



NONPROFIT CHARACTER AND PHILANTHROPY

Mike Gould, '76, Lt Gen (Ret), USAF

CEO, Air Force Academy Foundation & Association of Graduates

Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay

Lindsay: Would you mind sharing a little bit about your journey and how you got to where you are today?

Gould: Reflecting back on my journey, a lot of it has to do with the family that I grew up in. My dad was a vet & mom was a nurse. Dad flew P-51s in the Occupation Forces in the Pacific at the end of World War II. He came back after the war and like a lot of people, he hadn't been to college yet, so he got his degree at Kent State University and then he went on to graduate school at the University of Michigan. That is where my sister and I were born. While he was in school in Michigan from 1950-1953, Korea sparked. Uncle Sam was calling and wanting aviators from the War to come back, so he got recalled back to active duty to go fly. He asked if he could stay and finish his education before he went, and they said okay. He finished his Masters Degree and was straight off to jet upgrade.

About the time he got requalified in the F-89, the armistice was signed, but he had committed to serve again, so he stayed in the Air Force and went up to Alaska in the Air Defense Command. Shortly thereafter, the B-47 became operational and the Air Force needed single seat pilots to go fly this new intercontinental bomber, so that's what he did. He was eventually assigned to the 100th Bomb Wing at Pease Air Force Base in New Hampshire, where I grew up from Kindergarten through 6th grade. I remember visiting Dad as he was sitting alert at Pease and going to the flight line to welcome him home from European reflex missions at the height of the Cold War. I missed my Dad but, in hindsight, I was learning valuable lessons about commitment, loyalty, work ethic – and military families' sacrifices.

In 1965 the Air Force assigned Dad to Kent State University to command the ROTC Detachment. We all know how Kent State played out in 1970. I watched a quiet mid-American campus be overtaken by anti-war rioters, followed by Ohio's governor activating the National Guard, and then four students being killed by gunfire. My Mom, then the head nurse in our local hospital, cared for the onslaught of casualties on May 4, 1970. She shared the stories of removing bullet-proof vests from "peaceful demonstrators" and treating life-threatening wounds

Mike Gould, Lieutenant General (Retired; USAFA 1976) is the CEO of the Air Force Academy Foundation and the Association of Graduates. In that role, he leads all efforts of both organizations in support of the United States Air Force Academy and its many graduates. Gen Gould spent 38 years on active duty where he held such positions as military aid to the President, senior military assistant to the Secretary of the Air Force, was a seven-time commander, and culminated his service as the Superintendent of the Air Force Academy. He is a command pilot with over 3,100 hours in 11 different aircraft.

suffered by police and Guardsmen. There was so much more behind the story of Kent State and many other American cities during those turbulent times. Little did I know, those experiences prepared me well for the world we find ourselves in today.

A year later, as my Kent State High School teammates were scheming how to avoid the draft, I departed home at age 17 for the USAFA Prep School. I came here believing the concept of a “military commitment” applied to all Americans. Once you pay that commitment, you go on with the rest of your life; it was just what you did. Academically, I struggled through the Academy because, in hindsight, I didn’t apply myself right. I loved it though because of the like-minded friends, the chance to play college football, the constant challenges, and the opportunities afforded after graduation. Thanks to the example my parents set, abiding to the Cadet Honor Code was the right, natural thing to do. As for Mrs. McComas’ decorum training, I have to say she couldn’t hold a candle to my mom...

Pilot training followed and while I loved flying airplanes, I was still of the mindset that I would fulfill my commitment, then separate and go coach high school football. On my third assignment, I was an Instructor Pilot at Pilot Instructor Training (PIT) at Randolph Air Force Base. Most members of the 560th Flying Training Squadron were biding their time until the 6-year point when their commitment expired so they could go to the airlines who were seemingly hiring anyone who could fog a mirror. I came home one day with an application for Delta Airlines. Paula knew I had no desire to be an airline pilot & called me on it. She offered, “If you like what you are doing, keep doing it – we’re on board.” Having Paula’s and our two boys’ total love and support helped me realize that the Air Force is my calling and I would keep doing it as long as I could contribute.

