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Brig. Gen. (Ret.)
Chris Inglis
Class of 1976

A debilitating sports injury at the Academy nearly ended the Air Force career of Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Chris Inglis before it even started.

Fortunately for him, and the nation, Academy leaders kept the cadet on track to graduate. He has since gone on to leadership roles across a 30-year active and Reserve career in the Air Force and in a parallel career at the National Security Agency, including a seven-year stint as its deputy director.

While a lacrosse player at USAFA, Inglis seriously damaged ligaments and tendons that held his spine in place.

"Within a fairly short span of time, my spine went from being straight — zero degrees curvature — to 63 degrees curvature," he remembers. "I was otherwise healthy and well."

In the spring of his third-class year, Inglis went to the doctor, who was shocked at the rapid progression of the scoliosis. That summer, Inglis was sent to Wilford Hall Medical Center in San Antonio for evaluation.

"They quickly determined that the only way to stop the progression was to fuse the spine," he explains. "They put in some instrumentation ... a fairly long steel rod to hold it all in place while the fusion took hold across more than 50 percent of my back."

During his long hospital stay, a stranger suggested Inglis read a book and conduct re-

search about Joshua Chamberlain, a Medal of Honor recipient from the Civil War era. Despite serious injuries suffered in battle, Chamberlain never let constant pain stop him from making a difference later in life. He would go on to be governor of Maine and president of Bowdoin College.

"He got up every day with this serious ailment," Inglis reports. "He never had an excuse."

The stranger asked Inglis what he planned to do in light of his own serious injury. It was the kind of inspiration the then-cadet needed in order to press on.



ABOVE: Cadet Chris Inglis pictured in a body cast during his second-class year at USAFA.



The expected recovery period for the spinal surgery was a year, so Inglis returned to USAFA in a body cast — stretching from his ears down to his hips.

"It was a fairly dramatic cure for that injury," he says. "When I got back to the Academy for the start of school in the fall of 1974, they entered me into classes as if nothing had happened. They gave me a pass on some of the physical activities, since the spine was still healing. But from the Academy's perspective, they just treated me like I was another one of 4,500 cadets."

Inglis admits to a certain degree of audacity to think he could make it through his two-degree year while still recovering. But he's grateful the Academy leadership allowed him to give it a shot.

"I was impressed, even then, with the degree of care and consideration that I was given," he says. "No one ever asked the question 'When are you going to leave?'"

"It was as challenging a thing as I'd ever done. Thinking at the speed of an airplane was not something I'd had to do before. All my life, you had the opportunity of being confronted with a problem ... and then have a moment to reflect. You can't do that in an airplane."

Academy Days

The son of a World War II infantryman who earned a Silver Star in the Ardennes Offensive, Inglis developed a keen interest in serving his country as he matured.

Growing up in Maryland, Inglis had plenty of exposure to the Naval Academy. He'd taken at least three dozen school field trips and family trips to Annapolis through the years.

But on a fateful trip to Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico one summer, his Boy Scout troop stopped by the United States Air Force Academy for lunch. Inglis was thoroughly impressed.

"I was just overwhelmed — in the most positive way — by the scope, the scale and the breadth of it," he recalls. "My journey at that point was already determined."

It turns out another young man from Inglis' neighborhood was appointed to the Academy and graduated with the USAFA Class of 1971. Inglis suddenly realized that it might be possible for him to do the same.

"It just seemed like this was a place that would inspire the imagination and challenge me," he says.

He eventually accepted an appointment to USAFA. Inglis would go on to learn key life lessons as a cadet that would stick with him throughout his career — chief among them teamwork, determination and the importance of public service.

But because of his injury, Inglis' ultimate goal of becoming a pilot likely was in serious jeopardy.

Pilot Track

If he'd been a cadet today, Inglis suggests that he likely wouldn't be allowed to fly with a steel rod in his back.

But as graduation approached, Inglis actually passed his commissioning physical and became a second lieutenant on June 2, 1976. Later that day, he learned that the surgeon general of the Air Force had signed his waiver to attend pilot training.

"I was enormously grateful," he admits. "It was a gift."

Pilot training would have to wait, however, as Inglis received a Guggenheim Fellowship to Columbia University, where he would complete a master's degree in mechanical engineering.

Then he headed to Williams Air Force Base in the summer of 1977. He remembers the

excessive heat and the stress of learning to fly a jet airplane.

"It was as challenging a thing as I'd ever done," he admits. "Thinking at the speed of an airplane was not something I'd had to do before. All my life, you had the opportunity of being confronted with a problem ... and then have a moment to reflect. You can't do that in an airplane."



At the conclusion of training, Inglis was selected as a First Assignment Instructor Pilot (FAIP) in the T-37.

