

THE AIR FORCE ACADEMY and the Association of Graduates are proud to announce the winners of the Distinguished Graduate Award for 2011. The award recognizes Academy graduates whose singular and distinctive contributions to our society and nation have set them apart from other graduates. The winners of the Distinguished Graduate Award for 2011 are Brigadier General (Ret.) Ruben A. Cubero and Mr. Richard D. McConn. They will receive their awards at a formal presentation during Academy Founder's Day in April 2012. ▷



Brigadier General
Ruben A. Cubero, Class of 1961

2011 Distinguished Graduate

A portrait of Mr. Richard D. McConn, a middle-aged man with grey hair, wearing a dark blue suit jacket over a white button-down shirt. He is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The background is a blurred brick wall with white columns.

Mr. Richard D. McConn, Class of 1966

Award Winners

Presented by your Association of Graduates

“I’d say the biggest thing I took away from the Academy, especially observing cadet leaders, was that they were all people of principle who lived their values and weren’t afraid to confront others who violated those values.”

—Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Ruben Cubero, Class of 1961

General Cubero graduated with the third class of the Air Force Academy in 1961. Following graduation, he has demonstrated a lifetime of outstanding service to the Air Force Academy and the nation.

Cubero reflects fondly upon his time at the school which prepared him for his time as an officer. “I think the Academy is the most important institution in my development as an adult,” he recalls. “One goes to the Academy right out of high school and then over the next four years you begin developing into manhood. I’ve often said that the Academy is like the crucible of my manhood—it developed me in many aspects—one being physical conditioning and making sure that I stay fit throughout my life. The other aspect involved getting an education. The Academy propelled me on to a master’s degree and later a Ph.D., all thanks to the Air Force. This all started for me at the Academy with a love of academics and an intellectual curiosity to learn more as I went along in life.”

During his 37-year active duty career, he flew multiple aircraft for the Military Airlift Command, accumulating over 6700 flying hours and completing 243 combat missions in Vietnam as a Forward Air Controller. His actions earned him a Distinguished Flying Cross and 14 Air Medals. “The Academy shaped my idea of leadership,” Cubero explains. “Understanding the mission is of utmost importance, and then getting people to coalesce around that mission is the overall objective.”

Much of his later career was spent with the Academy faculty, first as an instructor in the Department of Foreign Languages and later as permanent professor and head of the Department of Foreign Languages. Like many graduates, Cubero was delighted at the opportunity to return to the institution that gave him his start. He harkens back to the many ethical foundations upon which the school was built. “I like to consider myself a person of good values even before

I came to the Academy,” Cubero says, “but living for four years under the honor code was extremely important in my life. I think that every aspect of the military is a demonstration of leadership. There are times when you have to be a follower, and that was certainly true at the Academy. You learn the basics of being a follower initially and then you progress on with added responsibilities as you go through the four years. You go through the same progression in every job in the Air Force—starting at the freshman level and building your way up to a more senior position.”

In 1991, General Cubero was selected as the Dean of the Faculty for the Air Force Academy, a position he held for seven years. As the Dean, he supervised the 800-member faculty and managed a \$60 million annual budget and assets of \$250 million. Following his retirement from active duty in 1998, General Cubero was hired as the Athletic Director at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs (UCCS) where he made significant improvements, including the “Exemplary Student Athlete” program which stressed individual responsibility on the part of all student athletes.

During this same time, he also served as President of the Falcon Foundation where he guided the 150 Trustees through two membership meetings each year, acted as steward for the Foundation’s \$17 million endowment, and distributed 100 preparatory school scholarships each year.

“I love the Falcon Foundation for a number of reasons,” Cubero exclaims. “It takes cadet candidates who are pilot qualified and allows them to enhance their academic qualifications to attend a prep school and eventually the Air Force Academy. To me, the essence of being a warrior in the Air Force is being a pilot—I’ve always had a great affinity for flying. We track these students during their four years at the Academy. There is a great possibility that they will some day go on to war once they graduate and become officers; we therefore mentor them so that they fully understand the aspects of leadership.”

