

A portrait of Mr. Hugh Williamson, an older man with grey hair, smiling. He is wearing a light-colored shirt and a bolo tie. The background is a blurred bookshelf.

MR. HUGH WILLIAMSON

CLASS OF 1964

Hugh Williamson '64 remembers the moment that helped launch his successful career in business.

While sitting in the office of a local banker, Williamson outlined his various options for when he left the Air Force. He suggested he could take a job with one of the major airlines — United, Pan Am or TWA in particular.

The banker just laughed.

“Son, you don’t want to go do that,” the banker responded. “You’re going to get up there and punch a button and sit back? Do something that’s going to make something happen.”

Williamson took the advice to heart. In the de-

cades since, Williamson became the first United States Air Force Academy graduate to become the chief executive officer of a Fortune 500 company. He’s also launched and operated numerous other businesses, displaying a knack for turning struggling companies around and growing startup operations into industry leaders.

His business acumen is just one aspect of his life story, which has led to him being chosen as a 2020 Distinguished Graduate of his alma mater.

“To have been selected . . . not only was I greatly surprised but I was greatly humbled,” Williamson admits. “I’ve done my share, but there are a lot of people who have done the same or more.”

EARLY DAYS

The son of a civil engineer who worked on the Manhattan Project, Williamson enjoyed an idyllic childhood in various locales. A sports nut ever since he was young, Williamson went on to become an excellent basketball and tennis player as a teen.

He ultimately graduated from a high school in Mobile, Alabama, with a strong academic record and athletic talent.

"I was basically a straight-A student, except for deportment," he laughs.

When he applied to attend USAFA, Williamson says his parents were initially against the idea. His family had no military background, so they didn't completely understand what their son was signing up for.

Williamson actually ended up with appointments to Air Force, Army and Navy.

"I chose Air Force, primarily because I couldn't see myself digging foxholes and I certainly was not getting on a boat," he smiles.

It all turned out well, as the values Williamson had been taught as a youngster meshed with the cadet life. His grandfather was a stickler for honesty and integrity and instilled those traits in the younger Williamson.

"My mom basically always told me I could do anything I put my heart to if I really wanted to do it," he adds. "She inspired in me a sense of confidence, in fact I was actually overconfident in lots of cases and had to dig myself out of situations."

Shortly before leaving for the Academy, Williamson met with then-Cadet James Poole '61, who was on summer break, to get some intel on what to expect when the cadet candidate arrived in Colorado Springs. But when Williamson hopped on an airplane for the first time and headed west, his overconfidence reared its ugly head.

"I was thinking it couldn't be that bad," he says. "I was in great shape and so forth. But it was a shock, to say the least, the first time I walked up and guys were yelling at me from all directions and I was doing more pushups than I ever thought I could do."

That night, when Williamson settled into his bed, roommate Scottie Sudmalis '64 and he made a pledge.

"We both swore we wouldn't let the other one quit," he recalls. "Fortunately, it never came up." ►



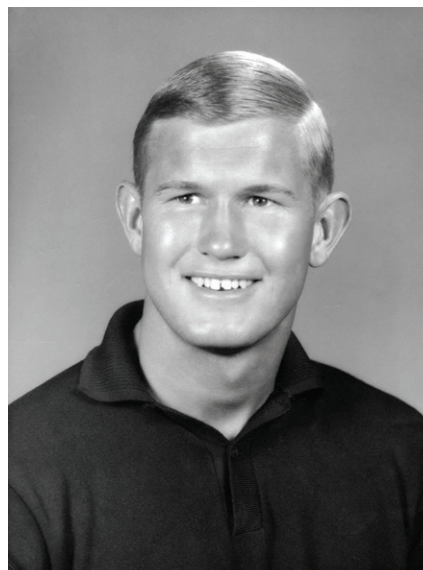
TOP: Hugh Williamson and his brother, Pete, head off to church with parents.



MIDDLE: Hugh's last T-38 student solo.

BOTTOM LEFT: Hugh's high school graduation photo.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Hugh and Pete off for a ride on Scout.



