

## *Introduction*

*“It took me a while to accept being bossed around, but I had wanted a place at the Naval Academy so long and so badly that at first it never occurred to me to do anything but what I was supposed to do. But by the time I was a first classman I was bridling under authority, going over the wall on occasion, and accumulating a hefty share of demerits.*

*I knew even then that I was trying to protect my sanity by asserting my independence. At the same time I developed a talent for avoiding detection—great training, as it turned out, for surviving in the Pentagon.”*

**—ADMIRAL WILLIAM CROWE JR.  
FORMER CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF**

*“I had never been away very much in my life, and so this was a major excursion for me, away from my family. I went by train and my mind just raced with the possibilities of the life that awaited me there. A lot of young men had been away at prep schools and done a lot of traveling before they entered the Naval Academy, but I had never been on a boat.*

*I was a land-lubber in every respect.”*

**—JIMMY CARTER, 39TH PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES AND  
RECIPIENT OF THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE IN 2002.**

*“One day on a New Year’s weekend, Jack Stephens received a call from Gabriel Lewis in Panama. Lewis was a friend of the United States who had helped us harbor the Shah of Iran. Gabriel said, ‘Jack, I am calling you from the terrace of my house. There are three gunship helicopters circling my house. Noriega’s soldiers are coming after me, and they are going to kill me. I know that you are friends with Admiral Crowe, and I am imploring you to help me if you can. . . .’ When Crowe was informed of Gabriel Lewis’s predicament, he asked Jack Stephens, ‘Is this something you really want me to do?’ Jack said ‘Yes.’ And Crowe said, “All right. I will do it, but I don’t want to do it.” One hour later,*

*a car pulled up in front of Lewis's Panama estate, and eight soldiers about six-foot-six inches tall, all blonde, not in uniform but obviously military, piled out carrying machine guns. . . . Lewis lived nine more years and died of natural causes."*

—VERNON WEAVER, U.S. AMBASSADOR  
TO THE EUROPEAN UNION UNDER PRESIDENT CLINTON.

*"I thought plebe year turned out to be one of the most helpful nudges I'd had in a lifetime of preparation for military challenges, particularly those of prison. At the Naval Academy the system had provided for physical hazing of plebes, and I had profited from it in prison. I came away from Hanoi believing that some people were so constituted as to be poor prisoners in the absence of it."*

—ADMIRAL JAMES STOCKDALE  
(The highest-ranking naval officer held prisoner in Vietnam. He spent seven-and-a-half years in the "Hanoi Hilton," the first four in solitary confinement. For his leadership under great duress, he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.)

*"I have always been self-confident, but I also felt there were a lot of others who would be very competitive at the Academy, and I didn't know whether I was going to come out anywhere near the top. I do know that my parents had instilled a great sense of ethics and the importance of hard work in me, and that served me very well there. There was never even a brief moment during my first year that I considered quitting. What would I do if I quit? Go out as a sailor? No, that wasn't a possibility."*

—STANSFIELD TURNER, RHODES SCHOLAR  
FOUR-STAR ADMIRAL, AND FORMER DIRECTOR OF THE CIA.

*"I was aware that I was not only associated with, but competing academically with, a sample of the best this country had to offer. And that was exhilarating. I could accommodate the possibility of failing, but I was determined as hell that I wouldn't. And I learned that I needed that straightening out during plebe year. I think I learned something from it that helped me in the future, namely to take orders without wincing, no matter what the damn orders were."*

—FORMER U.S. SENATOR FROM ALABAMA AND FORMER PRISONER OF  
WAR IN VIETNAM JEREMIAH (JERRY) DENTON

*“In one sense I knew that the guys in my class at Annapolis were rather special, because the requirements to get in there were pretty hard. On the other hand, these were just the guys around us, so for all I knew everybody was like that. The Naval Academy breeds integrity and love of country and a recognition of the value of the people around you. That manifests itself in the way you live out the rest of your life.”*

—ADMIRAL THOMAS HUDNER  
FIRST RECIPIENT AFTER WWII OF THE MEDAL OF HONOR.



WHAT DO ALL OF THESE DISTINGUISHED MEN: former Joint Chiefs chairman Admiral William Crowe, 39th U.S. president Jimmy Carter, billionaire investment banker Jackson T. Stephens, Ambassador Vernon Weaver, Medal of Honor winner Admiral James Stockdale, former POW and U.S. senator Jerry Denton, Medal of Honor winner Tom Hudner, and former CIA director Stansfield Turner have in common? They were all members of the United States Naval Academy Class of 1947.