As a senior captain T-38 PIT instructor, I got a call saying the ATC Vice Commander, needed a couple

checkout flights in the ’38. The Vice, Maj General Charlie Hamm was a ’56 West Point graduate, an F-100 combat vet and former Thunderbird pilot; the last thing he needed was a blow-by-blow “wingtip-on-the-star” fingertip formation lesson from me, but I learned that lesson the hard way. After my first IP demo, he took the jet, tightened my position by about one half and said, “How’s this look, captain?” Talk about being humbled. After the checkout, he told me he needed a new executive officer and I was it. I’m thinking the last thing I needed was to carry a general’s bag around – not in my plan. I went back to my boss, a Colonel at the 12th Wing and he asked me how it went with the Vice. I said, “He wants me to be his Exec, but that’s not my cup of tea.” The Colonel said, “You have a choice to make; if that is what General Hamm wants you to do, if I were you, I’d go do it and do it well.” A welcome attitude check from a mentor. Paula and I both learned tons from General Hamm and his wife, Jane, and we are grateful for their mentorship and enduring friendship.

It soon hit me that there is something special about being associated with a mission, a cause, a lifetime of service – until, that is, my first staff assignment in the Pentagon when I started second-guessing myself. As a new Major I was running a program that involved Professional Military Education (PME) at Maxwell AFB. I had to travel down to Maxwell to give a talk at Air Command and Staff College (ACSC) and one of my ’76 classmates, Harrison Freer, was in the course at the time. I was singing the blues about my job and how much I detested the staff work. I’ll never forget Harrison’s response, “You should hear yourself whining. Knock it off and apply yourself just like you have in your previous assignments and make something good happen.” Hearing that critique from a peer, a guy that I respected and had grown up with at the Academy, made me realize I needed to make an attitude adjustment. To this day, I’m grateful for my friend Harrison.

As one of the “Iron Majors” in the Pentagon, my job was to dissect the Ike Skelton Congressional Committee’s





report on their year-long study of Professional Military Education. My task was to examine the roughly 70 recommendations that came out of Committee to find out what the Air Force needed to do to comply. I was scheduled to brief the Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel Policy on the Air Force's response but first had to pre-brief the three-star, Lt Gen Tom Hickey who was the Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel. The bottom line of my briefing was that we need to

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"stand up and tell these Congressmen to stop meddling in a business that they know nothing about." I had this figured out and I was really going to "tell it like it is." Of course, the General said, "I get your point, but you need to tone this down a bit, Major." It is one of those things that sticks in my mind. You can have an opinion, but the effective way to voice that opinion is probably in a more subtle way than to tell your bosses to leave you alone. I'm grateful for mentors like Tom Hickey.

You can learn a lot of lessons of how to be an effective leader by watching your leaders' decisions, both good and bad. That's kind of how my journey went. When I think about the leadership opportunities that I had in seven different commands and a couple executive leadership positions over the course of my career, I'd like to think many of my good decisions occurred because of great examples I witnessed, and my bad decisions were because I was too slow or stubborn to have applied the lessons I'd been taught.

Lindsay: You highlighted several things in your journey that are so critical. You talked about being open to opportunities, being humble and willing to learn, and paying attention to those around you. During your career you had the opportunity to be the Air Force Aide to the President and the Senior Military Assistant to the

Secretary of the Air Force. As you were developing and growing as a leader, you got to witness some very senior leaders. Can you share a bit about what that was like?

Gould: As you've reminded me, Doug, I've had some incredible opportunities handed to me. During my first tour in DC, after a year on the Air Staff, my boss, Lt Gen (Ret) John Jackson, surprised me when he called to tell me he had nominated me to be the Air Force Aide to the President. When I finished laughing, he told me he was serious and that I'd made it through the vetting and would be headed to an interview at the White House in a couple weeks. Somehow after three interviews, the director of the White House Military Office told me they had selected me. Over the next two years, I had a front row seat witnessing some significant history – like the fall of the Berlin Wall, Desert Shield/Desert Storm, the highly-scrutinized Supreme Court confirmation of Justice Clarence Thomas, a potential enactment of the 25th Amendment when President George H. W. Bush experienced a cardiac episode and more... The main job of the MILAIDE was to serve as an action officer for the President in the event of a national emergency, but because of the requirement for a MILAIDE (one from each service rotating a 24-hour watch) to be in the immediate proximity of the President, we got to hear and see some incredible acts of leadership and character in action.