Since his retirement, General Cubero has voluntarily worked closely with the Association of Graduates and the USAFA Endowment—the core non-profit organizations that support the Academy. In his continuing efforts to mentor the young men and women who attend USAFA, Cubero stresses the importance of understanding the commitment one must make when walking the path of The Long Blue Line.

“My advice would be to really study the Oath of Office,” he implores. “The bottom line, the basic purpose of our graduation from the Academy is to support and defend the Constitution of the United

States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. That is the core of what I call the warrior ethos. The next part is to bear true faith and allegiance to the same. If you don't understand the Constitution then you don't really understand what you're supporting and defending when you become a military officer. If there is anyone who sees the need to go to war and understand that this is his or her obligation, it would be a graduate of this institution."

Also selected to receive the Distinguished Graduate Award was Mr. Richard D. McConn, a member of the Class of 1966. Following his graduation, Mr. McConn served in the Air Force as an intelligence officer. At a very junior rank, he was assigned to Lowry AFB in Denver, Colorado, as the Chief Instructor of the Mobile Computer Training Team that pioneered intelligence data collection in the Air Force. "During my career as an officer I was treated very well," McConn says fondly. "Being an Academy graduate doesn't guarantee you anything but it certainly opens doors for you. I think integrity played a role that was well bred into me as an officer. The Academy was a great training ground, there's no question about that. It was second to none as far as preparing us to be officers."

McConn attributes much of his ability to take on new challenges to his time at USAFA. "The Academy teaches you so many things," he explains. "You get such a broad exposure about life and that was really surprising for those of us who came from small towns. In addition to the academics and sports—the summer travel, foreign languages—it gave us such an all around exposure to things we'd never thought about. This carries over to a lot of other things you do in life but more important it gives you confidence. You're able to socialize and work with people, you're able to observe all these different situations and that all helps to breed confidence and spark your interests later on in life."

Subsequent military assignments took him to Washington D.C. where he served in the office of the USAF Vice Chief of Staff and in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and then as a White House Aide to the President. "In the military they showed me a lot at a very young age," McConn remembers. "Maybe they showed me too much too soon, but I realized there was a much bigger world out there, and it was based on capitalism, economics, entrepreneurship, innovation and technology. Eventually I decided that I needed to go see that world and that's what led me out of the Air Force."

After leaving active duty, he remained in the Air Force Reserve and served in a key position in the office of the USAF Chief of Staff. As a civilian,

through talent and hard work, he built a multi-million dollar international logistics enterprise that is known for integrity and ethical conduct. Currently, he owns several companies with offices in Morocco, Tunisia, UAE, Jordan, Pakistan, Germany and Taiwan.

Throughout his life, he has been a strong supporter of education. In his home state of North Dakota, he established an Aerospace Scholarship Endowment at the University of North Dakota. Seeing the need for additional opportunities for Academy graduates to prepare themselves for leadership positions in America, he established the McConn Scholars program which sends 2-3 active duty USAFA graduates to Georgetown University

"It's been one of my credos in life: just do the right thing. I think the Academy really reinforced that structure in me and it's carried over all these years."

—Mr. Richard D. McConn, Class of 1966

for a Master's Degree in Public Policy. After finishing their degrees, these graduates spend at least the next year serving on a Congressional staff. The result is to give future officers a thorough understanding of how the U.S. government works.

Mr. McConn is a founding director of the USAFA Endowment and was influential in getting Congress to pass the law which enabled the establishment of the Air Force Academy Athletic Corporation, a non-profit entity that will raise money to operate and improve the Academy's intercollegiate athletics programs.

Thinking back on his long and varied career, McConn is often faced with philosophical questions formulated over a lifetime of facing challenges in both the military and civilian sectors. "What is success for an Air Force Academy graduate?" he asks. "I've spent a lot of my life trying to figure out what success really is. It's not necessarily money or status; it's not the car you drive. What is success for our graduates who have this inner fiber? It's a great question that hasn't been answered yet, and it's something for us to ponder and think about down the road." ▣