



CLASS OF
1967

MAJ. GEN. (RET.)

EUGENE LUPIA

Each year, just prior to USAFA graduation, Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Eugene “Gene” Lupia ’67 returns to his alma mater to speak with the civil and environmental engineering students.

This year, like the three previous decades he’s spoken to firsties, Lupia shares a simple lesson that has served him well since commissioning into the Air Force.

“If something’s not right, say something,” he says. “That has benefited me a lot. There are 10 or 12 examples of when I could have bitten my tongue and just pressed on, but I chose to say something.”

He readily admits that his honesty and willingness to speak up didn’t always serve him well. But it was a practice that helped advance his career beyond early expectations.

“I don’t know if that’s part of my New York background or exactly what, but I say what I think I should say,” he laughs.

Lupia went on to become the first USAFA graduate to serve as the Air Force’s top civil engineer. His legendary status in the civil engineering career field has resulted in three Air Force awards named in his honor — the Eugene Lupia Award of Excellence recognizing one company grade officer, one non-commissioned officer and one enlisted civil engineer each year.

Another Eugene Lupia Award is presented to the top graduating USAFA cadet in the Civil Engineering Department.

“It’s quite a nice feeling having awards named after you,” he smiles. “And you’re giving the awards to really deserving people.”

Despite his impressive resume, Lupia admits he’s shocked that he is among three honorees for the 2021 Distinguished Graduate Award.

The list of previous honorees includes so many individuals he considers mentors — Gen. (Ret.) Ronald Fogelman ’63, Gen. (Ret.) John Loh ’60, Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Bradley Hosmer ’59 and Gen. (Ret.) Mark Welsh



’76 among them — he doesn’t feel his name belongs among those greats.

“I was flabbergasted to be admitted into the club,” he admits. “It just blows my mind. I’m very honored.”

NEW YORK BOY

Growing up in Brooklyn and Queens, Lupia was a city kid through and through. He played stickball in the street and flipped baseball cards toward the stoop. He didn’t have the voice to join his friends singing harmonies on the street corner, but they did allow him to provide the occasional “doo-wops” at the appropriate times.

"I was very politely invited not to participate in the singing," he laughs. "And we never became the Jersey Boys or anything."

When the streetlights flashed on, that meant it was 5:30 p.m. and it was time to go home, have dinner and start studying.

Lupia says his father, an attorney, was very disciplined and strict.

"Every night we did my spelling words," he remembers. "We did math, and he was a math wizard. As a result of that, I became real strong in math. Eventually, that helped me a great deal in studying engineering."

His mother, on the other hand, was the loving one.

"She would just do the hugging," he smiles. "It was a very cordial environment that I grew up in."

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE?

Lupia's family had no experience with the military, so when a counselor suggested the high schooler apply to the nation's newest service academy — the United States Air Force Academy — they didn't give it much thought. Lupia filled out forms, passed a physical and then pushed the idea out of his mind.

Lupia previously landed a scholarship to Notre Dame — the Holy Grail of universities for Catholic families in New York — and he fully expected to attend school there.

A few weeks later, however, Lupia received a letter that he'd been accepted to the Academy. He called his father and broke the news, noting that being a cadet meant free schooling and a paycheck while attending.

"He said something like, 'Son, what is wrong with you? Nobody pays you to go to college,'" Lupia laughs.

A half hour later, after Lupia's father called a friend to ask questions about USAFA, he phoned his son.

"It's true," Lupia remembers his father saying. "Sign up."

Of course, Lupia had no idea what he was signing up for. Because of his small stature, he was an easy target for upperclassmen during Basic Cadet Training.

"About a month into BCT, I decided this was not for me," he says. "However, there was one upperclassman who was on my case all the time, day and night. I decided I was not going to let him force me out of here." ►



ACROSS: Gene Lupia is pictured in 1964-65 at his future wife's parents' mountain cabin at Sportsman's Paradise in Lake George, Colorado.

TOP: Then-cadet Lupia straightens up his room after a "Hell Week inspection" during doolie year, 1963.

