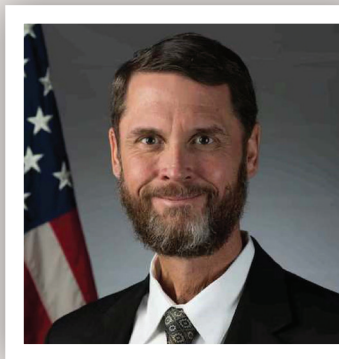


Leadership Achievement AWARD



COL. (RET.) SHANE HAMILTON '92

The Strongest Survive

An intelligence career built on service, not spotlight

By David Bitton

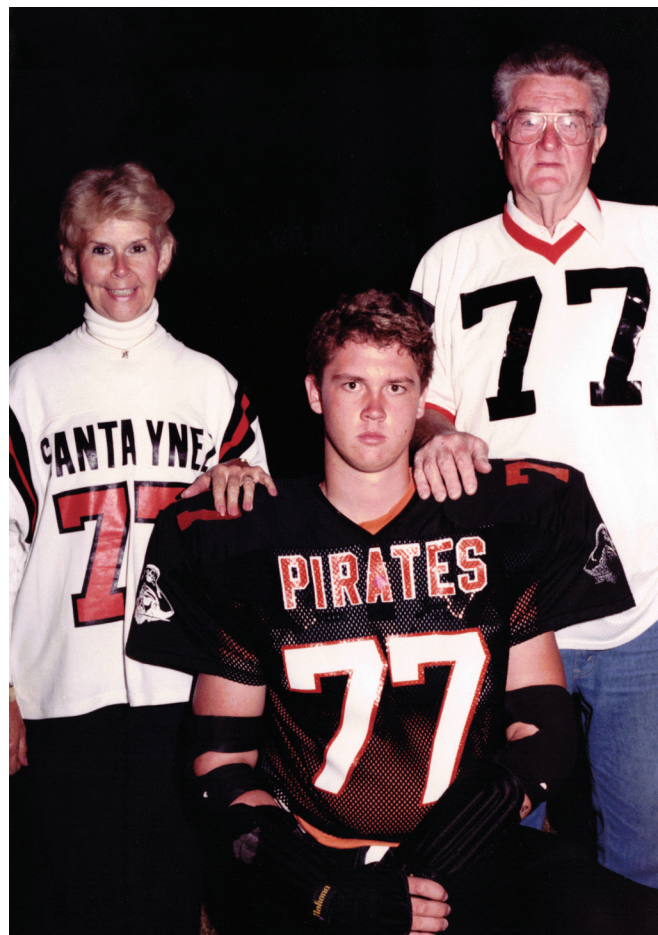
Col. (Ret.) Shane Hamilton '92 sat in his family's living room in a Notre Dame T-shirt, at the feet of a mother in a Notre Dame sweatshirt and a grandmother in a Notre Dame sweatshirt, watching a stranger pop a tape into the VHS player.

Every man in his family dreamed of attending Notre Dame since his grandfather, the first college graduate among them, had earned All-America honors on the football team there decades earlier.

Col. Hamilton thought of himself as a decent (but not great) high school offensive tackle, and his coach had been fending off a persistent recruiter from a school Col. Hamilton had never heard of.

"Coach, what's the Air Force Academy?" he remembers asking.

Col. Hamilton, a 2025 recipient of the Leadership Achievement Award — which recognizes graduates who have reached a high level of professional accomplishment in military or civilian life while upholding the Academy's standards of integrity and character — still remembers what Air Force head coach Fisher DeBerry told him after the five-minute recruiting tape ended.



Col. (Ret.) Shane Hamilton '92 with grandmother Marion White and grandfather Jim White during Shane's senior night high school football game.



“ I said, ‘Coach [DeBerry], you don’t think I’d make it at your school?’ And he said, ‘Shane, that’s not what I said. What I said was only the strongest will survive, much less prosper.’ And I looked at him, [and] I said, ‘I’ll go to your school.’”

— Col. (Ret.) Shane Hamilton ’92

Col. Hamilton said his family wanted him to attend Notre Dame. DeBerry told him that might be for the best, because only the strongest would survive, much less prosper, at the Air Force Academy.