MEMORABLE MOMENTS

Williamson's goals while at the Academy were to play Division I basketball and get a good education. He accomplished both, and then some.

His academic efforts were a bit lacking in the beginning.

"My problem was I never was really challenged academically in high school," he admits. "If I had study habits, they weren't any good."

After recording a 2.89 grade point average in his first semester, Williamson received an unexpected visit from an upperclassman.

"One of the second classmen was a stickler on education," he remembers. "He came and chewed my butt out."

By the end of the second semester Williamson's GPA was up to 3.73.

In an effort to get away from the Academy on a regular basis, Williamson joined the chorale.

"I knew they went up and sang with the Loretto Heights College girls," he admits.

One highlight from his cadet singing career came when the chorale was invited to appear on the "Dinah Shore Show" in Los Angeles.

"Roy Rogers, Dale Evans and Trigger were on the show, and we got to meet them," he reports. "For a boy from Mobile, Alabama, that was big time."

Another highlight was being invited to a Christmas Debutante Ball in Denver.

"You had to be 6'2" or over to sign up and volunteer," he recalls. "It was a fantastic evening."

The next day, while staying at a host family's home, Williamson was asked if he'd ever driven a Ferrari. The gentleman of the house later gave him the opportunity to test the limits of the machine.

"It was the first time I'd ever been 100 miles an hour in an automobile," he smiles. "We went out and drove for an hour."

Williamson's height was a factor in another memorable moment for him. When President John Kennedy spoke at the Class of 1963 graduation ceremony, Williamson led the cadet welcoming party.

"They wanted guys who were 6'3" or more," he says. "I was the lead guy. So I'm standing at the foot of this ramp and I call the group to attention. We're saluting and Kennedy reaches out to shake my hand. I'm sure there was a stutter step in there on my part, but he shook my hand."

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—MR. HUGH WILLIAMSON III '64

IMPORTANT LESSONS

The Academy helped establish a firm foundation for Williamson's career and personal life. Some of the key lessons he learned were working as a team, multitasking and dealing with pressure.

"I think managing stress was a key element that I came away with," he says. "Of course, when you got to the Academy you were under stress the entire time."

One way to manage the stress was developing the ability to multitask, he adds.

"When you are a Doolie especially, you had to do about eight things at a time," he remembers. "I was capable, and still am capable, of working under pressure. And I've been under a lot of pressure, needless to say."

Finally, assembling a team and working as a team were important lessons.

"I don't care how good you are — a single individual can't accomplish much," he explains. "But if you build a solid team, you can accomplish plenty."

CAREER GOALS

When he showed up at the Academy, Williamson admits he had no specific career goal in mind.

He explored the opportunity to attend law school, and in fact was all set to enroll at University of Virginia and become a judge advocate general officer.

"That's when all hell broke loose in Vietnam," he says. "I got a call from the judge advocate general's office saying they needed pilots more than we need lawyers right now. That was the best thing ever to happen to me — I would have been a really bad lawyer."

Williamson headed off to pilot training at Reese Air Force Base in Texas instead, thanks to a waiver from Gen. Curtis LeMay.

"My sitting height was a quarter inch too tall," he laughs.

It was there that he met his future wife, Nan. At the end of training, Williamson requested an F-105 assignment in Vietnam, but instead became an instructor pilot at Reese in the T-37.

"I was disappointed, but you don't get a vote," he reports. "In the end, of course, it turned out really well."

A couple years later, Williamson ended up leading the academics for the T-37 program.

TRANSITION TIME

Now ready to head to Vietnam in the F-4, Williamson received another call that would change his career direction again. Because of a fighter pilot bubble in the Air Force ranks, he was offered a chance to transition out early.

"I just couldn't see myself staying in a seniority-based situation," he says. "I wanted to do something where I could do as well as I could manage."

Two weeks later, Williamson was enrolled in graduate school pursuing his master's in business administration.

Upon graduation, Williamson interviewed with six different companies and was offered positions with each.

"Back then, if you had an MBA, you were ex-military and you had an engineering background, you could go anywhere you wanted to," he says. "Timing is everything."

