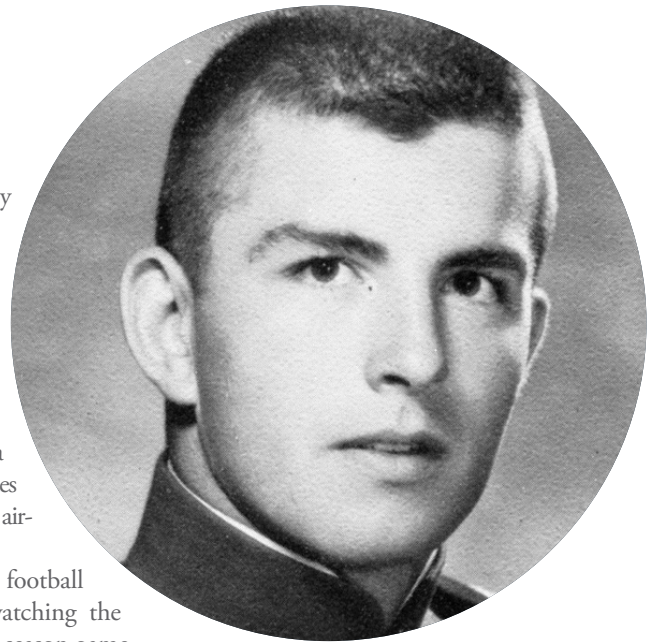


COL. (RET.) LESLIE DENEND

1963



Had it not been for the miracle of modern medicine, Col. (Ret.) Leslie Denend '63 might have missed out on many opportunities he's enjoyed giving back to his community and alma mater.

In 2008, after his heart began to fail, Denend received a transplant at Stanford Hospital that has served him well for more than a decade.

"I'd have to go back to my early 40s to remember when I've had this much energy," he admits. "I've been able to do anything I've wanted to do. I've been very lucky in the sense that this heart seems happy where it is."

Sitting in the living room of his Napa Valley home, Denend points to pictures of his grandchildren on the wall and smiles.

"Just think what has happened in the past decade. My grandchildren have gone from this high," he motions with his hand a couple feet above the floor, "to now they are all in college."

In addition, Denend's 50th Academy class reunion occurred since the transplant, and that's when he made a commitment to become involved with the USAFA Endowment and financially support projects to benefit the institution and cadets.

"All of these things have been possible because of my transplant," he notes.

Denend also has lived to enjoy the announcement that he is one of five alumni to be honored as 2019 Distinguished Graduate Award recipients.

"I was totally taken by surprise," he says of the honor. "When I found out who the other honorees were, and know-

ing the ones who are already in that group, I felt real humility."

Unexpected Journey

Born and raised in the San Francisco area, Denend was interested in aviation since he was a youngster. He built model airplanes and often talked about various aircraft with his father.

During the 1958 college football bowl season, Denend was watching the Air Force Academy's first post-season game on television when an informational film about the institution was broadcast. His father asked if Denend ever considered going to the school. Of all the service academies, he told his father, USAFA was the most interesting because of its focus on aviation.

"The next day, my father called our congressman and asked what needed to happen to apply," Denend recalls. "The congressman said it was very late but to send a letter. So, I did, and the rest is history."

When he accepted his congressional appointment, Denend admits he had no idea what he was getting into.

"My father worked for the telephone company for 46 years," he says. "But growing up in California and San Francisco during World War II, my earliest memory is watching the fire engines race down to the shore in San Francisco as I peeked from behind the blackout screens. There wasn't a military tradition in my family, but the idea

of the military and airplanes wasn't a totally foreign idea."

Day One

When he arrived at the Denver airport in the summer of 1959, Denend was anxious to get started on his new adventure. He eagerly hopped on the first bus to Colorado Springs.

"By the end of the day, I had been told that they were putting a mark by my name because I wouldn't be here in six weeks," Denend smiles. "I was scared to death. Things had come easy for me, and I had been successful in most of the things I had done."

Through perseverance and help from his roommate Leonard "Lucky" Ekman '63 — who had attended Georgia Military Academy — Denend finished the summer "somewhere in the middle of the pack in terms of avoiding the grief from upperclassmen." ►

"I really feel strongly about what goes on at the Air Force Academy. Our service academies are really a repository for the values that make our society work ... that make us who we are."



"Lucky made me a better cadet than I might have been on my own," he admits.

Once the academic year began and intramural competition started, Denend says he became more comfortable with his role as a cadet.

By his second-class year, Denend had distinguished himself academically and was encouraged to get involved in the new graduate program. He would eventually apply for a Fulbright Scholarship and was accepted.

"President [John] Kennedy came and spoke at our graduation, and I soon figured out that I was going to get to shake the president's hand," he recalls. "I'm standing in line and I'm ninth and I didn't know exactly what I was going to say."

The president asked Denend what his plans were after graduation. The new second lieutenant said he was headed to Germany.

"It took him a little bit by surprise, and he came back and very quickly said 'I think that's wonderful. Air Force officers should be educated broadly for the kind of responsibilities you're going to have,'" Denend remembers.

"Yes, sir, and thank you," Denend recalls responding.

During his year overseas, Denend researched the recovery of Germany's economy in the years following World War II. He also was involved in the study of game theory.

Pilot Duty

Denend returned to the states and entered pilot training at Williams Air Force Base in Arizona.

"I won the academic award, I won the military award, and I won the flying award," he reports. "I was asked if I would be interested in staying as a T-38 instructor at Williams, as opposed to taking a fighter. My family thought that was a wonderful idea, and so I did."

A year later, Denend also became an academic instructor, teaching the applied aerodynamics course and other classes.