MIDDLE: In 1972, Gene Lupia is presented a Vietnamese decoration by the Vietnamese base commander at Tan Son Nhut Air Base.

BOTTOM: Gen. Lupia's trusty car was raffled off for \$1 a ticket at his going away luncheon from the Pentagon in summer 1977. He was then off to Armed Forces Staff College in Norfolk, Virginia.

Lupia planned to finish BCT, then leave for home.

"I was going to make it through the summer, just to spite him," he says.

ACADEMIC CHALLENGES

By the end of the summer, Lupia changed his mind.

"I decided to stick it out," he reports. "I decided to study civil engineering, which turned out to be a very good choice. Engineering came naturally to me."

After the academic year began, Lupia joined the freshman soccer team. A short while later, he was recruited to join the squadron rugby team, even though he'd never played the sport before.

"They recruited me to be a hooker," he recalls. "I weighed about 118 pounds at the time ... I was the perfect kind of guy for hooker. I learned in that process that the hooker gets the crap beat out of him."

Lupia says he ended up loving his time at the Academy and learned life lessons that have stuck with him ever since.

"One of the things I learned is don't give up," he says. "And I learned to work hard."

In addition, the importance of having mentors and being a mentor was a key takeaway from his time as a cadet.

"I wouldn't have had the success I had in my career and my life without all the mentors," he suggests.

CAREER PATH

Lupia hoped to fly helicopters in the Air Force, but a call from the head of the Civil Engineering Department at Oklahoma State University changed his career trajectory.

Lupia was soon approved to pursue his master's degree in construction over the next two years. He completed his coursework in just one year, plus got married to Diane, a Colorado Springs native whom he met while a cadet.

Fresh out of graduate school, Lupia's first assignment was as a civil engineer at Lockbourne Air Force Base in Ohio.

As his minimum required commitment to the Air Force approached, Lupia planned to separate from the military and pursue opportunities in the civilian world. When he was promoted to captain, however, Lupia received an assignment to Vietnam.

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—MAJ. GEN. (RET.) EUGENE LUPIA '67

"The Air Force Academy had been really great to me, and my time in the Air Force had been really great," he says. "I decided I had to go. I owed it to the country. I owed it to the Academy, and my wife agreed."

His new plan was to complete his Vietnam tour and then leave the Air Force upon his return to the states.

TURNING POINT

When he arrived in Vietnam, Lupia was assigned to the Air Force advisory team headquarters at Tan Son Nhut Air Base. Even though the office was responsible for providing civil engineering services throughout the country, Lupia quickly became bored and frustrated.

"There just wasn't anything to sink your teeth into," he recalls. "I wasn't very busy, and I wasn't getting much job satisfaction."

One night, while visiting the officers club, Lupia ran into his group air officer commanding (AOC) from his Academy days. When asked how he liked his new job, Lupia took the opportunity to speak up and be honest.

The former AOC happened to be a personnel officer, and a few days later Lupia became the adviser to the Vietnamese base civil engineer at Tan Son Nhut.

"It turned out to be a great job," he reports. "And it was all about speaking up at the club that night. I had no officers working for me but had about eight or nine enlisted guys. They were all at the top of their career fields."

Among the projects Lupia worked on during that tour were the installation of a perforated steel plank runway and supervision over the construction of a family housing area.

HQ DUTY

After a year in Vietnam, Lupia had again changed his tune about leaving the military.

"I was no longer trying to figure out a way to get out of the Air Force; I was figuring out a way to continue to do well in the Air Force," he says.

Lupia returned to the U.S. for a job in the Pentagon. His primary job was to rewrite the manual for industrial engineering in the Air Force.

When he met the two-star general in charge of civil engineering, Lupia recalls being asked how his new job was going. He informed the top Air Force civil engineer that he had no experience with industrial engineering, but he assured the general that he could learn. It's another example of speaking up when the opportunity presents itself.

An hour later, Lupia was reassigned to the housing division to guide construction of temporary lodging facilities (TLFs) at 18 bases.

"I was back in housing construction again, in spite of the fact that I'd shot my mouth off," he smiles. "When I speak to the cadets, I always tell them not to be afraid to speak up and tell the truth, but to do it respectfully."