He settled on a position with IBM, working with clients to improve their technology upgrades. He was involved with the development and introduction of the System 7, the game-changing scientific computer that IBM first produced in the early 1970s.

"I got promoted twice," he says. "But when I ended up in corporate headquarters, I didn't want to be an IBM corporate flunky."

BIG BUSINESS

Williamson jumped ship to become general manager at O'Neal Steel, a client he'd worked with during his IBM stint.

"I didn't know much about the steel industry," he admits. "But I'd sold the company a lot of computer stuff. The first thing I did was get everything I'd sold them going."

He installed one of the first online automated inventory systems so the company



CLOCKWISE: Hugh, son Mark and 11-year-old grandson Dylan after the 50-mile, 6,800-foot Iron Horse Classic race. The Williamson family at Breckenridge. Hugh and Nan at a CEO holiday party.

could easily track its products. He received a lot of positive press as a result.

That's when headhunters started calling, trying to convince Williamson to take on a new challenge.

He accepted his first chief executive officer role with Edgcomb Metals Inc. Under his leadership, the company grew from \$97 million in sales in 1977 to \$660 million seven years later.

After another headhunter call in 1984, Williamson accepted the CEO role with Revere Copper and Brass Inc., a Fortune 500 company. At the age of 42, he was one of the youngest CEOs among top companies. Revere was in bankruptcy at the time.

"Revere had been the tenth largest company in the United States in the 1930s," Williamson says. "But in a series of just poor managers over years, they were 474 or 484 when I took it over."

The plan was for the company to emerge from bankruptcy in three years, but Williamson and his team accomplished that feat in just 11 months. Revere was soon profitable again.

Williamson next decided to leave the big corporate world and instead focus on startups and new technology. He went on to ownership and leadership roles in public

companies such as Ketema Inc., Emageon Inc. and XeDar Corp.

Several of the companies provide critical national support in terms of resources, technology and cybersecurity.

In his various company roles, Williamson also was heavily involved in industry associations, helping lobby Congress for favorable legislation.

Williamson remains involved in business ventures today. Several years ago, his family (Hugh, wife Nan, and their two sons) created Humanade LLC to handle real estate and business interests that they are all involved in.

"The only way to really do well in business is to do whatever you're doing better than your competition," he says. "You've got to outperform somewhere to do well. But it hasn't hurt that I've made so many mistakes along the way. You learn to not make those same mistakes again, and you just keep doing better and better."

GIVING BACK

Through the years, Williamson and his wife have felt a strong commitment to giving back to their communities via numerous nonprofit organizations.

They formed the Williamson Foundation, now called El Puente Foundation, to support numerous causes. The foundation focuses on providing a safe, healthy and nurturing environment for youth, and especially those who are needy, disadvantaged or at-risk.

The Williamsons also have been heavily involved in the United Way and Boy Scouts. A regular churchgoer all his life, Williamson led the endowment organization for the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

In addition, the Williamsons have been strong supporters of USAFA through a variety of efforts.

Williamson has been a Falcon Foundation trustee since 1985, and the couple has recently established a \$1 million scholarship fund named for the Class of 1964.

The Williamsons were Patron Level donors in the construction of Doolittle Hall — the AOG's alumni house — back in the 1990s, and they have been Polaris Society donors for the past 25 years.

More recently, Williamson became a founding director of the Air Force Academy Foundation Board (formerly the USAFA Endowment), where the couple continues to support many worthy projects.

"I'm sitting here today because I went to the Air Force Academy," he says. "It's why I'm what I'm worth financially. It's why I'm worth what I am as an individual — as a husband, a father and as a grandfather. It's important that we give back, and we're not done doing what we're going to do for the Academy."

SPECIAL THANKS

Williamson says he credits his wife of 55 years, Nan, for his success as an Air Force officer, businessperson and human being. He says what he's most proud of now is his close family.

"We didn't set out to make a lot of money," he admits. "Our family has been my number one objective all along. As long as I have a roof over my head and I have the family I have, I'm a happy camper."

He also thanks his Class of 1964 classmates, who have always been supportive. Those friendships he developed at USAFA have remained strong for more than five decades, he says. 