“I said, ‘Coach, you don’t think I’d make it at your school?’” Col. Hamilton recalls. “And he said, ‘Shane, that’s not what I said. What I said was only the strongest will survive, much less prosper.’ And I looked at him, [and] I said, ‘I’ll go to your school.’”

Col. Hamilton’s grandmother didn’t speak to him for two years. She came around eventually.

What followed was a 35-year career spent at the intersection of intelligence, airpower and national security, much of it conducted in rooms most Americans will never know existed, in service of decisions most Americans will never know were made.

A MENTOR ON THE TERRAZZO

Col. Hamilton arrived at the Academy as a Division I athlete and jokes that it wasn’t his academics that got him in.

“I went to the Academy on an athletic scholarship, not academic, and my grades certainly showed it,” he says.

The person who he says shaped him most wasn’t a professor or a coach. It was Master Sgt. Mike Baird, who ran the Academy’s Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape program.

Col. Hamilton kept returning to SERE summer after summer, eventually becom-

ing group commander, the most senior cadet position in the program, to stay close to Baird.

“He took time, even when I was a student, to really see me as an individual and try to help me on my leadership journey,” Col. Hamilton says of Baird. “He taught me more about leadership than you can stack M5 sessions a mile high.”

When other cadets studied in the library, Col. Hamilton studied inside Fairchild Hall’s SERE office, just to listen to Baird talk.

FINDING A CALLING

Col. Hamilton graduated with little interest in the cockpit and no military lineage to point him anywhere else; his grandfather’s brief wartime service was the only uniform in the family before his own.

His instructors steered him toward intelligence based on his interests and his dual degrees in political science and history. He listened, and from his first day in the career field, he knew he belonged.

“It was by the grace of God that I ended up in intelligence,” he says. “From Day 1 of being an intelligence officer, I was where I wanted to be.”

Early in his career, before the Air Force owned a single remotely piloted aircraft, Col. Hamilton authored the service’s foundational strategy for employing one.

That guidance helped shape two decades of operations following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the nation.

During the early days of the war in Afghanistan, he developed targets for 478 highly classified, presidentially directed missions — work that earned him the National Intelligence Certificate of Distinction from the director of Central Intelligence.

He went on to serve as senior analyst during the peak of North Korean provocations, lead threat assessments for U.S. operations in Libya, and prepare presidential daily briefings on China, Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council.

He briefed Congress on a foreign information operations threat — testimony that helped guide a \$50 billion shift in national security policy.

He transformed the National Air and Space Intelligence Center’s analysis hub into

the top-ranked unit among 18 squadrons.

As associate director of intelligence at Air Combat Command, Col. Hamilton directed a \$7.5 billion intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance enterprise spanning more than 15,000 airmen across six major commands.

He implemented a sensor-to-shooter kill chain automation program now operational across four combatant commands, guided early artificial intelligence integration into satellite imagery analysis that cut human processing timelines by up to 80%, and secured \$150 million to automate long-range targeting capabilities that had stalled for decades.

LEADING FROM THE BOTTOM

Col. Hamilton says his leadership philosophy traces back to an Irish Catholic upbringing that drilled into him a single idea: Any strength he had wasn't his to use for his own success.

"I don't believe that the best leaders sit at the top," he explains. "I believe that the best leaders sit at the bottom, and that the true privilege of leadership is the responsibility to care for the folks you work with and to take care of them on their journey."

The hardest lessons came from failure, not success, he says, and from watching how people respond when things go wrong.

"You can actually learn more about leadership from bad leaders than from good ones," Col. Hamilton says. "When you fail and you have to pick yourself up, that's when you really see who a person is."

Much of his work, by design, will never be publicly told.

What stays with him isn't the budget lines or the classified briefings. It's the airmen he helped get into schools, into commissioning programs, into the assignments and awards that built their careers.

"That's what truly speaks to me," he says. "It's the role that I was able to have in helping them that I'm most proud of."

He credits his wife and his mother as the two people most responsible for shaping who he became — a debt he says he's still working to repay.

Of the Leadership Achievement Award, Col. Hamilton, who calls himself a poor cadet by any measure, admits to a flicker of imposter syndrome even now.



Col. Hamilton with his wife, Denise, and mother, Patti Hamilton.

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"I've tried to do my best every day and work hard," he says. "It means the world to me that people who I know took the time to nominate me for this award. It's truly humbling." 