



DR.

# WILLIAM WECKER

*As someone with a knack for mathematics and statistics, Dr. William Wecker '63 knew things weren't adding up.*

*A member of the Association of Graduates' steering committee for its first significant fundraising campaign in 2007, Wecker recalls the unease he felt as the effort ramped up.*

Several USAFA graduates had designs on raising millions of dollars to support their alma mater on important construction projects and academic enhancement programs that would never receive adequate federal funding — including Falcon Stadium upgrades, an indoor practice facility, and a building to house the cadet character and leadership programs — but progress was slow.

"I was very disappointed with the situation, but not with anybody in particular," he says. "Everybody was doing their best, but we weren't any good at it. I wasn't any good at it. We had some success, but not nearly the level of success that I thought was possible. Something needed to be done."

After brainstorming alternative approaches, Wecker teamed up with Terry Drabant '65 to launch the fledgling United States Air Force Academy Endowment (now the Air Force Academy Foundation), an organization focused solely on private philanthropy in support of the institution. The Endowment was born on July 12, 2007, with other founding directors joining Wecker and Drabant in the weeks and months following.

Wecker describes two factors that were key to the success of the Endowment: (1) asking donors what they would like to support rather than telling them what they needed to support, and (2) serious attention to the stewardship of gifts.

Wecker relates the example of Lt. Col. (Ret.) David Jannetta '75, the first major donor to jump onboard. Jannetta fondly



recalled a lecture he attended as a cadet — a visit by Joseph Heller, the author of "Catch 22" — and indicated he wanted future cadets to have the same kind of life-changing experiences he enjoyed. He chose to fund a lecture series within the English Department.

"We would never have thought of such a lecture series on our own," Wecker says. "But Dave Jannetta thought of it."

Jannetta's \$200,000 donation, which was invested in the Endowment's long-term investment portfolio, has now funded lectures for 15 years running. Wecker predicts that the Jannetta Lectureship fund will continue to support visiting speakers for a great many years to come.



The second critical factor to effective fundraising — stewardship — helps assure donors that their money is being put to good use in advancing the Academy's mission elements.

"They want to know that their gift is making a difference," he says. "We closely monitor the intended and efficient use of gifts and the results accomplished. Then we make sure that the donors know those facts. Without a serious program of stewardship, you can't expect to do serious fundraising."

Today, the Air Force Academy Foundation manages more than 360 separate funds supporting Academy programs.

"We've completed 10 major construction projects and have 11 more underway," he reports. "We're a major construction operation. I never saw that coming, but it turns out that it is much cheaper and faster for the Foundation to be the contractor, complete the construction and then gift the result than it is to give the Academy the funds and expect them to do the work."

As the Air Force Academy Foundation celebrates its 15-year anniversary, its impact on the Academy has been enormous.

"I'm very proud of all that we've accomplished," Wecker says. "Most startup charitable foundations don't survive the first year. Our Foundation has raised \$300 million. Just look around — the iconic Character Center building, the Holaday Athletic Center, the restored Air Garden, the Madera Cyber Innovation Center and much more. We are making a major impact."

During an interview in California, Wecker suggests the Foundation's expanding support role at USAFA is the reason he was selected as one of the 2021 Distinguished Graduate honorees.

"Being named a Distinguished Graduate is obviously an award for what the Foundation has become, not me personally," he smiles. "The big achievement of the last 15 years has been the standing up and creation of this Foundation, and it deserves the recognition."

Along with his key role in establishing the Foundation, Wecker's resume also suggests a background worthy of his individual recognition as well. ►



**ACROSS:** William Wecker says goodbye to his wife, Mary Linn, as he prepares to leave for Vietnam.

**TOP:** The Wecker family poses for a group photo.

**MIDDLE:** William and Mary Linn are pictured shortly after their wedding.

**BOTTOM:** William Wecker hops in his Corvette as he heads to pilot training at Laredo Air Force Base in Texas.



## MIDWEST SENSIBILITIES

Born in 1941, shortly before Pearl Harbor was attacked, Wecker holds memories of his father being away from home.