Six of these men are in their early 80s, and Stockdale and Stephens each made it to their ninth decade. (Both died in July 2005 as this book was being written.) With the keen perspective of age, all of the men look back on their days at Annapolis as the most important years of their lives, essential for instilling in them the core values and discipline and sense of patriotism that guided them to such great achievements. The men don't put forth the proposition that they were the greatest-ever American military class, because humility is one of the values they hold dear. But it is a question they've thought about from time to time, because, by any measure, this group—a collection of men who finished a four-year course of study in an accelerated three-year curriculum in preparation for a global war that they thought might last a decade—was exceptional.

As Vernon Weaver said, “It's foolish to ponder whether our class was the best, but I can tell you we did all right for ourselves. Let's just say we weren't chopped liver.”



On February 19, 2005, at Groton, Connecticut, the most heavily armed submarine ever built, the *USS Jimmy Carter*, entered the United States Navy's fleet. The \$3.2 billion nuclear-powered fast-attack submarine was to be the last of the Seawolf class of attack subs that the Pentagon ordered during the Cold War's final years. It was also the first submarine named after a living ex-president.

Giving the keynote speech on that day was Admiral Stansfield Turner, Jimmy Carter's Director of Central Intelligence from 1977–81. Turner gave an inspired and emotional talk about his respect for President Carter and how the 130-person crew of the *USS Jimmy Carter* should appreciate that their boat would bear the name of a man who upheld the highest standards of integrity, decency, and moral courage during his time in the White House.

Turner told a story to illustrate the strength of Carter's character as president:

"During the 444 excruciating days where Americans were being held hostage in our own embassy in Iran . . . every day of that crisis you would just feel the president's chances for reelection ebbing away. But never once did I suspect that any decision President Carter made with respect to those hostages was colored by his electoral prospects. What he thought was most likely to rescue those hostages and get them back home safely, is exactly what he did."

Turner told how, at a meeting with his top advisors at Camp David, Carter explained that the Iranians had the day before put a proposal on the table. They would return the hostages if the U.S. would agree to have the United Nations make a thorough inspection of what the Iranians said was United States interference over many years in the internal affairs of Iran. Turner spoke up at that point and said, "Mr. President, I think we ought to agree to the proposal, get the hostages back, and then renege on the promise to let the United Nations conduct a review. After all, we're doing this under duress."

Shaking his head slightly as he recalled the moment, Turner said, "Well, I can't tell you the look I got across the table. I wish I could

have slid under it. The president said to me, ‘Stan, you know we can’t do that.’”

“His presidential horizon was, of course, much broader than mine,” Turner said. “He was thinking of the reputation of the United States in the world, and that we could not permit ourselves to be accused of duplicity.”

Turner’s self-deprecation takes on added dimension when you realize that Jimmy Carter has often said, as he did to me in an interview several months prior to the submarine dedication, that Stan Turner was easily the most outstanding member of the Naval Academy’s Class of ’47, and the one man that every other midshipman looked to as a model of intelligence and high moral character.

Near the end of his talk, Turner, 81, found his emotions getting the better of him. Perhaps he sensed that there would never be another chance for him to pay his respects publicly to a man he had known for over 60 years and for whom he had served at the highest level of government for four of those years. According to another of their Annapolis classmates, Vernon Weaver, who directed the Small Business Administration under Carter and who has remained personally and politically close to both Carter and Turner since their days at the Academy, it was only the second time he had seen Turner get that emotional. The other occasion was at the funeral of Turner’s wife Karin, who was killed in a plane crash in Costa Rico in 2000.

In the audience the day that the USS Jimmy Carter was commissioned were no less than 50 other Class of ’47 graduates who had come from around the country to pay their respects to their most celebrated and accomplished classmate. Jack Raftery, a father of nine who had flown from his home in Las Vegas to attend the ceremony, related how he was especially touched when the son of a deceased Class of ’47 member circulated among his father’s classmates, requesting their autographs on a photo of their class graduation mounted on wood. And later that morning, a middle-aged woman worked her way among the ’47 grads, explaining that her father had hoped to attend but was unable to due to health reasons but that he

would appreciate his classmates signing a 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary log book from 1971.

As the years pass, and more and more of the distinguished United States Naval Academy Class of '47 members “graduate” beyond this life, moments like the dedication of this state-of-the-art submarine to their most distinguished classmate take on additional significance. It tells you volumes about their eternal devotion to their time in the Navy and their years at the academy that so many would make the effort to be there on that day. And at the dedication ceremony they were all moved when Jimmy Carter, a man who had served as governor of his state of Georgia and president of the United States, and had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, told them that, “This is the most deeply appreciated and emotional honor I’ve ever had, to have this ship bear my name.”