Denend then volunteered for duty in Vietnam and soon headed overseas. Following check out in the RF-4C Phantom II, he completed 196 combat missions in Southeast Asia flying out of Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base.

"I really enjoyed that time," Denend recalls. "You suddenly realize that you're doing what you spent all this time learning. By then, I had quite a bit of time as a pilot, so I was more confident in mission accomplishment."

Continuing Education

In preparation for a faculty assignment at USAFA, Denend earned a master's in business administration and a Ph.D. in economics at Stanford University.

As he completed his degrees, Denend was selected as a White House Fellow.

"As we drove across the country from California ... President [Richard] Nixon resigned," Denend recalls. "So, Gerald Ford became president of the United

States, and that's the president that I worked for."

Denend served as an executive assistant to the assistant to the president for international economics.

"As an executive assistant, you see everything," he says. "You're not really key on any particular issue, but you end up with a wonderful understanding about what the issues are and how things come across the president's desk."

Career Twists

In 1975, Denend returned to his alma mater to teach core economics courses and econometrics. He also checked out in the



T-37 and flew with cadets.

"One day I'm out over southern Colorado with a cadet and a radio call says return to base and land immediately," he remembers. "In all my flying experience, I've never been told to return to base and land immediately ... there was a phone call from the White House."

He soon found out that fellow USAFA graduate Randy Jayne '66 had recommended him for a position on the National Security Council (NSC) staff with President Jimmy Carter's administration. Denend became the special assistant to National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski.

"It was kind of the high point in my life," he says. "You're very privileged to work at that level."

During his time with the NSC, Denend worked on three key policy issues — nuclear proliferation, conventional arms transfers and global human rights.

"I ended up spending a lot of time on refugees," he says. "At the time, boat people were escaping from Vietnam and ending up all along the Thai Peninsula. We were trying to figure out what to do."

In 1981, Denend became the Air Force

member of the Colonel's Staff Group — serving under Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General David Jones — working on the budget and intelligence matters.

He then returned to the White House for a third tour to serve on President Ronald Reagan's economic policy staff.

Transition Time

Denend would retire from the Air Force with 20 years of service. His goal was to eventually become chief executive officer for a major public company.

"The skills that you acquire in your military experience really do make it possible to have a successful career in business or in public service subsequently, whatever you choose to do," he suggests.

He joined McKinsey & Company and worked with major industrial clients, including the up-and-coming technology powerhouse Apple Computer. Denend later joined 3Com Corporation, a leader in computer networking in Silicon Valley, as a vice president.

He eventually became president and CEO of Network General Corp., and the public company quadrupled in market value during his tenure.

"In Silicon Valley in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the dominant theme was connectivity," he says. "We're going to make the computer a part of a network. It was very exciting."

In the years since, Denend served on more than a dozen public company boards, including Rational Software, McAfee, Informix, Exponent and VeriFone corporations. He also served as the vice chair and lead outside director of USAA.

"Board service became attractive as board service became more of a profession," he notes. "I wanted to be viewed as someone who helped make the company be better and do better, grow, and be a more enduring company."

Today, Denend dabbles in a Napa Valley wine business. His property also touts dozens of olive trees, which are harvested and processed by a local olive oil company.

Drawn to Leadership

Denend recalls a spirit of competitiveness that has always driven him. As a fourth grader, he was elected president of his class and he relished the leadership role.

"I guess I liked it, because I sought to be

the leader of almost any organization I ever joined," he smiles. "Maybe I'm competitive to an extreme, but that's been a characteristic. If it's out there and it's challenging ... then I wanted to do it."

With every new career challenge, Denend says his ultimate goal has always been to help the business or organization he was working for strive for excellence.

"I never had high money aspirations," he admits. "But in every situation, I've tried to make things a little bit better. I've been able to do that, and I'm very happy to have played that role."

Giving Back

Denend has been an active participant in community affairs and supports his alma mater in a number of ways. While on the USAFA faculty, he co-led a 12-month effort to define goals for the city of Colorado Springs. He was a senior fellow and chair of the Silicon Valley Chapter of the American Leadership Forum. In addition, he was the founding chair of Stanford Hospital's Heart Transplant Patient and Family Advisory Council.

He is a trustee of the Falcon Foundation and the Air Force Academy Foundation.

"I really feel strongly about what goes on at the Air Force Academy," Denend says. "Our service academies are really a repository for the values that make our society work ... that make us who we are. I think that we've moved into an era where the Academy needs and certainly warrants the support of its alumni the way a normal university does for private giving."

Denend says he intends to be intimately involved with the Air Force Academy Foundation as it continues its comprehensive campaign in the days ahead.

Lessons Learned


Denend attributes much of the success he's enjoyed to his time at the Academy.

The Cadet Honor Code helped him establish a professional code of ethics that stayed with him his entire life, Denend says.

"Character is more than just the idea of not lying or cheating or stealing," he explains. "There is ethical behavior, and these standards of behavior hold for all time. We flirt with dangerous times if we adopt a different position."

In addition, Denend says his cadet experience taught him how to handle pressure, how to multitask and how to be disciplined — all traits that helped him as a businessperson.

Perhaps the key lesson he's learned through it all is the value of family life. He met his future wife, Judy, on a blind date during his third-class year. They have two grown children and five grandchildren, all of whom live in the Bay Area.

"Gradually, as you get older, the most important thing that emerges is family," he says. "It's the most enduring thing ... and that's certainly true of me." 

FAR LEFT: 2nd Lt. Leslie Denend poses for a picture of his many honors gathered during his time at USAFA.

LEFT: President Jimmy Carter (left) discusses items with Leslie Denend (right) and another staffer on Air Force One.

BOTTOM: Leslie and Judy Denend and their family.

