



DISTINGUISHED GRADUATE AWARD

Gen. (Ret.) Tod Wolters

CLASS OF 1982

By Bryan Grossman

Gen. (Ret.) Tod Wolters '82 had barely learned to walk when he decided he would one day fly.

His earliest memories are not of airplanes themselves, but of the man climbing out of them. At 4 years old, he watched his father, a U.S. Air Force fighter pilot, return home from missions in his flight suit, eager to recount the day's sortie.

"Just the big smile on his face with a flight suit coming home, talking about his day at dinnertime, and just being so in love with what he was doing," Gen. Wolters recalls. "It was infectious."

His father flew the F-102 Delta Dagger before transitioning to the F-4 Phantom II. All four Wolters children eventually earned commissions. His older brother, Lt. Col. (Ret.) Timothy Wolters '78, followed their father into fighter aviation, flying the F-15 Eagle. Serving the nation wasn't viewed as

extraordinary. It was simply what the family did.

Their father grew up on a soybean farm in a small Kansas town during the Great Depression and understood that military service opened doors that otherwise might never have existed.

"Going into the Air Force was a big road to success for those young farm boys," Gen. Wolters says.

Growing up as the son of a fighter pilot also meant growing up on the move. The family lived on both coasts, spent time in West Germany and Washington, D.C., and adapted to the rhythm familiar to generations of military families. Every few years brought a new school, a new neighborhood and new friends.

One move left a particularly lasting impression.

During a cross-country drive through Colorado Springs in the mid-1960s, the family stopped to look at the U.S. Air Force Academy. The Cadet Chapel was still under construction when his father pulled over.

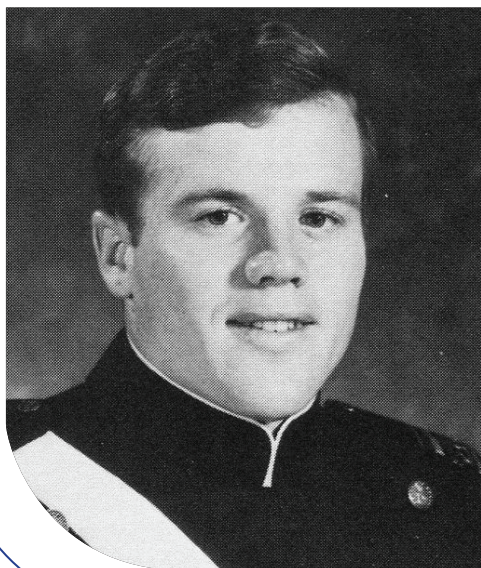
"I remember my dad telling me, 'This is where you're going to go to college,'" Gen. Wolters says. "I said, 'OK, sounds good to me, Dad.'"

MAKE YOUR MOVE

By the time Gen. Wolters finished high school, there was little doubt about his next move.

"If not the Air Force Academy," he says, "it was going to be West Point or it was going to be Annapolis. But there was no doubt in my mind that the Air Force Academy was the place to go."

Three weeks after his older brother graduated with the Class



of 1978, Gen. Wolters reported for inprocessing as a member of the Class of 1982. The timing proved invaluable.

"My brother was a great coach," he says. "All of the tactics, techniques and procedures of getting through as a cadet, my brother passed on to me."

The advice wasn't complicated: Follow the rules, stay out of trouble and take care of the people around you.

One piece of guidance, however, stayed with him for the next four decades.

"One of the things that my brother told me was, 'The best part of this place is the other people,'" Gen. Wolters says. "He was right."

Like many new cadets, he juggled demanding academics, military training and Division I football while trying to find enough hours to study and sleep. He readily admits academics challenged him the most.

"I was never a great student," he says.

What carried him through wasn't talent alone, but the willingness of classmates and instructors to help him succeed.

"I had tremendous classmates that, if you were struggling, they could give you some extra coaching."

Faculty members, he says, were equally invested.

"All of the academic instructors would bend over backwards to make sure they could keep you up to speed. They were invested in you 24/7," he says.

Gen. Wolters found his niche on the football field.

