



Gen. (Ret.)
Mark Welsh III
Class of 1976

On prominent display in his third-floor office at Texas A&M are mementos from Gen. (Ret.) Mark Welsh's 35-year career in the Air Force.

A letter from President George H.W. Bush hangs on the wall. Models of various aircraft Welsh flew while on active duty occupy several spots on the bookshelves. Pictures from watershed moments of his life are scattered throughout the room.

None of the accomplishments or memories, he suggests, make him the perfect candidate for the honor of Distinguished Graduate of the United States Air Force Academy.

"Academy graduates for my entire life have been my friends, my mentors, my role models, my trusted leaders, my commanders, my flight leads, my instructors, my wingmen," he says. "For my entire adult life, they have been my inspiration. I've never seen myself as distinguished compared to any of the ones I've known."

So, Welsh admits he was surprised to receive a call from the Academy with the news that he was one of four DG recipients this year. He is nonetheless grateful for the honor.

Interestingly, if not for a second-chance Falcon Foundation Scholarship to attend a

prep school, Welsh may have lived a completely different life than the one that led to his tenure as the 20th chief of staff of the Air Force.

It's a career that ultimately brought him full circle — back to Texas A&M, where he initially expected to attend college, just like his father.

Last-Minute Choice

The son of an Air Force fighter pilot, Welsh grew up on military bases throughout the United States, England and Germany.

"It was a great childhood, actually," Welsh recalls. "We had a wonderful family, we lived in great places and we had great friends."

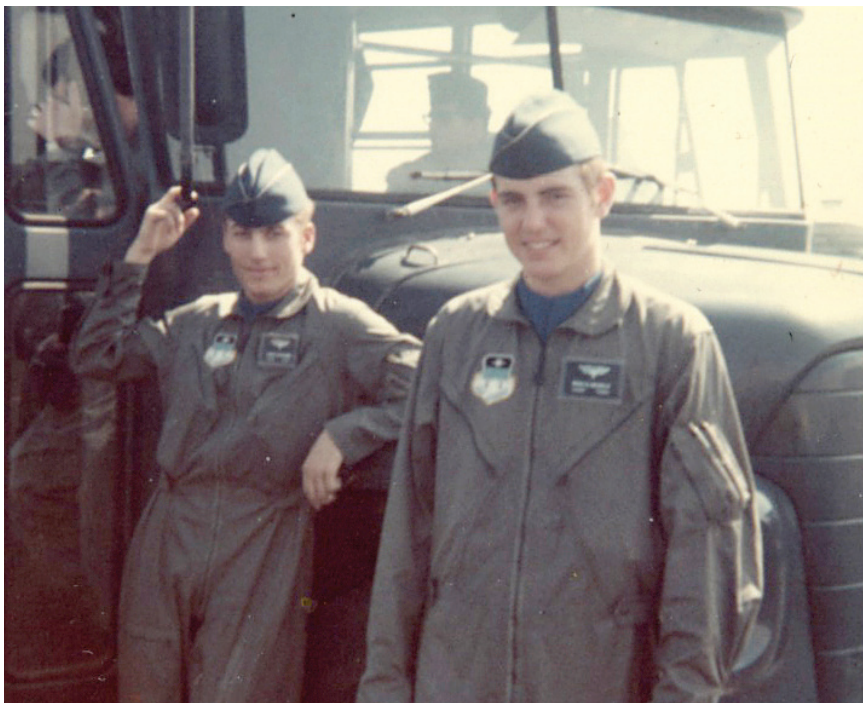
Welsh idolized his father and wanted to be just like him when he grew up.

"I had the chance to spend time on the flightline with him at all the bases we were assigned to," he laughs. "I knew all his crew chiefs. I actually wanted to be a crew chief growing up. But the best thing that ever happened for the United States Air Force is that they wouldn't let me be a crew chief, because I can't fix anything."

By the time he was in high school, Welsh zeroed in on becoming a pilot.

"The chance to fly airplanes was a big draw for me," he says. "It was a pretty excit-





ing thought. It wasn't about making career plans, it was about going fast."

Welsh sought a congressional appointment to USAFA, but unfortunately didn't make the cut.

"I was probably much more confident than I was intelligent or hardworking in high school," he admits, "so my high school grades were not that good."

Welsh's father discovered a different opportunity — a Falcon Foundation Scholarship — which would allow him to attend a prep school for a year in an effort to gain an Academy appointment the following year.

Unfortunately, Welsh received a letter from the Falcon Foundation informing him that he was a fourth or fifth alternate for the coming year.

"So, that opportunity seemed to have slipped by me," he recalls. "I actually applied to and was accepted to Texas A&M University, following my dad's footsteps."

Months later, near the end of his senior year, Welsh received a second letter. All of the students ahead of him had removed their names from consideration for a scholarship. Welsh took advantage of the opportunity.