"In fact, all of the dads were off to the war," he says. "I remember how relieved everyone was when the war ended."

Wecker recalls his childhood upbringing as conventional — baseball in the summer, pheasant and deer hunting in the fall, and hockey in the winter.

"And then you'd do it over again starting in the spring," he laughs. "I don't know how life could have been better for a young man growing up."

A stellar student, Wecker finished high school early. In fact, prior to graduation, he took full advantage of living in Ann Arbor, Michigan, by attending University of Michigan lectures and using the university libraries, computers and telescopes.

"I had my plan to be a nuclear physicist and cultivated the friendships of university professors," he remembers. "I didn't hang out much with people of my own age. If I had any free time, I was off to talk to somebody at the university."

## CADET LIFE

Wecker recalls working hard to prepare for his time at the Academy, reading as much as he could about the cadet experience. He still was surprised when he finally arrived.

"For a really intense activity like the Academy and Basic Cadet Training, you can't prepare for that by reading and thinking and talking," he admits. "You just have to experience it. The same is true of a war experience. You can go to the movies, you can read the books, but until you've actually done it, you really don't know what it's like."

A member of the wrestling team as a cadet, Wecker was running laps in the gymnasium one day when he happened upon a group in "funny outfits." He stopped to ask what was going on.

It turns out that the chief of staff of the Air Force at that time, Gen. Curtis LeMay, was a fan of judo and wanted airmen and cadets to learn discipline through the martial art. Gen. LeMay sent expert instructors, including the Japanese national champion, to the Academy to teach cadets.

Wecker says he decided to give it a try. He squared off against the instructor while still in his wrestling gear.

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—DR. WILLIAM "BILL" WECKER '63

"He just beat the living daylights out of me," he laughs. "That very day, I resigned from the wrestling team and joined the judo team."

Judo was a varsity sport in those days, so Wecker and his teammates traveled frequently to competitions. Because Wecker's skill level advanced quickly, Gen. LeMay arranged for the young cadet to spend two summers in Japan training with top judo practitioners.

## TAKING FLIGHT

Upon USAFA graduation, Wecker headed to Laredo Air Force Base in Texas for undergraduate pilot training. Wecker's march toward flying fighters was sidetracked, however, by his judo prowess. Competing in an Air Training Command judo tournament, Wecker took top honors and advanced to the next level.

"If you won a tournament, you didn't need a new set of orders; you just went on to the next tournament," he explains.

Wecker continued to win successive tournaments that allowed him to move along, eventually becoming Air Force Worldwide Judo Champion.

"My commander back at Laredo, who was kind of expecting me back the next Monday morning, saw me arrive about nine months later," he laughs. "I greeted him with a sheepish, 'Hi, remember me?'"

Because he'd missed so much instruction, Wecker washed back two pilot training classes but would graduate at the top of his new class. He ultimately chose to fly the F-4.

Another important highlight of his time at pilot training, Wecker says, was meeting his future wife, Mary Linn.

Over the next decade, Wecker flew jets and continued to hone his judo skills. He would represent the Air Force and the United States in many international judo competitions.

## COMBAT TOUR

Just weeks after completing pilot training, Wecker was deployed to Vietnam.

"We were the very first F-4 squadron from the Air Force to land in Vietnam," he reports. "We were at Da Nang ... the northernmost air base in Vietnam, just a few miles south of the border of South and North Vietnam."

All of the combat missions Wecker flew were over North Vietnam, but more specifically Hanoi.

"On our very first missions up there, we were greatly surprised by something that I had never even heard of," he recalls. "That was the SAM missile — surface-to-air missile."

The Russian-made weapons were shooting down U.S. jets on a regular basis, Wecker reports.

"We didn't know how to deal with them," he says. "No one in our intelligence community, nor anybody else I asked, had any idea how they worked. It was a very difficult time."

Wecker says he attempted to use his considerable mathematics skills to figure out how SAMs worked and how best to evade them, but he eventually gave up.

