

By Bryan Grossman

Much like the rising temperature on June 4, 2024, the *Checkpoints* team steadily climbed to the third-floor office in the Alexandria, Virginia, home of Lt. Gen. John Hopper Jr. '69 and his spouse, Patricia.

As the interview begins, Gen. Hopper, who served as the 18th commandant of cadets and retired from the Air Force as vice commander of Air Education and Training Command at Randolph AFB, Texas, says it coincides with the 55th anniversary of his U.S. Air Force Academy graduation.

That accomplishment is extraordinary on its own, but it's even more exceptional considering a military career wasn't a blip on Gen. Hopper's radar while growing up in small-town Clarksville, Tennessee.

He says his higher education ambitions included attending Fisk University, listed among the nation's Historically Black Colleges and Universities. But his father, a U.S. Army career NCO, had other plans for his son; he encouraged Gen. Hopper to attend Ohio State University, advice inspired by an assignment in the Buckeye State.

Meanwhile, a guidance counselor, perhaps seeing military leadership potential, arranged a meeting with an Air Force liaison officer during Gen. Hopper's senior year of high school. That meeting forever changed his trajectory.

A NURTURING COMMUNITY

Had he not attended the Air Force Academy, it's a good bet that Gen. Hopper would have gone down a much different path. He may not have climbed the ranks to become a general officer or the commandant of cadets. He prob-

ably wouldn't have acted as the longest-serving CEO of the Air Force Aid Society or have been instrumental in opening combat specialties to women through his work on the Military Leadership Diversity Commission.

Because of the course he chose, the Distinguished Flying Cross honoree also helped battle veteran homelessness as chairman of the Veterans and Community Oversight and Engagement Board for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. He has also served as a Falcon Foundation trustee for more than a dozen years.

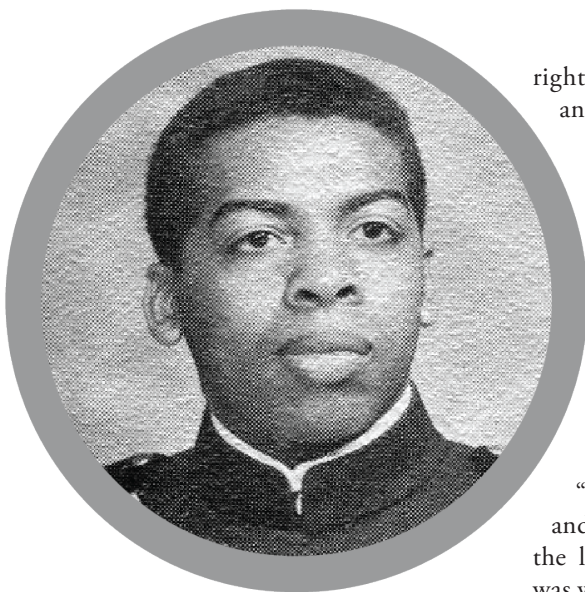
Before attending the Academy, serving his country and advancing to the highest strata of military service, Gen. Hopper's life began in 1946 at his paternal grandmother's house in Clarksville, Tennessee. The town, Gen. Hopper says, has two claims to fame: Fort Campbell, which straddles the Kentucky state line, and Wilma Rudolph, the 1960 Summer Olympic Games track and field gold medalist.

"She lived right across from my maternal grandmother's backyard," Gen. Hopper says. "As little kids, you didn't want to make Wilma mad because she could clearly chase you down."

Gen. Hopper says his community was tight-knit.

"My first-grade teacher was my dad's first-grade teacher," he says. "My second-grade teacher was my best friend's mother. It was that sort of situation — a very nurturing community."

Gen. Hopper attended segregated schools in Tennessee until he entered the fourth grade, when an assignment took his father to then-West Germany. It was his first time on an airplane, but it certainly wouldn't be his last.