Recruited to play for the Falcons, he spent four years in the program, playing strong safety for three seasons and halfback his senior year. Air Force teams often faced challenges other Division I schools didn't, leaving little room for mistakes.

Preparation and precision became the equalizers.

"We knew if we were going to beat somebody — because they were typically bigger than we were, quicker than we were and faster than we were — we had to find a way to achieve victory. That just came through precision and timing and hard, hard, hard work."

The discipline that made Air Force football competitive against larger opponents would later define his approach to flying and leadership.



Left: "Readiness is everything," says Gen. Wolters, who played strong safety for the Falcons for three years and halfback his first year.

Below: Gen. Wolters receiving his wings, with his father at his side and his mother, who he calls "our family's commander-in-chief," doing the honors.



FROM USAFA TO SECEUR

After graduating, Gen. Wolters found that the discipline he had honed balancing academics, athletics and military training at the Academy allowed him to

thrive in the cockpit.

He entered pilot training and launched what would become more than four decades of military service. Along the way he logged more than 5,000 flight hours — most of them in the F-15C Eagle —

earned top honors in major training programs and eventually commanded at every level of the Air Force before serving as commander of U.S. European Command and NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe.

Over the course of his career, Gen. Wolters watched American airpower evolve dramatically. After flying the F-15 for thousands of hours, he eventually had the opportunity to pilot the Air Force's newest fighter, the F-22 Raptor, while serving as wing commander at Tyndall Air Force Base, Florida.

He admits he climbed into the cockpit with a healthy dose of confidence.

"I was pretty convinced," he says, "that if I had four or five F-15Cs, they could certainly gang up on one or two F-22s and achieve success."

That confidence disappeared almost immediately.

"When I flew the F-22 for the first time, I got airborne at about 15,000 feet, and within 15 seconds was chasing a tanker to get some gas," he recalls. "I just marveled at the range that I could see and the speed and the quickness."

Searching for a way to explain the aircraft's dominance, he settled on this analogy: "It was kind of like you and I trying to jump into a boxing ring, and at some point Muhammad Ali, who was invisible, was going to

jump into the ring. It just didn't work."

More than the airplane itself, he says, the experience reinforced his appreciation for American innovation and the airmen who make it possible.

"I was overwhelmed with what our United States Air Force and our Department of Defense could produce," he says. "It was a machine that I knew was going to render the enemy in a bad place for a very long time."

'THE LANGUAGE OF CHAMPIONS'

Technology changed throughout Gen. Wolters' career. His leadership philosophy did not.

Whether he was heading up a fighter squadron or commanding allied forces across Europe, he judged success by the same two questions.

"Did you treat everybody that you came in contact with with dignity and respect, and were you willing to ensure that good order and discipline was demonstrated throughout your organization?"

That philosophy carried him from squadron command to group command, wing command, a numbered Air Force, a major command and ultimately one of the most consequential operational assignments on the planet.

As NATO's Supreme Allied Com-

mander Europe, Gen. Wolters led more than 1 million soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, guardians and civilian personnel representing 32 NATO nations. Yet despite the scale, he insists leadership never became more complicated.

"The language of champions," he says, was something he first learned at the Academy.

"When something bad happened, take the blame," he says. "If anything good ever happened, pass the credit to others."

That philosophy would soon be tested on one of the largest stages imaginable.

Six months before his retirement, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The invasion transformed years of planning into immediate action.

"All of the hard work that had taken place up until Russia invaded Ukraine was going to be tested," Gen. Wolters says.

The mission was clear: Defend every inch of NATO territory, reassure allies along the alliance's eastern flank and continue supporting Ukraine — all while preventing the conflict from escalating into a broader war.

"We were doing everything we could to make sure that we could figure out a way to keep us out of World War III," he says.

'A TOUGH ROAD'

Success depended not only on military capability but on trust among allied nations. For Gen. Wolters, one lesson proved especially important.

"You cannot overcommunicate enough," he says. "If you think that you've communicated enough, odds are you're wrong."

Leading the alliance required constant communication — not simply issuing guidance, but ensuring every nation understood the mission, its role and the broader strategic objective. It was leadership on a global scale yet rooted in the same principles of teamwork and mutual trust he had first learned in Cadet Squadron 29.