"I was not able to solve it," he says. "So, I just went on about my business of flying missions."

After completing more than 100 missions in Vietnam, Wecker left for his next assignment — an F-4 squadron stationed in Great Britain.

"That was a different mission ... nuclear alert," he remembers. "We used to sit in a trailer and be ready to jump into airplanes and drop a nuclear bomb someplace in the Eastern Bloc."

## PROTOCOL POST

After a year on nuclear alert, Wecker unexpectedly was ordered to report to the commander of Air Forces in Berlin. In his role as





**CLOCKWISE:** Wecker checks the infrared sensors on the Sidewinders. Wecker poses for a picture with his son, Michael, at Dahlem Museum in Berlin, Germany. Celebrating 58 years of marriage, Mary Linn and William Wecker pose for a picture among the benches they helped fund in the Polaris Hall courtyard.



chief of protocol, Wecker helped coordinate activity within the U.S.-controlled sector of Berlin for two years.

"Berlin was under military occupation after World War II," he explains. "Berlin was located deep inside East Germany, but the East Germans were not in Berlin. It was the Soviets, the British, the French and the Americans. The four of us divided up the city into our own sectors."

Effectively managing the city required considerable coordination among the various parties, Wecker says.

"These were well-armed parties who didn't get along very well," he says. "We had to think things through carefully to avoid something troubling happening."

One of the most complex operations Wecker was involved with occurred in 1969 when U.S. President Richard Nixon visited Berlin. John Ehrlichman, White House counsel, was concerned about the potential for anti-Vietnam War protesters during Nixon's speech.

Because Berlin was under military occupation law, officials were able to round up potential dissidents and hold them in jail for two days.

"The president came and did his speech, without incident," Wecker recalls. "Ehrli-

chman was impressed. I even got invited to go back to the White House for a job after that. I respectfully declined because I had other plans."

## MATH & STATS

After separating from the Air Force, Wecker attended graduate school at the University of Michigan.

"Universities were not terribly welcoming to former fighter pilots at that time," he admits. "It was a tumultuous time, and with my background, there was zero prospect of my getting scholarship money out of Stanford. But the University of Michigan was my home, and they took me in."

In two and a half years, Wecker completed his master's degree and Ph.D. in statistics and applied mathematics. His Ph.D. thesis was on statistical prediction, the same problem he had pondered while in Vietnam and which continued to puzzle him.

"Finally, I knew how the SAM missiles worked, but that time had passed," he says.

Upon completing his doctorate, Wecker accepted a professorship at the University of Chicago and continued his research on statistical prediction theory.

"There are many statistical prediction problems of practical interest that are simi-

lar to the SAM intercept problem, but sufficiently different from it so as to require different solutions," he says. "Predicting the future performance of the economy based on past performance. Predicting peak demand for electric power next summer based on past demand, and many more. Extrapolating a statistical regression beyond the range of the data. So, I was a busy beaver solving these problems as a professor for about 20 years."

While Wecker spent most of his time in academia at the University of Chicago, he also enjoyed stints at Stanford University, the Czech Technological University in Prague and a university in Singapore.

## NEW CHALLENGE

Due to his outside consulting jobs, Wecker says life eventually became too busy.

"I couldn't do a good job of teaching and research at a major university ... and do a good job on the outside work," he says. "There were not enough hours in the day."

He retired from teaching and opened a consulting firm specializing in mathematics and statistical prediction, hiring approximately 25 experts in the field.

"We took on projects from all over the world," he reports. "We were studying the launch of satellites, aircraft accidents, nuclear power construction. You name it, we were doing it. We were the only ones who could do the work ... and we were very busy."

To this day, Wecker continues to consult regularly with clients on difficult mathematical and statistical challenges.

"I'm still working — not as hard as I used to, but still working," he says.

## NO REGRETS

Thinking back over his 80 years on Earth, Wecker says his wife of 58 years and his extended family are what give his life meaning today. Being able to meaningfully support his alma mater is icing on the cake.

"I don't have any real regrets," he admits. "I think all the major decisions are the ones I would make again." 