“We landed in Germany,” he recalls, “and went to the hotel on Rhine-Main Air Base, which I would visit some 30 years after as a C-141 pilot. We stayed an extra couple of days before going to our final destination, Darmstadt, because the Harlem Globetrotters were in town and doing one of their overseas shows. It was quite a start to our German adventure.”

Gen. Hopper moved back to Clarksville after the seventh grade but, during his junior year of high school, Gen. Hopper’s father received an assignment to Fort Hays in Columbus, Ohio. Gen. Hopper didn’t want to move.

“I was sure my grandmother would support me staying there, living with her, and finishing high school in Clarksville,” he says. “She did not; it was a family conspiracy.”

Earlier that decade, President John F. Kennedy’s administration sought to increase minority participation rates in the military and at military academies.

“I benefited from that,” Gen. Hopper says. “I talked to a liaison officer in the spring of 1964, but it was too late to apply for the [USAFA] Class of ’68, which was probably good. I wouldn’t have made the cut, I don’t think.”

Gen. Hopper instead received an offer to attend the USAFA Preparatory School.

“The Prep School has been a learning experience that I would not trade,” he says. “‘Enjoy’ may not be the exact

right word — but the Prep School was an enjoyable experience.”

Thanks to his time as a Husky and exposure to the military through his father’s career, Gen. Hopper says he was ready when he entered the Academy. He explains that USAFA’s honor code was one of the strongest draws.

“Through my junior and senior years, I began to realize what a privilege it was to live in that environment,” he says.

“Doors were open in the dorms, and wallets were on desks. Things in the lost and found didn’t stay lost. It was where your word was your bond. As we got closer to graduation, it became even more precious because I realized [USAFA] was a bit of an ivory tower and the outside world presented a more corrosive environment, perhaps not intentionally so. But you would have to work harder to demonstrate integrity and live that sort of life, which I think was one of the challenges the Air Force was preparing us for. I valued that.”

Academically, Gen. Hopper majored in general studies, and, militarily, he was part of the survival training cadre and taught survival in the summer training courses. Then, the summer between his second- and first-degree years, he was the cadet commander for basic survival training, a group commander-equivalent job.

And, like most cadets, Gen. Hopper participated in intramural athletics.

“I particularly liked the way the Air Force Academy approached [athletics]. As freshmen, there was a lot of emphasis on some basic sports. Wrestling and boxing were part of that process. Wrestling, I enjoyed, but boxing, not so much. Several of my classmates were excellent boxers. ... They matched us up by weight, and I think I weighed about 175 pounds. I got matched against Dick Rivers. ... But nobody told me Dick Rivers was the Golden Gloves champion for greater St. Louis or something like that. So, the part where Mike Tyson says, ‘Everybody has a plan until I hit him in the face’ — Dick Rivers knows that. I can’t say

that he knocked me out because then I probably wouldn’t have been able to go to pilot training. But I was displaced for a bit.”

AFTER THE ACADEMY

After courting for more than four years, Gen. Hopper married Patricia Rhodes, of Colorado Springs, in August 1969, and she joined him as he rushed off to pilot training at Laughlin AFB, in Del Rio, Texas.

Following pilot training and just two years after commissioning, he was assigned to fly the C-130 from Taiwan, from which U.S. forces flew in direct support of U.S. forces fighting in Vietnam. Gen. Hopper’s combat experience was soon no longer confined to the boxing ring and “the fields of friendly strife.”

The 15-month assignment didn’t allow spouses or children, though many brought their spouses over at their own expense and lived on the local economy. Gen. Hopper did the same and invited Patricia to join him in Taiwan. She took the risk and arrived in mid-May but, within three days, their housing plan fell apart, and Gen. Hopper was on the flying schedule for a 10-day rotation to Vietnam. She spent those 10 days, not knowing anyone, in a Taiwanese youth hostel. Finally finding housing, “It was, in a sense, commuting to the war,” he says.