What sticks with me most is something I think we all long for today – and that was an adherence to at least some sort of civility in the political arena. Where is Will Rogers' wit when we need it? "The man with the best job in the country is the Vice President. All he has to do is get up every morning and say, "How is the President?" My observations of the 43rd President revealed that he was a gentleman and an admirable family man. He labored over tough decisions just like we all do, but often the stakes he dealt with were so much higher than ours. I always thought his deep-rooted character led him not to being on the right side of history, but on the right side of right. There is

a lot we can all learn about character from members of the “Greatest Generation.”

Then there was a two-year stint as Senior Military Aide to the SECAF, Dr. Sheila Widnall, the first woman to serve as a Service Secretary. My primary function was to advise the Secretary on military matters while staying abreast of political factors. One of the first lessons I learned in that job was the importance of loyalty, but I was surprised at to whom one should direct those loyalties. Being the new guy in the SECAF’s office and naively thinking a part of my responsibilities would be to keep the blue-suit side of the Air Staff apprised of civilian activities, I requested a courtesy call with the CSAF, Gen Ron Fogleman. The Chief probably appreciated my gesture, but he made it easy by telling me there would be no need for me to play the go-between role; rather, he clearly stated my allegiances were to my boss, the civilian leader of our Air Force.

During that tour, I witnessed how important civilian control of the military is in our democracy. I learned that the concept of maintaining good order and discipline in a military unit can mean something different to civilian leaders. I learned that giving best military advice to civilian leaders may and may not lead to the optimum outcome for either side, but that the dialogue is important in the decision-making process. Perhaps most memorable and enduring, I learned that bold, decisive and always respectful leadership from senior military leaders can do wonders to set the right culture in an organization. Following several controversial decisions made by his civilian Air Force and DoD leaders, Gen Fogleman stood on his principles by submitting his resignation as CSAF to the Secretary and he did so without fanfare or personal disparagement. By refusing to publicly elaborate on all the factors that led to his resignation, he sent a clear message about character and leadership to every member of the US Air Force. Right after the Chief handed his letter of resignation to Dr. Widnall and departed her office, she called me into her office and holding up his letter asked, “What do we do

with this?” My response was simple: “You accept it and find a new Chief. It’s too late; he has made up his mind.”

Lindsay: It certainly takes some moral fortitude when you are sitting in that room to not worry about your job or your career, but to say this is what we are standing for. With that idea of honor and discipline, can you talk a little bit about the role of character?

Gould: Here is the way I look at it. If you think about leadership as the art of inspiring others to move in a certain direction, or to act in a certain manner, or to speak with conviction about a cause, to me it is obvious that you need something to compliment your leadership. That something is character. It is your mental and moral beliefs, the virtues that you hold dear that back up the leadership piece. If you don’t have a firm grip of what your moral, mental, and internal virtues are, you’re going to have a hard time taking a stand in a leadership position. Some of those virtues are ingrained during your formative years, but not everyone grows up having benefitted from the same value system. I told you about my dad being gone a lot when I was little. For him it was all about integrity and a solid work ethic. That was just engrained in me.

Then, you come to the Air Force Academy where you live under the Honor Code. You have classmates from all different walks of life, diverse backgrounds, and different cultures and you watch and hear the discussions. I remember we had honor lessons where the cadet honor reps would present some dilemmas. For example, you go to the phone booth one day and you notice in the coin return that someone left a quarter behind (oops, I’m dating myself). What are you going to do with that quarter? At first you think those hypothetical lessons are silly, then as the stakes increase, eventually you realize there is value in thinking through simple cases. What are you going to do if you hand a clerk a \$10 and they start making change for a \$100? Are you going to walk out of there and say, that clerk sure blew it, or are you going to do the right thing?