"The Falcon Foundation gave me a second chance, one that I probably hadn't earned ... because I just wasn't mature enough to work hard for it at that time," Welsh says. "But it opened the door to a life that I just couldn't have imagined."

Prep School

Transitioning to a military environment wasn't too taxing for Welsh. He thrived within the physically challenging and highly disciplined atmosphere at Wentworth Military Academy in Missouri.

"I enjoyed the military side of it actually," he says. "It kind of showed me what it re-

quired to refocus and work harder, and actually study and do better academically, which is something I needed to learn."

Welsh says he remains eternally grateful for that additional year of maturity that helped launch him into the Air Force Academy.

"I wouldn't be sitting here if it wasn't for the Falcon Foundation," he says. "I owe everything to that group of people."

Cadet Experiences

For the most part, Welsh loved his time as a cadet. Perhaps his most vivid memory is from survival and resistance training, as the loud music finally came to an end.

"Somebody ripped off your hood, and you're looking at the American flag," he remembers. "I still get emotional thinking about that. That was a remarkable shared experience, unlike any other I'd had in my lifetime up to that point."

Even though he enjoyed his classes and instructors, Welsh still continued to struggle academically.

"I just didn't apply myself the way I wish I had," he says. "As a result, I blocked myself off from opportunities down the road. I didn't have the transcript to apply to a resident master's degree program and get accepted. It was my own fault."

"I was never the best athlete on any team, I was never the smartest guy in the classroom, I was never the best speaker, I was never the best-looking guy. ... If I was going to succeed, it wasn't going to be about being the best, it was going to be about trying the hardest. That I could do as well as anybody."



During his four-year cadet experience, Welsh played intercollegiate golf for two years and baseball for his final two years.

"It gave me a great diversion from some of the other things that were more routine about cadet life," he says.

Welsh was especially grateful to one of his Academy roommates, John Vosburg, who introduced his sister, Betty, to the future general. Betty would later become Welsh's wife. "My whole life changed when I met her," he says.

Corny Things

Welsh remains steadfast in his belief that corny things are important, and the Academy experience is filled with many such things.

"In my house, when I was growing up, corny things mattered to my mom and dad," he says. "All those things that bond people and form teams, and that will allow you to go do really difficult things in difficult places at difficult times, side by side. Pride, patriotism, faith and family, respect, loyalty, and friendship — I learned about those things at the Academy."

The consequence of focusing on such values resulted in Welsh concluding that "people matter," he says. He carried that people-first focus with him throughout his career.

"If you're in an environment where people

are lifting you up and helping you along, it's a very different world than living in an environment where people are always in your way or trying to push you in the opposite direction," he says. "I didn't see that second example at the Academy. I saw the first."

Another lesson he learned at USAFA was that hard work pays off. Welsh says he realized early on that he was never going to be the best at anything.

"I was never the best athlete on any team, I was never the smartest guy in the classroom, I was never the best speaker, I was never the best-looking guy," he laughs. "If I was going to succeed, it wasn't going to be about being the best, it was going to be about trying the hardest. That I could do as well as anybody."

Because of those lessons learned, Welsh says the Academy holds a special place in his heart to this day.

"I love what it stands for," he explains. "I love what it did for me. There were frustrating days like everybody else, but overall I kept focused on the fact that this was a pretty good deal."

Off We Go

After graduation, Welsh jumped into pilot training at Williams Air Force Base. He became a T-37 instructor pilot immediately following.

PREVIOUS: Cadet Mark Welsh (foreground) strikes a pose during his time at USAFA.

LEFT: Mark Welsh and Betty Welsh share a special moment in this picture dated 1979. Betty is pregnant with their first child.

BELOW: Gen. (Ret.) Mark Welsh '76 is pictured during his F-16 flying days. He calls his varied flying experiences "fantastic."

"It was not something I wanted to do," he admits. "I had grander plans. As it turned out, it couldn't have been any better for me because it was like free life insurance. I watched students make every mistake I would have made some day if I hadn't seen them do it first."

On the personal side, being an instructor pilot helped Welsh become more of a people person. Interacting with students improved his communication skills and his ability to empathize.

At the end of that assignment, Welsh started flying the A-10. ►



"It was an airplane I always dreamed about flying," he says.

Welsh later switched to the F-16 and enjoyed that platform as well.

"We got to deploy to lots of different places and in lots of different ways," he says. "My flying career was just a fantastic experience."

Leadership Roles

Welsh went on to command at the squadron, group and wing levels. He later served in a number of Air Force and Joint Forces positions, the Central Intelligence Agency, and as commander of NATO's Air Forces.

"Every time I turned around, someone gave me an opportunity that surprised me," he says. "It was a joy. Every day was a privilege."

Several assignments would return him to his alma mater over the years. In 1984, he became an Air Officer Commanding in Cadet Squadron 5.

