



DISTINGUISHED GRADUATE AWARD

Mr. W. William "Bill" Boisture Jr.

CLASS OF 1967

By Bryan Grossman

Years before Worth W. Bill Boisture Jr. '67 led some of the most influential companies in business aviation, his eyes were already fixed on the sky.

Growing up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the son of a Marine Corps officer who survived the brutal fighting on Iwo Jima, Boisture was surrounded by quiet examples of service. An uncle had graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy during World War II and become a naval aviator. Patriotism, he says, was simply part of family life.

"I'm not quite sure I can put my finger on what inspired me

to serve," Boisture says. "But my dad's willingness to serve was in the fabric of our family. We grew up in a three-kid family with modest means, and patriotism was important."

His fascination with aviation, however, came from somewhere else entirely.

"I came to the desire to fly all on my own," he says.

"I was always looking up. I kept a little log of the airplanes I could identify. I built model airplanes; they all hung from the ceiling of my bedroom — the heaviest one, a B-29, right over my head."

That fascination eventually led him to the U.S. Air Force Academy. As a high school senior, he reasoned that if he wanted to fly, the Academy must be where future pilots were made.

"It was just about that simple," he says.

His first application ended in disappointment.

"I was counting on it so much," Boisture recalls. "When I got the letter saying I hadn't been accepted, I enrolled in summer school at Louisiana State University, taking math and English and, frankly, doing mediocre work in both."

Then another letter arrived.

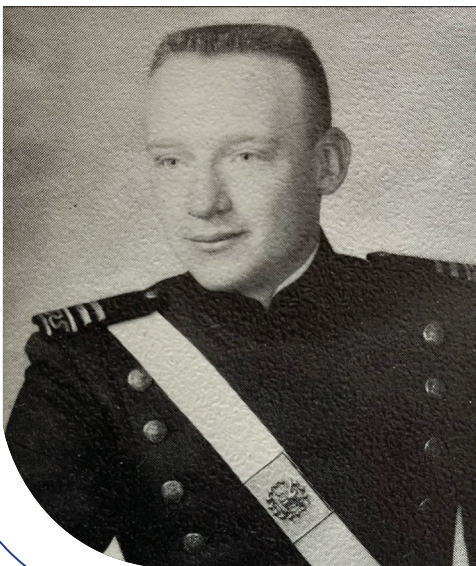
THE TURNING POINT

Postmarked Dallas, the correspondence came from Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Robert Smith and the Falcon Foundation, offering Boisture a scholarship to attend prep school near Bandon, Oregon.

Looking back, he still sees that opportunity as the turning point of his life.

"I don't know what would have happened otherwise," he says. "None of the opportunities — the Air Force, flying, the people I've met, my military career, my business career — would have happened the way they did. That's what I mean when I say the Falcon Foundation changed my life."

The Millard School, perched on Oregon's rugged southwestern coast, offered few distractions and one clear mission.





"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers ..."
23rd Squadron, Class of 1967

"They taught math, and they taught English and then they taught English, and math — and that was it," Boisture says with a laugh.

The focused academic environment prepared him for another shot at the Academy. But even with that preparation, arriving in Colorado Springs in 1963 was a shock.

Coming from nearly sea level in Baton Rouge, Boisture vividly remembers grabbing his issued gear during inprocessing and double-timing up to his dorm room on the top floor of Vandenberg Hall.

"By the time I got up there at 7,000 feet, I was breathless," he says. "I just remember thinking, 'Whoa, this is big time.'"

The elevation challenged him, but not as much as the academics.

"I more questioned my ability to achieve than my decision to come," he says. "I was never what the dean would have called a great student. The first two years, I always felt like I was at risk."

His mother briefly celebrated when he told her he had landed on an academic list.

"I had to tell her, 'Mom, it's the wrong list.'"

Still, Boisture never considered quitting.

"I never felt like I didn't want to be there," he says. "I was concerned I might not make it."

The military environment, on the other hand, fit him naturally.

"I flourished," he says. "I accepted the discipline and saw it as a challenge."

Boisture played varsity baseball until academic demands forced him to step away, eventually earning one of the Academy's most significant cadet leadership positions as squadron commander during his firstie year. He also helped lead the first basic cadet training program conducted at Jacks Valley.

"We'd never done this before," he says. "So we had to figure out how to do it while maintaining the discipline and rigor."

The experience reinforced a leadership philosophy that stayed with him throughout his career.

"You lead by example," he says. "You don't lead by dictation."

The Academy also gave him something

more enduring than leadership experience.

