

“We don’t go alone on this path,” he explains. “It takes all of us working together to accomplish a mission. When you’re at the Academy, it’s all about the team.”

Holland would go on to serve as the team captain during his senior year.

As a cadet, the importance of time management, focus and commitment also proved to be key lessons.

“Maj. E had always stressed that, no matter what the task is that you take on, do it to the best of your ability,” Holland shares. “I don’t care if you’re hanging toilet paper. You be the best toilet paper hanger that there is.”

To help inspire and mentor future leaders of the Air Force, Holland would later return to the Academy to pass on the legacy of service — landing aircraft on the Terrazzo and providing the cadets with flight orientations to include official authorized jumps out of Special Operations aircraft, as well as providing aero research projects for the cadets. These opportunities gave the cadets a better sense of the important missions available to them, he says. Holland returned as a guest speaker at USAFA on numerous occasions as well.

Graduation Time

Holland and his classmates found themselves in the midst of tumultuous times as they prepared to graduate from the Academy in 1968. Martin Luther King was assassinated in April, and

protests over the U.S.’s involvement in the Vietnam conflict were heating up.

Holland recalls that most of his classmates knew they would be going to Southeast Asia in some capacity, and many were on edge as their Air Force careers kicked off.

Then, on June 5 (graduation day), presidential candidate Bobby Kennedy was shot and killed. Vice President Hubert Humphrey was scheduled to give that day’s USAFA commencement address, but he had to cancel.

“It was very sobering when you think about what was happening with the war in Vietnam and the role that we would be playing,” Holland says. “All of us had our first assignments, and my first assignment was to go to pilot training.”

When he arrived at pilot training, Holland found that half the class came from the Academy. The fellow grads partnered together to form study groups.

“We made sure we did everything we could so that all of us would graduate and have the opportunity to serve our nation,” he says.

Holland would land a C-130 assignment to Dyess Air Force Base in Texas, where he participated in numerous rotations to Europe and was checked out as a special air warfare pilot.

He then was selected to pilot the AC-130, a heavily armed gunship that conducted armed reconnaissance and troops-in-contact missions.

Just before heading to Royal Thai AFB, Holland returned to West Virginia for the holidays. He would receive word that an AC-130 had been shot down and the entire 14-man crew perished.

“That was a real wake-up call for me,” he admits. “My mother asked me, ‘You’re just flying C-130’s, right?’ I said, ‘Mom, don’t worry.’ I did not want her to associate me with the AC-130.”

His first mission in combat ended up being one of Holland’s most eventful. He was participating in his “dollar ride” — an opportunity to simply ride along to see how the gunship crew operated — when the gunship came under heavy enemy fire. Holland was certain the plane would be shot down.

“And I had told my mother that I was coming back,” he laments. Thankfully, the airplane made it back safely.

Holland would go on to complete more than 100 combat missions, of which 79 were flown in the AC-130 during the Southeast Asia War.

“In fact, I was the second to the last gunship out of Cambodia on 15 August 1973,” he recalls. “The commander was the last guy out.” ▶

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New Horizons

At the end of the war, Holland agreed to remain in Southeast Asia to help lead a highly classified “punishment” raid with three AC-130s. As it turned out, senior officials didn’t have the stomach to carry out the raid.

By the time Holland was ready to return to the States, there were no pilot slots available at Hurlburt Field. “There was no room for me at the inn,” he explains.

Holland volunteered for a consecutive overseas tour instead.

He would become an air operations staff officer at Ramstein Air Base in Germany, which included planning and directing special operations training missions in Europe.

As the Air Force drew down its pilot numbers after the war, fewer flying jobs were available. Some of Holland’s classmates decided to leave the military and become commercial pilots.

But Holland received a letter from the Air Force Institute of Technology (AFIT) asking if he would be interested in pursuing his master’s degree in astronautical engineering.

“I had been out of anything dealing with engineering for almost nine years at this point,” he remembers. “I really took a long time to think through that.”

Despite recommendations from several trusted advisors to reject the offer, Holland agreed to accept the challenge.

“I flashed back to the ‘Eagle & Fledglings’ statue at the Academy and what’s written on there,” Holland says. “‘Man’s flight through life is sustained by the power of his knowledge.’ I decided to do it.”

He found himself in class with recent USAFA graduates and other new Air Force officers who had had much more experience in computers and the latest technology than he had.

In the end, he fared well in the course of study.

“I give credit to disco,” he laughs. “The young guys knew they had these old guys in the class. They were sure we’d get the curve down. They went out ... but all of us felt the pressure of the younger guys. My career was on the line.”

Space Race

After finishing his masters, Holland would head to the Space Shuttle Flight Operations Branch at Los Angeles Air Force Station. He would head up a survivability study, helping determine the potential vulnerabilities of the fledgling Space Shuttle Program.

“I thought that was a pretty daunting task,” he admits. “But we were able to put this in such a way that made sense.”

He eventually had a chance to go to Johnson Space Center, Vandenberg Air Force Base and Kennedy Space Center as part of the planning process for the Shuttle.

Later, he would be assigned to CX (corporate plans), prioritizing budget expenditures for the nation’s satellite programs. He helped to move global positioning system (GPS) technology to the front of the line for funding.

“GPS was pretty much at risk,” he remembers. “Nobody really believed in it. The relevance of GPS was something that was debated during that time.”