Having those discussions where the stakes are relatively low are invaluable to help find that moral compass.

Lindsay: Two things really resonated with me when you were talking through that. The first was that you have to think about it in advance. You need that preparation. Two, you were talking about knowing what you stand on and for. If we establish a foundation of those moral principles and virtues, the event really doesn't matter because we know how we need to respond because we have that foundation. If we change with every situation because we are worried about someone will think or who we want to keep happy, we will drift all over the place. That is where leaders sometimes fail when they get overwhelmed by the moment and they lose sight of that center. It's that alignment between what we say and what we do.

Gould: Exactly. If you haven't thought about it before hand, chances are, you have a 50/50 chance of making the right call when the pressure is on. It's like continuation training in flying. With the timing of my career, we were commissioned as Lieutenants in 1976, Vietnam was behind us, and we were "fighting" the Cold War. We weren't engaged in combat, but we were training for that day. Continuation training flights can seem repetitive, but the idea is that you keep repeating it so that when you take that bird strike through the canopy or someone is shooting at you, you have already thought it through. The instincts, the muscle memory kicks in and you respond in the right way. It's also like that with sports. One of the worst things you can do is take a golf lesson from your local pro, then read a couple of "how to do it" articles, then head to the course to play a round of golf. You have all these thoughts going through your mind. But, if you read the books, take your lesson and then go to the range and repeat it and you get the muscle memory where things are happening without having to make conscious thought about physical movements, then you get in a grove and you will make good decisions on the golf course later. Likewise in our everyday lives, if we haven't taken the

time to consider character dilemmas and think about resolutions, then we probably aren't going to be prepared to make the right call when it really counts.

Lindsay: That leads me to think about where you are right now. We want to have leaders think about it ahead of time and provide those experiences early enough where they can get the repetitions they need. In your current role as the CEO of the Air Force Academy Foundation you provide resources back to the Academy

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to have those opportunities and experiences. In addition, you are also the CEO of the Association of Graduates where you encourage and develop relationships with Academy graduates to stay connected. What is your message regarding the importance of staying connected and giving back to the Institution? I'm not necessarily talking just about the financial piece, there is also an advocacy piece as well as a time component. I'm sure there are some graduates out there who valued their time at the Academy, but haven't really been connected. Why is it important for all graduates to reconnect?

Gould: That's a really good question. It's important that we, as grads, look other grads in the eye and say, whether it's been 10, 20, or 30 years since you went through the Academy, regardless of where you are right now, if you look really hard at what you are doing, the decisions that you are making, or the success that you have enjoyed; if you are really honest with yourself, you can probably go back and say, "I probably wouldn't be as well off as I am if not for some of those experiences that I had at USAFA." Whether it was the friends that we made, the people that lifted us up when we really needed it, the academic challenges we endured, or the adversity we overcame on the athletic field - all of us





who go through the Academy can look back and say that those experiences helped prepare us for life. Don't you feel some need to connect? To make sure that the cadets here today are having the same or better opportunities? I think that is our role here. It's not about getting in people's pocketbooks. If we are being honest, the Academy did a lot to form our opinions, attitudes, and decision making. I think it is important to help people understand the benefits that the Academy afforded us. Whether every experience was positive or not, we learned a lot about ourselves and life.

I challenge grads to get and stay connected. Read *Checkpoints*, *ZoomieNews*, and *7258*. Follow Academy happenings on social media. Recognize and celebrate the impact that graduates are having all over the world. Understand that funding for training and education runs in a sine curve that follows what the administration and economy are doing. When defense spending is up, there is a little more to go around. In years when it is down, training and education is generally at the tail end of that whip. So, it's up to us to inspire that sense of wanting to give back to our alma mater. Matching graduates' passions with USAFA's needs will lead us to a culture of philanthropy.