Other members of the Class of '47 who didn't make it to the actual ceremony watched on C-SPAN, which provided uninterrupted coverage of the festivities. Among them were Jackson T. Stephens, one of the country's top investment bankers and philanthropists, who watched from his home in Little Rock, Arkansas. Stephens had left the Navy following the commencement exercises in June of 1946 and joined his older brother Witt in building one of the nation's largest investment banks. But Stephens' warm feelings towards Annapolis had only grown deeper through the years and in 2002 he donated \$10 million towards the construction of a new football field at the Academy, which is named in his honor.

Admiral William Crowe, who had served as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Republican presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, and then later surprised most of his classmates by endorsing Bill Clinton's run for the White House, was watching from his home in the Washington, D.C. area. In a casual interview the year before he had jokingly told me that the two most important things he learned at the Naval Academy were “1) To get dressed quickly, and 2) To eat quickly.”

Crowe also said in our conversation that the Naval Academy was “a pretty intense experience, and because when I was there they didn’t have counselors available, your classmates were the only ones available for counseling, and thus you formed friendships that last a lifetime.”

He remembers his battalion officer saying to him one day, “Crowe, you may make a good officer someday, but you’re a damned poor midshipman.” Little did that officer realize he was talking to a man who would years later become the top-ranking military official in the country.

And Admiral James Stockdale, who was awarded the Medal of Honor for his incredible bravery and leadership while a prisoner of war in Vietnam for nearly eight years, watched quietly from his home in southern California. Admiral Stockdale’s health had not been good of late, but he fought the Alzheimer’s disease that would claim him five months later with the same determination and ferocity he exhibited in a prison hell-hole in North Vietnam.

One of the Stockdale’s four sons, Sid, said this about his father in an interview a month earlier: “When you consider all the hardship and the loneliness and the struggle that my father endured in order to help protect the people he was in prison with, and whom he helped survive and with whom he helped thrive as a community in Vietnam, it’s incredible. I am hoping that in the long run history will bear out the truth. Perhaps it will happen when he dies. As so often happens, it takes someone’s death before people finally come to put things into an appropriate perspective. But my father knows what he has accomplished. He knows exactly what the score is, and so I think that the family is satisfied that he is satisfied in knowing that.”

Sid’s younger brother Stan recently said, “Just this morning I was meeting with a client and he said, ‘Your name is Stockdale? Stockdale, Stockdale . . . Oh, yeah, are you related to that guy who ran for vice-president?’ This happens a lot, and I respond, ‘Actually, I’m related to that guy who had his ass kicked for eight years in a prisoner-of-war camp so that we could live free lives over here in this country.’”

When Admiral Stockdale died, he received a memorial service with full military honors on the deck of the U.S.S. Ronald Reagan. Eight Medal of Honor winners served as pallbearers and more than a dozen former POWs were in attendance. It was clear that Stockdale's sacrifice would never be forgotten.



The distinguished members of the Class of '47 have every reason to believe that theirs was as impressive a graduating class as ever tossed their hats in the air at Annapolis. And they have several points to bolster that argument. Among their ranks are a U.S. president and Nobel Peace Prize winner, two Medal of Honor winners, a United States senator, a self-made billionaire businessman and renowned philanthropist, a former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, a former U.S. ambassador to the European Union, five four-star admirals, and no less than 34 men who achieved the rank of admiral. And as Class of '47 secretary Chet Shaddeau reports, "In addition to these nationally recognized figures, there are also literally hundreds of physicians, financiers, engineers, scientists, teachers, businessmen and clerics, as well as Army and Air Force officers and civic and governmental leaders, many of whom commenced these efforts after a productive military career, who formed the core of this great class."

In an e-mail, Shaddeau modestly expressed to me the following assessment of his class, which would no doubt be supported by members of other USNA classes who might understandably feel that their own particular class was exceptional:

"I hope you haven't fallen into the trap, Jack, as so many have, of believing the unsupported and inaccurate belief of many in our class that we had some kind of record for quantity of stars. In fact the numbers of our rank who achieved their status as admiral is about average for classes of the modern era."

So we'll leave the argument about which class was the greatest to be discussed at future reunions. The purpose of this book is, instead, to commemorate the singular achievements of a select group of

individuals who happened to enter Annapolis on a hot summer day in 1943, when the world was engaged in its largest international conflict ever. What so many of them achieved, focused as they were on a war they expected to last beyond their commissioning as officers, was a form of true greatness.

Inspired partly by pure patriotism and partly by strong and nurturing families that instilled in them values that would render them unshakable in even the most torturous moments, and then polished to a gleam by the rigid training at The Yard, the men we discuss in this book came to represent, with a nod to Tom Brokaw's chronicle, the best of *The Greatest Generation*.