"That was another great learning experience," he smiles. "I enjoyed that."

A short while later, Inglis developed problems with his spinal fusion and doctors had to remove the steel rod, allowing him to remain on flying status for 24 more years. After a couple months of recovery, Inglis became a C-141 pilot.

"That airplane had legs," he says. "You could go just about anywhere in the world ... and we did. It was a really interesting way to see the rest of the U.S. military and the world at large. And the crew concept of the airplane made for a team that you really enjoyed working with, no matter the challenge."

Navy Duty

After duty in the C-141, Inglis was expected to put his graduate degree to good use. In 1982, he would accept a mechanical engineering instructor position at the U.S. Naval Academy.

Patrick Inglis, Chris Inglis' brother, was a 1980 graduate of the Naval Academy. As a



PREVIOUS: Cadet Chris Inglis '76 accepts the award for Outstanding Cadet in Engineering Mechanics.

PREVIOUS RIGHT: 2nd Lt. Chris Inglis at pilot training Williams Air Force Base. His first assignment would be as a FAIP in the T-37.

LEFT: Chris Inglis (front left) and his crew are pictured in the cockpit of a C-130 during his time in the Reserves.

result, Inglis discovered that Air Force officers were allowed to teach there.

"I came fully expecting that I would learn new things, be pushed to consider new skills, and develop those skills ... as a further investment in my professional development," he says.

Inglis admits it was a challenge leaving the cockpit for the classroom. The first six months on the job were stressful as he learned how to teach a complex subject to a classroom of midshipmen with diverse academic backgrounds.

He eventually figured it out, winning the 1984 Clement's Award — Navy's annual honor given to the institution's outstanding military faculty member. It was quite a coup for a young captain — and an Air Force captain at that — to receive the honor.

During his time at Navy, Inglis enjoyed getting involved in the lives of midshipmen outside the classroom as well. In addition to teaching a full range of mechanical engineering courses, Inglis flew in the Naval Academy's aviation familiarization program and served as an officer representative for both academic and professional development programs throughout the academic year.

In the summer of 1983, Inglis even took time to qualify in yard patrol craft, commanding a four-engine boat for six weeks along the eastern seaboard.

"It was about as different a thing as an Air Force officer could do in those days," he smiles. "You came to understand very quickly how the Navy sees the marriage of people and machinery in a way that is fundamentally different than the Air Force. It was another growth opportunity for me."

Computer Science

During his Naval Academy tour, Inglis completed a second master's degree in computer science thanks to night school.

"Computers, which were coming into their own in those days, was the thing that captivated my attention," he says. "I was on the trailing edge of that first wave, thinking that I wanted to perhaps have a role in it. But I couldn't find a role in the field in the active Air Force while maintaining my forward progress as an aviator."

He left active duty, with a plan to seek a civilian job in the up-and-coming field of computers.

"I then joined the Reserves, where I continued to fly and progress along my Air Force career ... flying C-130s," he reports. "At the same time, I applied for and was accepted to the National Security Agency. I thought that had exactly the right mix for me — public service but private sector modality."

It turned out to be the perfect career move.

"I had a natural affinity for computers," he says. "I had always liked mathematics. But I was a junior at the Academy before I realized that mathematics actually had some end purpose. I loved figuring out how machines worked, and computers seemed to be that next iteration of mathematics, machines, hardware and software."

NSA Days

Inglis found his new role at the NSA stimulating, as his team used cutting-edge technology in an effort to stay a step ahead of our nation's adversaries.

His first job was as a computer scientist, trying to build a secure computer.

"We subsequently determined that that's not possible," he remembers. "But we learned a lot about how to make them defensible and actually defend them."

Over the course of several years, Inglis advanced to leadership roles within the NSA, eventually shifting over to the intelligence side of the organization.

"I found that very intriguing," he admits. "The information you then provided was actionable information on which many of the decisions were made by either the policymakers in Washington or those who stood in harm's way in our United States military."

Along his career path, Inglis was given the opportunity to lead at the branch, division, office and directorate levels within the NSA, essentially mirroring a progression as a civilian equivalent to attaining flag rank in the military.

"I eventually led NSA's global analysis and production, assuming responsibility of that at the time of 9/11," he explains, "when the counterterrorism issue rose up and became the number one problem for us."

He served overseas from 2003 to 2006 and then returned home to serve as NSA's deputy director and senior civilian from 2006 to 2014 — a role that required him to retire from the Air National Guard as a brigadier general. Some of the watershed moments for the NSA during that time period included Operation Buckshot Yankee (the Russian hack into the U.S. military's computer network), the standoff of U.S. Cyber Command, the fallout from the Ed-



ward Snowden case and the takedown of Osama bin Laden.