"Certainly, the Academy leaves you with an Honor Code that stays with you your whole life," Boisture says. "The Academy also taught me the value of being prepared and focused. And when you think you are prepared and focused, you better get prepared and focused again."

Those lessons paid immediate dividends.

Boisture graduated first in his undergraduate pilot training class. Unlike his Academy coursework, flying came naturally.

"This is something I really wanted to do," he says. "It wasn't work — it was fun. Then I found out I could do it. Good breeds better, better breeds best, and I just built momentum."

A CHILDHOOD DREAM

The Air Force assigned him to the F-4 Phantom II. It was a boyhood dream come true.

"I wanted a fighter," he says. "I remember seeing an F-4 for the first time on the flight line in Selma, Alabama. It was this big, noisy, ugly airplane. I thought, 'That's it. That's the one I want.'"

Over the next several years, Boisture flew approximately 230 combat missions during the Vietnam War, many of them with classmate and navigator Burt Slusher '67 in the back seat.

"We probably flew about 100 missions together," Boisture says. "Burt was an exceptional athlete and a great student, and we developed tremendous trust in one another."

Their squadron flew strike missions

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—W. William "Bill" Boisture Jr. '67



Left: Boisture scrambling in spring 1971 from alert for a close air support mission in Lam Son, South Vietnam.

Right: Boisture flew this U.S. Navy F-4 Phantom II while completing U.S. Navy Fighter Weapons School, better known as Top Gun.



throughout Southeast Asia, but Boisture found the greatest satisfaction in close air support.

"When you got launched off alert, it was generally because there were troops in contact," he says. "They had called for close air support, and that, to me, was a very important mission. It was challenging, and you got a lot of satisfaction out of doing it well."

The nighttime missions demanded something different.

Crews often spent five hours circling over AC-130 gunships in complete darkness, waiting for enemy fire to illuminate the ground below. Combat changed his perspective on leadership as much as it sharpened his flying skills.

"When you're stateside, you have airplanes to fly," he says. "Then you go into a combat zone, and the flying sort of becomes secondary to what you're really there to do. It helped me understand responsibility."

That lesson followed him to two of military aviation's most elite schools.

Boisture graduated from the Air Force Fighter Weapons School at Nellis Air

Force Base, Nevada, before attending the Navy Fighter Weapons School — better known as Top Gun — as an exchange officer. Few Air Force officers have completed both.

While the schools differed in culture, they shared the same purpose.

"What they were doing was teaching you to teach," Boisture says. "They brought you there, taught you to a level of excellence and then sent you back to your squadron. It was a multiplier effect."

At Nellis, he found an unexpected confidence.

"For the first time in my life," he says, "I thought, 'Hey, I can really excel at these academics, contrary to my previous experience with the dean at the Academy.'"

He also joined up with Slusher again. Both were congratulated on their course completion by Brig. Gen. Robin Olds, the legendary triple ace who was then the Academy's commandant of cadets.

Preparing him to fly the Navy's A-4 Skyhawk, Capt. Bill Franke, a former prisoner of war who had spent seven years in Hanoi, simply handed Boisture the flight manual on Day 1.

"Get ready," he told me. "We'll go fly tomorrow."

The next morning, Franke climbed onto the airplane's intake, showed Boisture how to start the jet, climbed down and pointed toward another aircraft.

"Watch me and do what I do," Boisture recalls Franke saying.

The simplicity of the instruction surprised Boisture.

"Coming from a more regimented command-and-control environment, that was different," he says. "But it worked."

Later, Franke walked into Boisture's office with another unexpected question.

"Boisture, do you want to go to Top Gun?"

Boisture's answer came instantly.

"Yes, sir!" he recalls, admitting he had no idea what to expect.

Top Gun proved equally memorable.

Boisture trained alongside Navy legends, including Vietnam ace Commander Randy Cunningham, and learned under Franke's mentorship.

"Incredibly qualified people," Boisture says. "I had an absolute ball working with them."

Top Gun offered unforgettable experiences, from flying a black F-4 Phantom that stood out among the Navy's gray aircraft to learning from some of the finest fighter pilots in the world.

One memory still stands above the rest.

Franke invited Boisture to accompany him aboard the USS Enterprise for lunch with the carrier's admiral.

Only afterward did another pilot explain why the trip mattered.

"The skipper's last carrier landing was the day before he got shot down in Vietnam," the pilot told Boisture.

Eight years after becoming a prisoner of war, Franke trapped aboard the Enterprise as though he had never left.

"It was his 1,000th trap," Boisture recalls. "We caught the third wire, went upstairs for lunch in the admiral's mess, and then launched back off the carrier. I still get emotional thinking about it."

DUES PAID

By 1978, Boisture had built the kind of résumé that suggested a full Air Force career.

