



Col. (Ret.)
H. Michael Lambert, M.D.
Class of 1970

For a kid, collecting money as part of managing a newspaper route rarely turns into a life-defining moment.

But for Mike Lambert, that dreaded job of asking for payment translated into an hour-long conversation with Maj. Gus Grissom, one of the original Mercury astronauts.

“He was at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base at the time and lived in our little village,” Lambert recalls. “He was kind enough to take me into his home ... just talking about what it was like to be a pilot and how to get there — getting good grades and being honorable.”

Grissom encouraged the youngster to consider the newly opened United States Air Force Academy. Days later, Lambert wrote to the Academy to get some information.

“I received a poster from them and put it on my wall,” he smiles. “I started aiming myself toward the Academy.”

Today, Lambert marvels at that brief encounter in 1958 and how it drastically changed his life. In the years that followed, Lambert served as an Air Force pilot and then became one of the nation’s most respected ophthalmologists and vitreoretinal surgeons.

Formative Years

Lambert credits his father for teaching him the value of hard work and the importance

of integrity long before he attended USAFA.

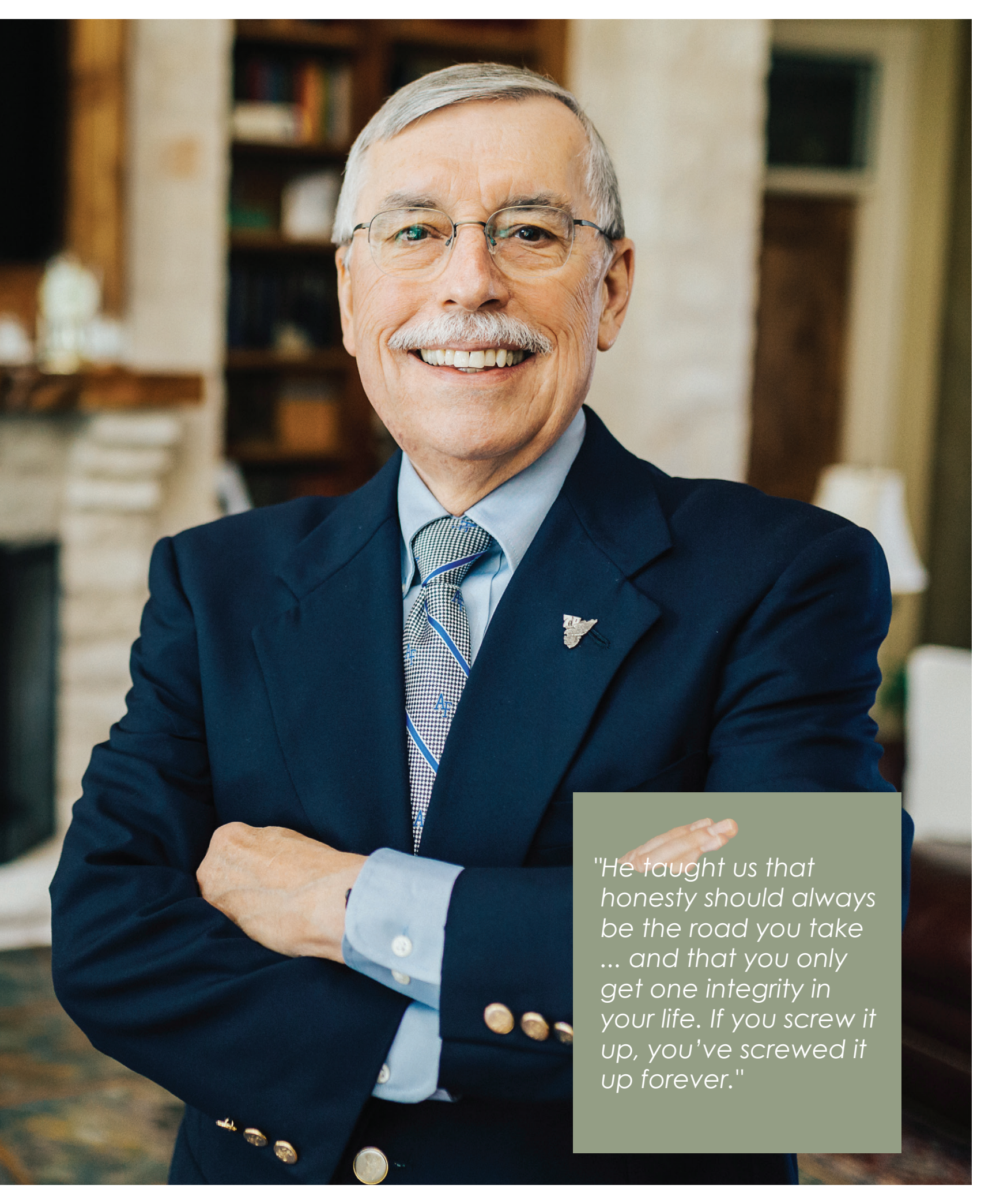
Like many classmates, his dad was a World War II Army veteran, who served as a first sergeant and who fought at Guadalcanal. Lambert’s dad was the police chief of their small Ohio village and a security policeman for 40 years at Wright-Patterson. His mom was his den leader in Cub Scouts and his dad was the scoutmaster.