In 1971, he piloted a C-130 flight to resupply friendly forces in a country where the Air Force did not usually operate. Gen. Hopper and his crew took enemy fire during that mission, and his aircraft was badly damaged. Patricia received a call claiming he’d been shot down.

“I just can’t imagine what she went through,” he says.

“The call was well meaning, but that was not true. We were shot up but not shot down,” he says, adding the damage was severe enough that he began formulating an evasion plan in case of a crash landing. Gen. Hopper’s C-130 leaked fuel, and his crew attended to systems damage throughout the return flight to Cam Rahn Bay Air Base.



LEFT ABOVE: Caravaning to Tennessee for holiday break, Lt. Gen. (Ret.) John Hopper Jr. '69, left, as a cadet, along with his acquaintances, hunker down at a motel after a snowstorm closed Interstate 70 at the Colorado-Kansas border.

LEFT BELOW: Lt. Gen. (Ret.) John Hopper Jr. '69 and wing command chief, CMSgt. (Ret.) Larry McDowell, following Norton Air Force Base's last operational mission prior to entering the base-closure process in March 1994. (Courtesy photos)



"We saw the ground crews running toward us," he says of the moments immediately after landing. "They all had broom handles and saws, and they were cutting off lengths of broom handle and using those to plug the holes in our fuel tanks because we were just streaming fuel, so we were pretty lucky to get back."

Gen. Hopper was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for that mission.

Nearly two decades later, in 1989, Gen. Joe Palastra Jr. stepped down as commanding general of United States Army Forces Command and was re-

placed by an "up and coming four-star named Colin Powell," says Gen. Hopper. At that time, Gen. Hopper was assigned to the Operations Directorate as chief of the Exercises Division at U.S. Forces Command Headquarters, Fort McPherson, Georgia. When his boss asked what he wanted to do next, Gen. Hopper said, "Go back to flying."

That conversation made its way to Gen. Powell. Gen. Hopper's next assignment was as director of operations at Norton Air Force Base in California. By late fall, his wing commander said, "Hey, you're being considered to be

one of the wing commanders in Desert Shield/Desert Storm."

"I was excited, and he said, 'Well, before you get too excited, it's a C-130 wing,' which I thought was interesting. I hadn't flown the C-130 since '72," Gen. Hopper says.

Shortly after, Gen. Hopper left his family at Norton and boarded a plane for Thumrait, Oman, where he acted as the commander of the 1660th Tactical Airlift Wing (Provisional) during Desert Shield/Desert Storm.

"It was one of the best leadership opportunities anybody could ask for," he says.

Gen. Hopper adds that when he departed for the Middle East, U.S. intelligence believed Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, and his wing was the designated large aircraft decontamination base in the southern Arabian Peninsula.

"And part of my wing was an air evacuation hospital, so contaminated crew members, contaminated soldiers, sailors, would be evacuated to our base to be treated," he says. "All of a sudden, at night, I'm thinking, 'Boy, I might be writing a lot of letters [to surviving family members] over the next day or two.' Fortunately, I didn't have to do that, but it's one of the things you think about as a combat wing commander."

HOLDING THE LINE

The lieutenant general has left an enormous impression on his alma mater both during active duty and as a civilian.

He was first assigned to the Academy from 1977 to 1981 and acted as deputy

director of cadet logistics, aide to the superintendent and air officer commanding for Cadet Squadron 12, the Dirty Dozen.

However, he says one of the most rewarding and challenging positions he held at USAFA was that of commandant of cadets from 1994 to 1996.

"I loved the time as commandant, but it was an interesting and stressful time," he says, adding that there "were things I wish I could have done better."

Gen. Hopper points to the sexual assaults plaguing the Academy in the '90s as an example, adding there was a sense that some cadets, particularly women, were perceived as having lesser value, which led to unhealthy behaviors.