He had flown combat missions, graduated from both Fighter Weapons School and Top Gun, earned early promotion to major and was serving as aide to the commander of Tactical Air Command.

Then he walked away.

The decision surprised many who knew him, but Boisture says it reflected both changing circumstances and personal reflection.

The post-Vietnam military faced shrinking budgets, fewer flying opportunities and career paths increasingly leading toward staff assignments rather than cockpits.

"I felt like I'd paid my dues," he says.

Leaving active duty did not mean leaving aviation.

Instead, it marked the beginning of a second career that would help reshape the business aviation industry.

Boisture entered business aviation at a time when the industry was beginning to evolve from a niche market into an increasingly global enterprise. His first stop was Canadair, where he helped market the Challenger business jet. The transition from military operations to corporate aviation required a different skill set, but he quickly realized that many of the same leadership principles still applied.

"The airplanes were different, but people weren't," Boisture says. "You still had to build good teams, communicate clearly and earn people's trust."

His career accelerated over the next three decades as he assumed senior leadership positions at several of the world's premier aerospace companies, including SimuFlite, Gulfstream Aerospace, NetJets and Hawker Beechcraft. Along the way, he helped guide the organizations through periods of rapid growth, international expansion, product development and changing economic conditions, eventually serving as president and chief executive officer at multiple companies.

"I never really viewed leadership as something different in business than it was in the Air Force," he says. "Your responsibility is still to create an environment where good people can succeed. If you take care of your people, they'll take care of the mission."

He also found that the fighter pilot's

discipline of continual learning never stopped serving him. Whether evaluating a new aircraft program, negotiating international partnerships or leading a company through industry challenges, Boisture approached each decision with the same deliberate preparation that once preceded combat missions.

People wanted honesty. They wanted competence. Most of all, they wanted to know their leader would make decisions grounded in integrity.

For Boisture, the Honor Code never became simply a cadet memory — it was a way of life.

A DIFFERENT PATH?

Over four decades, Boisture helped guide several of the world's premier aerospace companies through periods of growth and change, earning a reputation for thoughtful leadership and strategic vision while helping advance business aviation around the globe.

Yet when he reflects on success, he rarely begins with airplanes or boardrooms.

Instead, he talks about the people.

He remembers classmates who inspired him as a cadet, including fellow squadron commander Bob Barnes '67, whose friendship extended to their mothers exchanging Christmas cards for decades. He

remembers Bill Patterson '67, whose humor eased the tension of combat deployments in Vietnam. And he smiles when talking about the four classmates who remain among his closest friends nearly 60 years after graduation.

"It was that tight," he says of the Class of 1967. "My best friends today are still those guys."

He also remembers the officers who invested in him. Those relationships help explain why Boisture has remained connected to the Academy throughout his life.

His service on the Falcon Foundation board carries particular meaning because he knows firsthand what the organization makes possible.

Without its scholarship, he says, his life almost certainly would have taken a different path.

His commitment extends well beyond the Falcon Foundation. Through decades of service to the Association of Graduates, the Air Force Academy Foundation and other organizations, Boisture has worked to ensure future generations of cadets receive the same opportunities that shaped his own life.

Those efforts reflect a philosophy he has carried from Baton Rouge to Colorado Springs, from Vietnam to corporate boardrooms. Success, he believes, is mea-



Boisture stands ready to fly an A-4 adversary for Operational Test & Evaluation of the F-14 Tomcat. Boisture was on exchange with the U.S. Navy at Point Mugu Naval Air Station from 1973 to 1975.

sured less by personal achievement than by the success of those he has led.

That perspective makes the Distinguished Graduate Award especially meaningful.

The award recognizes graduates whose lives have brought lasting credit upon the Academy and the nation, but Boisture is characteristically quick to shift attention away from himself.

He speaks more readily about the teammates, mentors, family members and fellow graduates who influenced his journey than about the milestones listed on his resume.

"I've been blessed," he says. "I've had opportunities I never imagined. When I look back, it all started because someone gave me a chance."

It is a chance he has spent a lifetime honoring — and paying forward. 

Scan the QR code to watch Bill Boisture's *Checkpoints* video.



Below: Boisture with a prototype of the AT-6, an attack version of the T-6 Texan II trainer built by Beechcraft for USAF and USN training.

Boisture was CEO of Hawker Beechcraft from 2009 to 2014.

Bottom: July 2002 marked a major milestone for Gulfstream as the company simultaneously achieved the production of its 100th Gulfstream GV and 400th Gulfstream GIV-SP. Boisture was president of Gulfstream from 1998 to 2004.