“He taught us that honesty should always be the road you take,” Lambert recalls, “and that you only get one integrity in your life. If you screw it up, you’ve screwed it up forever. He was a really great guy and my hero. We had little money but much love.”

Lambert displayed mechanical aptitude early in life, helping his grandfather restore cars and assisting his uncle with electrical projects. Lambert’s father also encouraged a passion for inventing things.

“As a youngster I was curious,” he says. “I enjoyed taking things apart, figuring out how they worked and putting them back together. And then trying to figure out how to make them work better.”

When it came time to apply to colleges, the Academy was Lambert’s first choice, but his backup plan was to attend General Motors Institute. Fortunately, he ranked first on Congressman Clarence J. Brown Jr.’s service academy list, so Lambert ended up having his choice of appointments. ►



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When asked where he'd like to go, he responded simply: "Air Force, sir."

Career Goals

When he arrived on the Terrazzo, Lambert decided to pursue a major in physics.

"My goal initially was to become a pilot and then an astronaut," he says. "I literally wanted



to follow in Gus Grissom's footsteps."

But in the summer following his second-class year, Lambert participated in a summer research project at the Laser Weapons Laboratory.

"Somewhere in there — being locked in a lab building a laser in Albuquerque, New Mexico — I realized that was going to be my future if I stayed in physics," Lambert remembers. "I liked working with and talking to people. I also realized that Vietnam was going full bore and my classmates were going to Vietnam. I wanted to be where they were, so I decided to switch over from the physics master's program to heading to UPT [undergraduate pilot training] instead."

His Academy experience helped shape him as an officer and a doctor and a person, Lambert emphasizes. One consequential experience, he suggests, was Survival Evasion Resistance and Escape (SERE) training.

"That was an experience in itself," he recalls. "Like many things at the Academy, my class learned that we could do a lot more than we ever thought we could. Virtually everything we did at the Academy made you stronger and helped you believe in yourself and that you could do almost anything you could imagine."

Later, when he was a SERE instructor, Lambert caught the medical care bug. He taught the medical course during SERE and really enjoyed the opportunity.

Of all the lessons he learned as a cadet, Lambert adds, the most important was teamwork.

"Teamwork came up in everything," he says. "You were a team and you helped each other. It wasn't just one person trying to be a hero. I've carried that through my entire life. Teams are hard to form in the real world, but not if you bring a bunch of grads together. They understand."

Taking Flight

By the time he'd completed pilot training at Laughlin Air Force Base in Texas, Lambert was faced with a tough choice about which aircraft to pursue. The U.S. military was returning from Vietnam, and soon many fighter pilots would be out of work.

"Maybe you'd get two hours a month when the war was completely over," he says of a possible fighter assignment.

His squadron commander suggested the T-38, which would allow Lambert to get plenty of hours and would provide an opportunity to move to other airplanes. He headed to the T-38 and returned to Laughlin as an instructor pilot.