CAPITOL HILL

After completing Squadron Officer School, Lupia returned to the Pentagon as an assistant executive officer to Maj. Gen. M.R. "Tex" Riley, helping prepare the general for congressional hearings.

"We would defend Air Force construction programs to appropriations committees and to authorization committees," he explains. "There was no telling what the congressional members were going to ask. We had to prepare for everything. I learned a tremendous amount."

Lupia served for more than five years in that role, and then attended Armed Forces Staff College in Norfolk.

On the way to his next assignment as operations officer for the civil engineer-



CLOCKWISE: Diane and Gene are pictured with their first dog while attending graduate school at Oklahoma State University. As Combat Support Wing commander at Ramstein Air Base in Germany, Lupia would occasionally fly in the back seat of one of the aircraft from the sister fighter wing. Gene and Diane celebrate at Gene's retirement ceremony at Bolling Air Force Base in July 1999.



ing squadron at Grissom Air Force Base in Indiana, Lupia received a call that he and his family instead were being diverted to McConnell Air Force Base in Kansas. He soon became the civil engineering squadron commander at McConnell for three years.

Next, Lupia attended the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, then he worked for the Federal Emergency Management Agency for a year. After that, he was assigned to United States Air Forces Europe at Ramstein Air Base in Germany, working under then-Brig. Gen. Joseph "Bud" Ahearn. This was one time, however, that speaking up didn't turn out well.

Assigned to become the command programmer, Lupia suggested to Gen. Ahearn that he felt more comfortable in an operations and maintenance role.

"Get the hell out of here," the general barked.

"I literally got kicked out of his office," Lupia recalls.

He served in that program role for three years, responsible for securing funding for projects on 26 bases throughout Europe. Lupia was then assigned to be wing commander at Ramstein — the first civil engineer in the Air Force to command a wing,

BACK HOME

Lupia returned to the states to become the civil engineer at Strategic Air Command (SAC). He later became the first-ever Air Mobility Command (AMC) civil engineer, when SAC was disestablished in 1992.

Working for the AMC commander, Gen. Ronald Fogelman '63, Lupia helped direct a complete overhaul of AMC facilities throughout the world.

When Gen. Fogelman became the next chief of staff of the Air Force in 1995, Lupia was promoted to civil engineer of the Air Force and returned to the Pentagon. He was the first USAFA graduate to hold that position, and he oversaw 65,000 personnel.

"That was a heck of a job, let me tell you," he says. "I had my hands full, but I really enjoyed it."

NEW HORIZONS

Lupia retired from military service in 1999. He soon received eight offers from civilian employers, but decided to join CH2M Hill, a major engineering firm.

He eventually took over the company's environmental business and steadily grew revenue. He worked with numerous government and industry clients to

clean up contaminated soils, groundwater and rivers.

After 10 years in that role, Lupia became part of CH2M Hill's headquarters staff, overseeing systems, processes and tools. Three years later, he became president of the firm's global facilities and infrastructure business.

In 2015, Lupia started his own consulting business.

"Six months into this thing, I had 11 clients," he laughs. "I was working harder than when I was working full time at CH2M Hill."

He has since scaled down his client numbers so his hours are more manageable. He now has more time to spend with his wife, children and grandchildren, whom he credits with supporting him well over his entire career.

GIVING BACK

In recent years, Lupia became involved with the Air Force Academy Foundation, joining the board as a founding director. He uses his engineering and construction background to assist in USAFA building projects supported by private philanthropy.

He frequently helps evaluate pricing, deal with contractors, review designs and more.

"I give them the value of the 50 years of experience I've had in civil engineering," he says. "I am really happy that I'm on the team."

Among the more recent projects he's been involved with are the Madera Cyber Innovation Center, Falcon Stadium renovations and North Gate development.

"I started helping the Foundation because I owe everything I have to the Academy," he says. "It's not that anymore. Now, it's a labor of love. I love helping out with our projects and making them successful."

Lupia has achieved a record of extraordinary success and commitment to the Academy, the Air Force and the nation through his distinguished career. 