During Desert Storm, however, the proof of what GPS could bring to the fight was realized.

Holland would later be inducted into the AFIT Hall of Fame for his impact on space policies and technology.

Command Central

After proving his worth, Holland was asked about his interest in becoming an executive officer. He balked at the idea.

“I’m not an exec,” he told his superiors. “I’m an engineer; I’m a pilot. I didn’t know anything about administrative duties. However, the commander gets a vote, and Lt. Gen. Henry, said ‘Holland you’ve got the job and you’re also my T-39 instructor pilot.’”

Afterwards, Holland was selected to become the commander of the 21st Tactical Airlift Squadron in the Philippines, which had a SOLL (Special Operations Low-Level) II mission.

Then he would go on to numerous special operations command positions, including commander of Air Force Special Operations Command at Hurlburt Field, Florida, and his final assignment as commander of U.S. Special Operations Command at MacDill Air Force Base.

Under Pressure

According to Holland, modern day special operations can trace their beginnings back to Operation Eagle Claw (Desert One) in 1980, when U.S. forces attempted to rescue 53 Americans taken hostage in Iran. The operation did not go well.

“There is a SOF (Special Operations Forces) truth,” Holland explains. “You cannot develop competent SOF after the emergency has occurred.”

The U.S. had drawn down its armed forces in the years following Vietnam, but then the world started changing, Holland recalls. When the hostage crisis occurred, our nation was ill-prepared to respond in an effective way.

“You can’t just turn SOF on and off,” he explains. “You need to have SOF resourced, they need to be trained and they need to be ready at a moment’s notice.”

Preparation for special operations missions suddenly changed.

Special operations forces would go on to be involved in Grenada, Just Cause (leading to the capture of Manuel Noriega), Desert Storm, Mogadishu, Haiti, Kuwait, the Balkans and more. Some of the key missions that Holland’s teams undertook were the rescues of Lt. Col. Dale Zelko ’81 in Yugoslavia in 1999; and Lt. Col. David “Fingers” Goldfein ’84, the current chief of staff of the Air Force, in Serbia in 1999. Lt. Col. Steve Laushine ’80 was a helicopter mission commander on both rescues.

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, SOF teams would be among the first boots on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the early stages of the Afghan conflict, Holland’s special ops teams conducted 27 missions of the size and complexity of Desert One, and all of them were extremely successful.

“We had really become a mature force,” he says of his fellow SOF warriors.

Civilian Duties

After retiring from the Air Force in November 2003, Holland would stay involved in preparing U.S. forces for modern warfare, conducting various war games around the globe.

“Everything we do is joint, combined and interagency,” he notes. “That’s really the equation for success.”

The goal is to help the military to constantly improve and to identify new technologies that will continually keep the U.S. a step ahead in a changing world, he explains.

“We need to be prepared so that our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines can come back and fight another day,” he says. “I never love a fair fight. I want our teams to have the comparative advantage.”

That’s why Holland is upbeat about the addition of the F-35 to the nation’s weapons platforms. He says the fifth generation fighter will help deter enemies from challenging the U.S. in conflict, while providing an offensive capability in an A2/AD (area access/aerial denial) environment.

“If the adversary doesn’t understand our ability to deter and fight, then we’re going to be facing an enemy in our own homeland,” he explains. “In the business that I’ve been in, I always like away games rather than home games.”

In addition to war game planning, Holland also has been a strong supporter of the Special Operations Warrior Foundation, a non-profit that provides scholarships for the children of SOF personnel who die in combat or in training. The foundation also helps families with expenses when special operations personnel are severely injured.

Acknowledgements

Holland says he was “very humbled” when he learned that he was chosen as a Distinguished Graduate.

“I’m a behind-the-scenes individual,” he says of his discomfort with being singled out. “It’s how I’ve always worked. It’s what we do, as we (SOF warriors) work out of the shadows.”


He says he’s worked for and with many previous Academy Distinguished Graduates in the past — among them Gen. Ron Fogelman, Gen. H.T. Johnson, Gen. Mike Loh, Gen. Ron Yates, Gen. Mike Ryan, Gen. Ed Eberhart, Gen. Speedy Martin, Gen. Bill Looney and Gen. Chilli Chilton.

“These people were in the big leagues,” Holland says. “Even being considered in that league is a real honor for me.”

Holland says there is no measuring the support he received and felt from his wife Nancy during his career. He singles her out for praise as he accepts the DG honor.

“I think back during my time in special ops and the times I couldn’t tell her where I was going, how long I would be gone and that I wouldn’t be able to contact her,” he says. “She kept the home fires burning with our two sons — of which the older son, Chuck, graduated from Blackjack ’99 and after graduation married his wife Sharon, who was from Blackjack ’98. And our younger son, Justin, pursued his engineering degree through MIT. After 43 years of marriage ... those are very important aspects of what life is all about.”

Holland also thanked his classmates in Blackjack 21 for their support and encouragement through the years.

“All of those people really made a difference in my life, and I dedicate this honor to them,” he concludes. 



Gen. Charles Holland (right) participates in a pass review of the troops in Seongnam, South Korea. Holland was the first U.S. flag officer to be deputy commander of the Combined Unconventional Task Force.



Gen. Charles Holland (left) met up with his nephew, Command Sgt. Maj. Tim Coop, in Afghanistan. Holland’s immediate and extended family has a long history of military service.