"I had a wonderful time, and all the other IPs felt the same," Lambert recalls. "We were teaching students who were all motivated. And despite being out in the middle of nowhere, we probably had more parties and more fun in Del Rio than we had anywhere ... just because there was nothing else to do other than to do things together and we were with great friends."



As his instructor assignment was ending, Lambert struggled to set a career path for the rest of his life. Uncharacteristically, he went for a walk by himself one night to help sort out things in his mind.

"Jenny and I had just built a house in Del Rio," he recalls. "Jenny came running up behind me and said 'What's up?'" (Lambert had met his future wife in catechism class years before — she was 12 and he 14 — and he first paid attention to her when she painted his face and shirt while they were painting the church basement.)

He explained to her that he was thinking about attending medical school and that he wanted to be able to look back after 35 years and say that his life had an impact.

"I figured she'd say, 'are you kidding me, we just built this house,'" he recalls. "But she said, 'you want to go to medical school, let's go to medical school.' She's truly my lifetime partner and supporter."

The Eyes Have It

After applying to several medical schools, Lambert chose Baylor College of Medicine.

"I chose Baylor for two reasons," he says. "One, they were much more clinically oriented. Two, you could do the four-year program in three years. I'm an old man at this point — 26 — so I decided to go to Baylor to catch up."

After graduation, Lambert began a residency in obstetrics and gynecology at Wilford Hall Medical Center in San Antonio.

"About six months into the residency, I realized this was not what I wanted to do with the rest of my life," he notes. "I was very interested in doing microsurgery, but the Air Force at that point wasn't interested in the infertility specialty."

He switched instead to ophthalmology, another microsurgery possibility.

"Pilots rely on ophthalmology quite a bit, so that was important to me," he says. "More importantly, it was the type of surgery you could literally invent. It was very fine and very controlled. You had to be patient, take your time and do it right. And hand-eye coordination is very important. Just like flying a jet."

Lambert's goal was to specialize in vitreoretinal surgery and treatment, which was in its infancy at the time. He admits he wanted to help advance the science behind the techniques being used.

"We were only three or four years into the specialty then," he says. "That looked like the right place for me. They were just starting to develop better instruments because the things they had at that point were pretty rudimentary. I saw that as an oppor-

if his medical condition turned fatal.

"If I had had a crystal ball, I would have stayed in," he admits. "I don't know if I would have made it up to a star or two or three, but I certainly would have liked to have tried."

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tunity to develop many new instruments and techniques. I love making and inventing better ways to help people."

Lambert secured a fellowship at Duke University, working under the "father of vitreoretinal surgery" — Dr. Robert Machemer.

When he completed that fellowship, Lambert returned to Wilford Hall and quickly advanced through the leadership ranks.

"I came in as the vice chairman of the department and residency program director, and then moved up to the chairmanship in ophthalmology, chief of surgery at Wilford Hall, and chief consultant to the Air Force surgeon general," he notes. "The Air Force also offered me the chance to be a member of the Letterman Army Institute of Research, the committee that decided on new weapons, devices and experimental projects. I was blessed!"

Health Concerns

By 1989, Lambert was poised to extend his Air Force career, with the goal of becoming a hospital commander and beyond. Unfortunately, he was diagnosed with metastatic thyroid cancer and decided to leave active duty.

Lambert's military life insurance policy at the time was just \$50,000, which was not enough to provide for his wife and young son

Lambert joined the faculty at Emory College and Baylor College of Medicine, in part because they provided upward of \$4 million in life insurance coverage.

He would go on to found Retina and Vitreous of Texas, a private practice in Houston, and join the faculty at the Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences.

Over his 35-year teaching and ophthalmology career, Lambert has helped advance

the treatment of complicated retinal detachments and macular degeneration through his writings and instrument innovation.

Lambert invented and holds the patents on many instruments (specialized forceps, scissors, etc.) that are used for retinal surgery and treatment today. Even though he retired from full-time practice in 2013, Lambert continues his work on retina treatment improvements and teaching.

ACROSS TOP: Cadet Michael Lambert stands at attention and flashes a smile for the camera.

