

William P. Lawrence
Vice Admiral William P. Lawrence, USN (Ret.)

Distinguished Graduates Award—2000



Class of 1951
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Turning down a scholarship to Yale in 1947, William P. Lawrence enrolled in the Naval Academy's Class of 1951. At the Academy, the Tennessee native earned the reputation of "a true southern gentleman" and a serious student.

He maintained "star" grades while excelling in football. After he helped develop the brigade's honor code and served as both Brigade Commander and Class President, the *Lucky Bag* observed that, with Bill's graduation, "the academy loses a great guy and a true asset."

Following graduation, Bill headed off to flight school where he earned his wings, and was chosen for the Navy's elite test-pilot school. Taking the riskiest assignments, Bill pushed the Navy's new jets to the breaking point, becoming the first Navy pilot to fly a Navy jet at twice the speed of sound.

A slight heart murmur detected during testing kept Bill from joining friends John Glenn and Alan Shepherd as members of NASA's first astronaut corps. But his country needed him in Southeast Asia, where the Vietnam War was heating up.

In June 1967, Bill's F-4 Phantom was shot down during a bombing run over North Vietnam. For the next seven years Bill was a Prisoner of War, held with other American pilots in the notorious Hao Lo Prison, better known as the Hanoi Hilton.

After his release in 1974, Bill was assigned to the Pentagon, where he held several top posts. He served as Superintendent of the Naval Academy from 1978 until 1981, when he became Chief of Naval Personnel.

Since retiring from the Navy in 1986, Bill has held the Chair of Naval Leadership, served as a guest lecturer and teacher, and is enjoying life with his wife Diane, and his three grown children—one of whom, Wendy, became a shuttle astronaut in 1992.

Through hardship and adversity, Bill has remained a "true southern gentlemen," confident in purpose and selfless in the service of his country.