We are still a relatively new institution but that is no longer an excuse. If we can help people understand that there are valid needs and that philanthropy is crucial to enabling the excellence in all the Academy does, we will be firmly established on the right path.

Lindsay: That is a great way of looking at it. In a way, all of us graduates have been given something in advance by being able to attend the Academy. It's a good reminder of that value. Thinking about where you are now and the success that you have had, if you could go back and give Cadet Gould a couple of pieces of advice, what would they be?

Gould: I didn't have the wisdom to think about it at the time, but I wish I had taken advantage of the learning

opportunities that the Academy offered. When I was a cadet, I read just enough to avoid trouble in the next day's class, but today, I read whenever possible. I have about four books going right now. They cover topics anywhere from the 1918 flu to Dewey and Truman in the election in 1948. Then, I'm finishing a couple of books about the social issues that we are going through today and of course, the Bible is my best source of knowledge and inspiration. I can't wait to get quiet time in the evening to read. I wish I had applied myself better as a cadet; had I done so, I think I would have been more effective earlier as a Lieutenant, Captain, and a Major. The opportunities are there. It's a maturity thing. I just didn't realize that it was out there for the taking.

In hindsight, I'm eternally grateful for what the Academy experience did for me and our family. That's why I am in this job. Paula and I served for a long time, 30 and 38 years respectively – "lifers" as young Airmen would say. We were ready to retire and take on other challenges, far from more government work. In 2017 when Bart Holaday asked me to consider coming back to lead the Endowment (now, Foundation), my only hesitation was selfish. After Paula and I talked about it and realized how our Air Force experiences had perhaps uniquely qualified us for this role at this time, it just made good sense. Now in this job as CEO of both the Academy Foundation and Association of Graduates, it is important to me that we have a graduate community that understands what is required to make the Academy better for future generations.

Lindsay: Yours is a great example of service and how we can all give back in different roles and different ways. We all have a contribution that we can give back. Anything else that you would like to share?

Gould: Yes, Doug; looking back 10-15 years ago when we were advocating for the need to have a new building to serve as the home of the Academy's character and leadership development work, we talked a lot about the iconic architecture and world-class interior workplaces.

All along, however, the vision was really about the critical work that would take place inside this new facility. Now that USAFA has the new structure, it's activities such as the deep thinking that occurs in the research and scholarship arenas, the professional processes involved in administering the cadet honor system and indeed all the thought, time and effort that goes into publishing the *Journal of Character and Leadership Development* that have moved us toward turning the vision into reality. Our Air Force's and USAFA's Core Values are what define our culture as Airmen. Enculturation in any business is a social endeavor – and in this business of military service, which entails being prepared to lay down one's life in defense of the country, it is imperative that all Airmen, all cadets adopt that culture. Building an institutional culture based upon Integrity, Service and Excellence cannot be done without *character development*. Character is the bedrock upon which our values reside.

Recall General Patton's quote, "If you can't get them to salute when they should salute and wear the clothes you tell them to wear, how are you going to get them to die for their country?" I say we take that sentiment a step further as in, if we can't get cadets to embrace Integrity, Service and Excellence, how can we expect them to lead and make the sacrifices our nation requires. *Living honorably*, a theme championed in 2010-11 by then Commandant Brig Gen Rich Clark and then CCLD director, Col Joe Sanders, lies at the root of the CCLD's character and leadership development framework. I like the Center's direction and applaud the team's efforts to tackle that imperative to focus on character development. All these new ideas, the research and scholarship, the articles that you produce in the JCLD, will make our institution stronger. At the Air Force Academy, we have a platform that can influence higher education across the country. Educators need to understand the latest and greatest and think hard about the true meaning of moral courage. I'm proud of what you are doing and encourage you to keep it going. We in the AOG and Academy Foundation will help any way

we can. It takes resources to do what you do. We are the front company to make that happen, but we need donors to know that this is a worthy endeavor. Keep up the good work.

Lindsay: Thank you. I appreciate those kind words and the generous support so that we can showcase the great work that is happening at the Academy to all institutions and organizations.