ACROSS BELOW: Mike Lambert and new wife, Jenny, walk down the aisle after saying "I do."

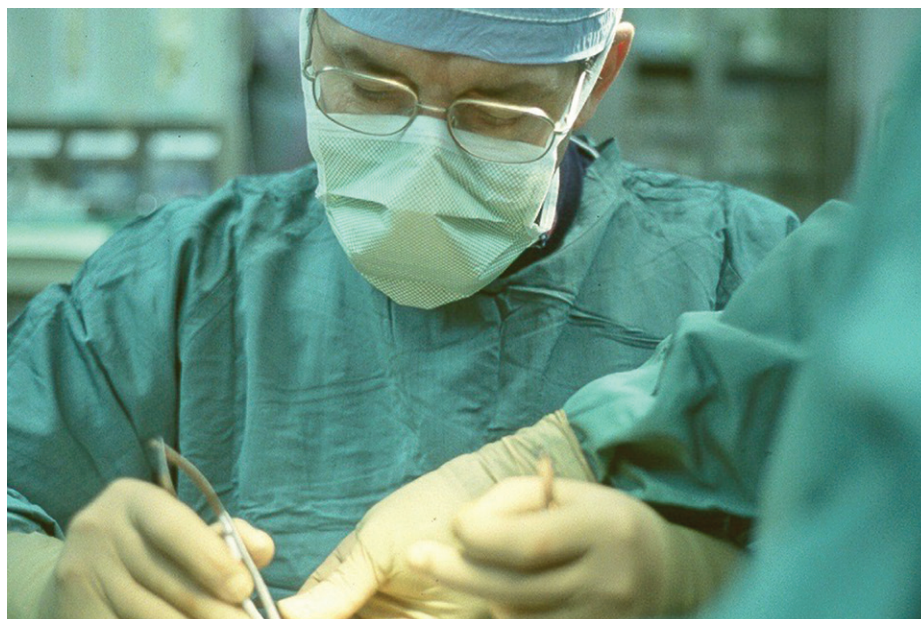
BOTTOM: Dr. Mike Lambert is pictured performing eye surgery on a patient. Lambert is a well known retina specialist

"I have a weird brain," he smiles. "I see things and I think, 'You could make that better by...' It's just fun for me. I just like to make things better ... or develop things that haven't been developed before."

His motivation, Lambert says, isn't to get his name on a new instrument or make money (he did not patent most of his ideas). His motivation is taking better care of patients and improving results.

"In my entire career, I never turned a patient away," he says. "Money or not, I didn't care. It drove our billing people nuts in private practice. But I'm very proud of that — I just wanted to take care of people — all people."

Lambert's enduring impact on ophthalmology and the treatment of retinal disease





is widely accepted. He has received numerous industry awards recognizing his many contributions. He was even a charter inductee in the newly established American Society of Retinal Specialists Hall of Fame.

While in full-time practice, he also was regularly featured on prestigious top-physician lists, such as peer-rated “Best Doctors in America” and “America’s Top Doctors.” He was chosen by his peers and listed every year from the inception of both lists until his retirement.

Retirement Years?

Even though he no longer is in full-time practice, Lambert keeps incredibly busy.

“We divided our lives into three parts, Jenny and I, a long time ago,” he explains. “Part one was where we were learning how

to do what we were going to do; part two was where we did what we had been trained to do and began to give back; and then part three is where we focus on giving back. In 2013, we started the giving-back part.”

Lambert serves at a charity clinic — I Care San Antonio — providing quality eye care to patients. The clinic was the brainchild of fellow USAFA graduate and close friend Dr. Bob Rice ’72.

“We don’t charge anything,” he says. “I don’t even have to look at a billing code. The patients can donate \$5 or \$10 if they want to, but it’s not a requirement.”

Lambert continues to teach on a semi-regular basis, bringing the ophthalmological community up to speed on the latest advancements in retinal surgery and treatments.

“I’m old now, so I’m called a senior thought leader,” he laughs.