"I was in the middle of a decision between becoming an F-5 aggressor pilot in England or going to do an exchange tour flying Harriers with the Brits in Germany," he recalls. "I got a call saying that I was going to the Air Force Academy to be an AOC. I fought the assignment. I tried

to get out of it, because I didn't want to quit flying."

It turned out to be a wonderful assignment, Welsh admits.

"You get to see the Academy from a different angle," he explains. "You get to see the quality of the young men and women who are coming in the door. I am not one of those people who believes that the Academy has gone downhill. The cadets are better today than we were, in any way you can measure, and they have the same heart, the same pride, the same patriotism. Anybody who says otherwise doesn't know them."

Following his AOC assignment, Welsh would remain at USAFA, becoming the executive officer to the commandant under Gen. Marcus Anderson '61 and then Gen. Sam Westbrooke '63.

In 1999, Welsh returned again to the Academy as commandant of cadets.

"I was excited about the opportunity to go back and see if I could make a difference at the Academy, because I feel so strongly about its importance," he notes.

An added bonus was that his son, John, had just received an appointment to USAFA's Class of 2003.



"I was much happier about this arrangement probably than John was, because his parents were coming to college with him," he laughs. "He got plenty of attention, which he handled very well. I wouldn't have wanted the distinction of being the commandant's son as a basic cadet."

Chief of Staff

In August 2012, Welsh became the 20th chief of staff of the Air Force, and he held the position for four years.

"I don't know why I was selected, because I knew the other people who could have been selected for the job," he admits, "and they're all pretty impressive people."

Even though he was intimidated by the job offer at first, a dinner invitation from then-Chief of Staff Gen. "Norty" Schwartz '73 helped calm his fears. In attendance that night were all of the living, former chiefs who proceeded to offer great insight and advice.

It was an extremely challenging time to be the Air Force's top military officer. Right out of the gate, Welsh had to deal with sexual assault scandals, friction between active duty and Air National Guard leadership, and sequestration.

"I think every chief, as they walk into the job, comes into a different situation," he



notes. “So their focus is on different things necessarily. Sometimes you get to decide what those things are; other times they’re kind of thrust upon you.”

In the case of sequestration, Welsh and his team had to make some difficult decisions while still motivating airmen to do their jobs at the highest level but with fewer resources.

Overall, Welsh reports that every day of his tenure as chief of staff was a privilege.

“The thing I feel good about is that I always gave it my best,” he says. “There were days that I wasn’t so good, but I think everybody has those days. But there were never days where I didn’t try my hardest. I think my dad would have been proud of that.”

New Challenges

As his military career came to a close, Welsh says he was amazed as he looked back at the trajectory of his career. It exceeded his expectations at every turn.

“I think I would have been a very happy retired lieutenant colonel,” he says. “That was kind of a goal of mine — to get to lieutenant colonel and maybe be a squadron commander.”

Upon retirement, Welsh landed the job as dean at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University. The mission of the school is to create principled leaders who hope to go into public service.

“It’s kind of modeled after President George H.W. Bush — Bush 41,” he explains. “It’s not about his politics. It’s about his principled leadership, about his personal example, about his way of treating people with respect.”

Approximately 70 percent of the graduates of the Bush School end up serving their fellow citizens in some capacity.

“That’s a remarkable number,” Welsh suggests. “The chance to come and serve in his school, and to try to produce public servants

PREVIOUS TOP: Gen. Mark Welsh '76 is pictured sharing a lighter moment during his tenure as chief of staff of the Air Force. (Submitted photos)

PREVIOUS BELOW: Mark Welsh and his kids, during his commandant years. From left are Liz, Mark IV, Mark III, Matt and John.

BELOW: Gen. Mark Welsh III and his wife, Betty, welcomed Elmo to the Pentagon during Welsh's chief of staff tenure.

in his image, was something that really appealed to me.”

It didn’t hurt that the school is part of Texas A&M. Welsh and his family have a long connection to the institution. Not only was his father an Aggie, but four of Welsh’s brothers and sisters graduated from there. All four of Welsh’s children are Aggies as well.

Giving Back

Even though he’s now employed at Texas A&M, Welsh remains connected to his alma mater in many ways.

Welsh is a member of the Association of Graduates and has been for decades, and he recently joined the board of directors for the USAFA Endowment.

“Staying connected to the school I love — the Air Force Academy — is really important to me,” he explains.

In addition, Welsh serves as a Falcon Foundation trustee. “I really want to be part of giving some young man or woman the same opportunity that I was given a long time ago,” he says. “It was just a major gift in my life.”

Welsh continues his involvement with the Academy with one goal in mind — strengthening and improving the institution.

“I think every institution has to remember that no matter what it is today, it could be more, and the Academy is certainly in that boat,” Welsh says. “How great can it be? I have no idea, but anything I can do to help it get there, I want to try and do.” 