"And if we were to believe the statistics, if 100 new cadets are walking through the door, I think the number was 25%. So, 25 of those cadets, men and women, had already experienced some sort of sexual trauma," he explains. "If you know that, it affects all of your experiential training."

But his overall service as commandant, he says, was positive and rewarding.

"I was very pleased with the cadets," he says. "I'm just glad I don't have to compete with them. I used to say that they're the same as we were when we were cadets — now I have to say, 'except they're bigger, faster, stronger, smarter and perhaps even better looking.'"

OUT OF UNIFORM

Gen. Hopper's selfless service didn't end with his retirement from active duty; one example is his work heading the Air Force Aid Society. The society's mission is to provide financial and educational support to airmen and their families. Gen. Hopper, the organization's longest-serving CEO, says it's been around "since there has been an Air Force. It was established by [Gen.] Hap Arnold and his wife, Bea. It is, in a sense, one of the world's best self-help machines."

Gen. Hopper was also instrumental to the work of the Military Leadership Diversity Commission, an effort chartered by Congress to diversify Depart-

ment of Defense leadership.

"[There was an] acknowledgment that ... underrepresented groups in the NCO corps were fairly consistent with and mirrored the population of those underrepresented groups in the country," he says. "In the leadership positions, it was a very different story."

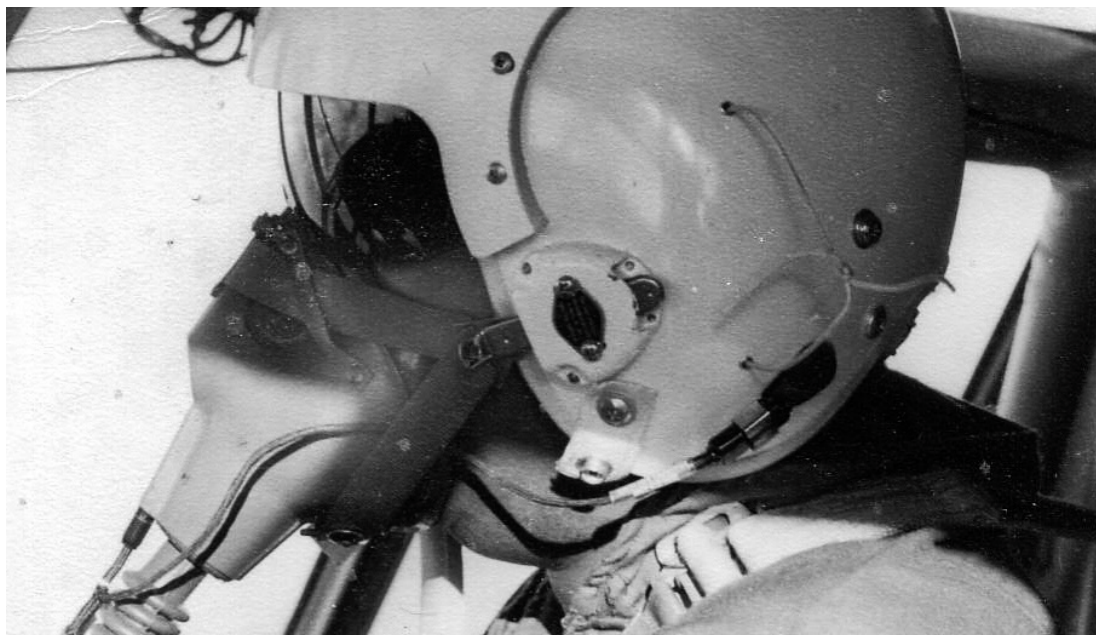
"In the uniformed services, we don't hire in the middle of the process. If we don't grow it, then it ain't going to be there when we need it in the senior positions," he says. "That growth process has to be where that diversity gets amplified through the care and feeding of

the next generation of leadership."

The commission examined all aspects of developing the next generation of leaders, which, among other outcomes, opened combat specialties to women.