As a prostate cancer survivor, Lambert also voluntarily consults with patients recently diagnosed with that form of cancer and talks them through challenges and questions.

In addition, Lambert co-founded the Greenon Local School District Foundation, helping his and his wife’s hometown replace aging school facilities. They also established the Giampetro Scholarship Fund to benefit Greenon students who pursue music education (Jenny’s passion).

Lambert helped found the Robert Machemer Foundation at Duke University, which helps fund research fellowships for ophthalmologists and retina specialists. He currently serves as the organization’s treasurer.

In his spare time, Lambert also serves on the board of the Guide Dogs of Texas Inc., a nonprofit organization that provides guide dogs to visually impaired Texans. Plus he supports the 100 Club, an organization providing police and fire funds in Austin and Houston, and Veteran Outdoors, an organization for vets started by classmate Harry Strittmatter’s son, Brad.

Because he loves restoring vintage automobiles, Lambert also has served in leadership positions with the Ferrari Club of America.

If that wasn’t enough, Lambert continues to consult with startup companies on a variety of innovative projects and just accepted a board of director chair position with LVX System, the inventor and first to commercialize Visible Light Communication (VLC). Their patented technology utilizes LED lighting to enable high-speed, very secure communications.

“This disruptive new communication medium shows great potential for our country as we address concerns relating to RF exposure, cybersecurity, Wi-Fi congestion, IoT [Internet of Things], autonomous vehicles and energy,” Lambert says.

LVX intends to use Lambert’s expertise in the fields of medicine and human health, defense application, aviation, and academic interface such as USAFA cadet research projects.

Lambert remains connected with his alma mater as well. He helped found and serves as president of the Central Texas Chapter of the Association of Graduates.

“We’ve been a distinguished chapter every year so far,” he reports. “I’m really





proud of that. It's really fun and an honor to be with grads who are just very special people."

Lambert also is a founding director of the USAFA Endowment.

"We're giving back," he says of the Endowment's efforts. "We're trying to do much to improve the Academy and improve the cadets' ability to do research and the like."

In addition, Lambert and his Class of 1970 classmates have done a bunch to establish themselves as the "heritage class" of USAFA. Through planning and financial backing entirely by the class, '70 has spearheaded a number of huge heritage-related projects, including the Southeast Asia Pavilion and the Plaza of Heroes adjacent to the AOG's Doolittle Hall.

"Our class leaders — Curt Emery, Gary Dahlen, Dick Rauschkolb and Mike Torreano — did the heavy lifting getting these projects done, and we have one more to come at our 50th reunion," he reports.

"I think heritage tells us who we are, who we've been, where we've come from and where we should be going," Lambert says. "I think many more people today should

be reading history books and learning why America is America, and what people did to make us who we are."

"It has been quite a journey," he smiles. "And it all goes back to the Academy ... aiming me toward doing something I wanted to do, something I loved, something I thought I was good at and something that would help other people — all with exceptional friends."

DG Honor

When he received word that he would be one of four recipients of the 2018 Distinguished Graduate Award, Lambert couldn't believe it.

"Who, me?" he laughs. "Wouldn't you rather pick any number of 100 classmates who I think deserve it as well? I think other than Jenny saying 'I do' and the birth of our son and his marriage to his wife, Yvonne, this is the most amazing thing that has happened to me in my life. It's the greatest honor I've ever received."

Lambert adds, however, that this honor doesn't mark the end of the story. He still plans to accomplish much more in the years ahead.

ACROSS TOP: Dr. Mike Lambert is pictured at Retina and Vitreous of Texas, which he helped found.

ACROSS BELOW: Mike and Jenny Lambert enjoy a top-down ride in one of the couple's classic cars.

BOTTOM: The Lambert family includes (from left) Jenny, Mike, daughter-in-law Yvonne and son Josh Lambert. Retired guide dogs Huey (left) and Coral joined the photograph.

"I hope I'm not done yet," he says. "My wife would tell you that I never think I'm done. She thinks that someone will start throwing some dirt in over my coffin at the Academy Cemetery and hear a knock from the inside. They'll open the top and I'll say: 'Hey, you could make these hinges better by...'"