Still, strategy was never the hardest part of command, he says.

People were.

Ask Gen. Wolters about the most consequential decision of his career and he answers without hesitation.

"Without a doubt, committing forces



Gen. Wolters prepares for his March 6, 2008, F-22 fini flight at Tyndall AFB.

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—Gen. (Ret.) Tod Wolters '82

is accomplished perfectly, there is a high potential for loss of life.”

No amount of experience, he says, makes those decisions easier.

“That’s a tough road to travel,” he explains. “But it’s what you get paid to do.”

Amid decades of command and leading through some of the highest-stakes situations imaginable, Gen. Wolters says he has remarkably few regrets. He credits that to his teammates.

“I was lucky enough to be surrounded by people that were willing to tell me the truth,” he says. “I had feedback from my colleagues, my peers, my subordinates, my bosses.”

He learned early that good leaders don’t have all the answers. They listen.

“You show up and you’ve got 30 or 40 people around you who are really quick, really smart, really fast,” he says of arriving at the Academy. “If you’re willing to listen to what they have to say, you can get a heck of a lot smarter.”

‘QUICKER, SMARTER AND FASTER’

Today, Gen. Wolters spends much of his time mentoring Air Force officers — from wing commanders responsible for thousands of airmen to young pilots just beginning.

Witnessing them surpass his own accomplishments has become one of the

most rewarding parts of his career.

“They’re quicker, smarter and faster than I was at their time in service,” he says, “and that’s something that I take great pride in.”

One former aide, now a wing commander, regularly earns unsolicited praise from members of the local community and the airmen under his command. Those compliments mean more to Gen. Wolters than any award or promotion.

“I can guarantee you his span of influence is far greater and far more productive than mine was when I served as a wing commander,” he says. “That’s really, really rewarding.”

Gen. Wolters sees the same promise in the young aviators serving alongside his son, a T-38 instructor pilot.

“I get to see the skip in their step and the intellect that they portray,” he says. “They’re on a good path to doing great things in the Air Force.”

Teamwork and mentorship are recurring themes: Whether speaking about his parents, football teammates, instructors, commanders, NATO allies or today’s

young officers, Gen. Wolters consistently measures success not by personal accomplishment but by investing in others.

That perspective makes receiving the Distinguished Graduate Award especially meaningful.

“It feels great to be a DG,” he says. “Anything that associates my name with the Air Force Academy is a plus for me.”

Almost immediately, though, he redirects the credit.

“But it’s not me,” he says. “It’s all those friends, all my football teammates, the coaches, the mentors, the instructors. Those folks were abundant everywhere at the Air Force Academy and abundant everywhere for the duration of my career. Anything that I’ve done that’s been close to successful, it’s them. It’s not me.”

For Gen. Wolters, that is the true strength of the Long Blue Line.

“It means everything,” he says. “It’s part of a production plant that throws a whole bunch of people out there on planet Earth that are doing everything within their power to generate greater peace across the globe in whatever function they’re per-



Change of command and Gen. Wolters earning his third star in 2013. He served from 2013 to 2014 as commander of 12th Air Force, Air Combat Command, and commander of Air Forces Southern, U.S. Southern Command.



forming.”

When asked what legacy he hopes to leave, he once again avoids talking about command or awards.

“I’m really not concerned about that,” he says. “I would just hope that they say, ‘That guy was a great friend at the Academy. During his time in the military, he was pretty focused on making sure that the generation that was going to follow him was going to be quicker and faster and smarter than he was.’

“If that’s what they think of me,” he says, “I’ll be happy with that.”

He didn’t know it at the time but, for Gen. Wolters, leadership lessons began with the smile on his father’s face as he walked through the front door wearing a flight suit.

It has guided every step since. 



Scan the QR code to watch
Gen. Tod Wolters’
Checkpoints video



Top: Gen. Wolters with his wife, Charlene, in Europe. He retired from the Air Force as commander of U.S. European Command and NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander Europe. Middle: Gen. Wolters with former NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and other prior commanders.