"The controversy is always that that's a step in the wrong direction," Gen. Hopper says. "Some associate opening access to those career fields with lowering the standard to enter the field, which is not the case."

"I can remember when we had no women maintenance officers or maintainers, and one of the reasons was a



ABOVE: Then-1st Lt. John Hopper Jr. '69 getting in some high-altitude-low-opening personnel drop training.

RIGHT: Lt. Gen. (Ret.) John Hopper Jr. '69 at his T1-A "fini" flight in 2005, at Randolph AFB, Texas. On the right is instructor pilot Capt. LeRon Hudgins '96. (Courtesy photos)



woman couldn't go around lifting an 80- or 90-pound toolbox," he adds. "And of course, the answer to that is, I know a lot of guys that can't go around lifting an 80-to-90-pound toolbox as well. Then, some enterprising person built these little trolleys that you put your 80-to-90-pound toolbox on, and you pull it behind you as you walk along the flight line. So, our reasons were not good; but the bottom line is, the standard stays the same."

Then, there are Gen. Hopper's efforts with A Soldier's Home. Nearly a century and a half ago, two California families donated almost 400 acres in what would become West Los Angeles, he says. "It was intended to provide a place for those who had fought America's wars — the wounded, disabled and those needing support."

The site once included a hospital, housing and access to transportation.

"It was kind of a bustling operation, and then it deteriorated," Gen. Hopper says. "The land was leased out ... and lost its designation as A Soldier's Home."

"So, a group of veterans got together," he adds, "they sued the government and the VA and said, 'You are failing to meet the obligation of what this land was given to you for.' The court ruling was: 'Yes, you did. You need to rebuild it. And in fact, an oversight committee will help you in this process.'"

Gen. Hopper was the first to chair that committee.

"It's just a super worthwhile project. Kudos to the current VA secretary, who has really been a huge help in moving this forward," he says.

Gen. Hopper also remains connected to the Long Blue Line through his service on the Falcon Foundation board, helping hopefuls reach the Academy via a similar path to his.

"They more than repay the Falcon Foundation's confidence in them and the Air Force Academy's confidence," he says. "When you look at the performance of the Falcon scholars, you will see investing that extra year is a big signal of their willingness to do well at the Air Force Academy."

A DISTINGUISHED CAREER

"Honored and humbled, it's a distinguished group," Gen. Hopper says of being named a Distinguished Graduate. "[The honor] emphasizes the solidity of the institution and what the Air Force Academy is all about."

He adds, "Being an Air Force Academy graduate certainly is the framework that my life took place in. It built not just the boundaries, but it built the places to exceed the boundaries. It built the places to be all you can be. The limits that are out there are the limits you put on yourself."


But he's also quick to thank others who have helped him along the way, beginning with his spouse, Patricia, and their two children.

"Paul Stein ... was superintendent when I was commandant. He could not have been a more supportive, experienced officer to work with," Gen. Hopper says. "Chief [of Staff Ron] Fogelman is a personal hero of mine and perhaps the finest officer I've ever had the opportunity to serve close to. And then myriad others."

"And, frankly, all those people while growing up, that small-town nurturing experience," he says. "I wouldn't trade that for the world."

Gen. Hopper also thanks his classmates — "too numerous to mention," he says. "There have been many, many officers and NCOs that I should thank, but I certainly can't thank them all."

Gen. Hopper concludes by saying the Long Blue Line is strong and its prestige is growing.

"I think the Long Blue Line at the United States Air Force Academy — and we should include Space Force as well — will continue to produce and be joined by men and women of character whose dedication to serving America deserves admiration. And I'm proud to be part of that." 



Lt. Gen. (Ret.) John Hopper Jr. '69 with Col. (Ret.) Linda Egentowich, COO of the Air Force Aid Society, and Col. (Ret.) Sid Heetland, CFO, at a convention held at the Gaylord Hotel in Aurora, Colorado. (Courtesy photo)