His time in the Air National Guard was equally rewarding, affording him the opportunity in the 1990s to lead the Air Force's introduction to service of the tactical variant of the

C-130J as a commander at both the squadron and group level. He later helped facilitate the standup of the Air Force's first cyber operations squadrons at NSA in the early 2000s.

At the conclusion of his NSA tour, Inglis was presented with the National Security Medal from President Barack Obama. The medal recognizes those who have made significant contributions to our nation's security.

"The career that I had at the NSA, you could never have predicted," he says. "My career was essentially a series of choices — some presented to me, some sought out by me. There wasn't a day where I didn't feel privileged to show up and to be able to participate in that sort of work."

Return to Annapolis

In 2014, Inglis returned to the Naval Academy as the Robert and Mary M. Looker Professor in Cyber Security Studies.

It's a bit ironic that Inglis finds himself in his current role, guiding the next generation of military leaders in the challenges

of today's cyber science realm.

Growing up in suburban Baltimore, Inglis says his childhood neighborhood was practically idyllic.

"It was perhaps a bit too wonderful, because it was easy to take it all for granted," he recalls. "You didn't perhaps understand how hard it was to deliver that sort of safety and security."

Throughout his 40-plus-year career, however, Inglis has obviously become keenly aware of the challenges our communities, our nation and the globe face in this rapidly evolving cyber age.

"It all happened so quickly that we were mindful of the benefits that we might accrue from it, but not as mindful of the dangers that lurked inside of that," he says.

Inglis remains grateful that he still has a critical role to play in the cyber field — instructing midshipmen and pushing the boundaries of professional education for the next generation of military leadership.

"There's just such an enormous poten-

TOP: Chris Inglis shakes hands with President Barack Obama after receiving the prestigious National Security Medal.

RIGHT TOP: Brig. Gen. Chris Inglis is pictured at the Navy Ball, explaining the operation of the Enigma Machine, a cipher tool.

RIGHT BOTTOM: The Inglis family — daughter Luciana, Chris, son Paul, son George and wife Anna — in 2004 along the English coast at Lulworth Cove.



tial — both positive and negative — associated with cyber,” he says. “I would never have imagined that I would be valuable in any way, shape or form at this august age.”

Ongoing Motivation

Inglis admits he still feels compelled to contribute what he can in the days ahead.

Part of his motivation is to honor the sacrifice of two USAFA roommates who died in military aircraft accidents, as well as his brother, Patrick, who died in 1983 while flying an A-6 off the USS Eisenhower.

“Those are sobering moments, they’re tragic moments,” he explains. “There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t think about those three people in my life. While my

efforts couldn’t possibly make up for their loss, it is something that motivates and inspires me every day.”

Inglis is additionally inspired to give back to the institutions that helped launch his career.

For more than two decades, Inglis has served as an Air Force Academy Liaison Officer, meeting with young people interested in attending USAFA. He’s always enjoyed counseling those potential future leaders.

“I’m simply giving back to them what was given to me,” he explains. “I can still remember ... meeting an ALO who did the same thing for me. And despite the fact that they might be a third my age, I still meet young people who inspire me. It’s just a really stimulating opportunity.”

In addition, he was instrumental in helping define the curriculum of cyber science that serves as the foundation for cyber education at both USAFA and USNA. He continues to consult on the planned construction of the Center for Cyber Innovation at USAFA, as well as the cyber facility currently under construction at the Naval Academy.

Inglis says he’s proud that both USAFA and the Naval Academy have attained accreditation for their cyber science programs, and he expects to be helping both programs advance in the days ahead.

“They are two of only four institutions in the nation that are currently accredit-

ed,” he notes. “So, if you want to know where the vanguard is for cyber science education, it’s at service academies.”

DG Honor

Inglis says he has mixed reactions to being named a Distinguished Graduate of the Academy. He says gratitude, surprise and humbleness are good descriptions of his initial emotions.

“I know the caliber of graduates that we have, and we have them in large numbers,” he explains. “Any number of them could be so honored.”

The only downside to the honor, he adds, is it’s viewed as a lifetime achievement award. He’s definitely not done yet.

“Does that mean it’s over, case closed?” he asked. “I’ve loved what I’ve done for the last 40-plus years. I’ll continue to look for that. I can’t tell you where I’m going to be in five years or 10 years, but I’d be willing to serve.”

None of it would have been possible, Inglis concludes, if not for being allowed to join the Long Blue Line at a time when his health was in question.

“I can’t tell you how grateful I am,” he says. “And I’m thankful for the gifts of opportunity, and the mentorship that I received from those who have gone before, those with whom I served and those coming on, to include my children and wife, who have supported and strengthened me at every turn.” 

