



PHOTO COURTESY OF NASA

UNFORESEEN DESTINY

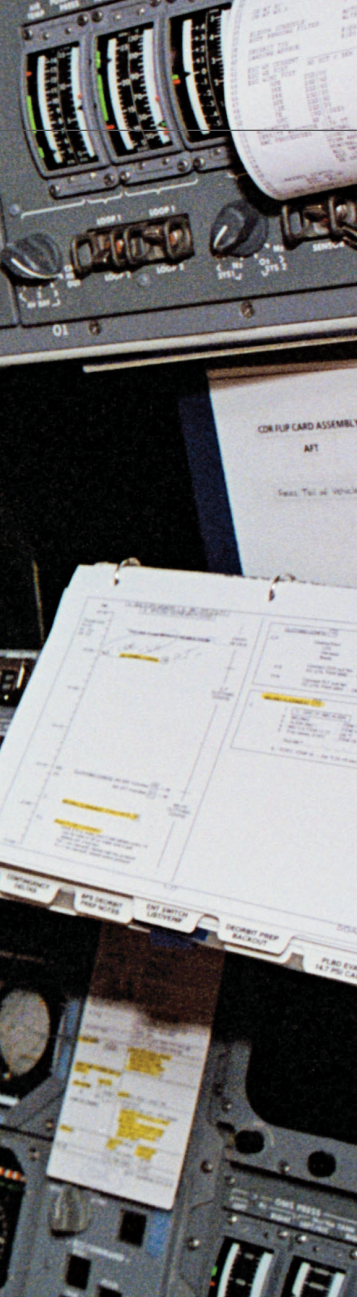
BOLDEN REACHED THE HEAVENS DURING AN UNPREDICTABLE MARINE CORPS CAREER

Major General Charles Bolden '68, USMC (Ret.), spent 680 hours in space on four U.S. Space Shuttle missions.

As a Marine Corps aviator, Bolden flew the A-6A Intruder in more than 100 combat missions during the Vietnam War. He flew more than 6,000 hours as a test pilot assessing aircraft including the A-6E, EA-6B and A-7C/E. He was inducted into the National Aviation Hall of Fame in 2017.

Bolden closed the military chapter of his career as the head of NASA for 7 1/2 years.

Not bad for a kid from Columbia, SC, whose segregationist home-state congressional delegation refused to make an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy for any Black person. Institutional racism couldn't deter Bolden from pursuing his dream of becoming a midshipman, which began as a 12-year-old.



MajGen Charles Bolden '68, USMC (Ret.), served 34 years in the Marine Corps including 14 as an astronaut. He was on four Space Shuttle missions and commanded two.

He would enter the Academy as a plebe in 1964 with six Black classmates. Four of those seven would graduate with the Class of 1968.

Bolden, a 2018 Naval Academy Alumni Association Distinguished Graduate honoree, knew for certain there were two things he absolutely wouldn't do upon commissioning:

1. Fly planes
2. Join the Marine Corps

Bolden would *only* serve 34 years in the Marine Corps, which included 14 with NASA. He commanded two of his Space Shuttle missions and has mentored countless midshipmen and astronauts throughout his career. He served as deputy commandant at the Naval Academy in the mid-1990s and serves as moderator for the annual astronaut convocation on the Yard each spring.

Enticed by the TV program, "Men of Annapolis," Bolden envisioned himself in the crisp white uniforms at the Academy and serving in the Navy post-commissioning.

"I was not going to fly airplanes because I thought that was inherently dangerous," Bolden said. "I was not going to go into the Marine Corps. I thought they were a little crazy."

His outlook flipped while a member of 29th Company in his plebe year, Vietnam War veteran then-Major John Reilly Love '51, USMC, who retired as a colonel, impressed Bolden with his brand of leadership.

A subsequent company officer soured Bolden on nuclear power.

"He was a lot like my dad," Bolden said of Love. "He was incredibly tough but eminently fair. He told you what he expected and showed his disappointment if you didn't live up to his expectations."

"I wanted to be like Major Love, against all odds."

That news didn't sit well with those closest to Bolden. He said his father cried and his wife was upset when he announced he was

commissioning into the Marine Corps. There would be a compromise following The Basic School, however Bolden had an aviation option coming out of the Academy. He took it and reported to Pensacola, FL, for flight training. He would not become an infantry officer in Vietnam.

'WE SHOULD HAVE BEEN DEAD'

Bolden's initial skepticism of aviation evaporated the moment he got in the cockpit for his first training flight.

"I fell in love with flying and never looked back," he said.

While he appreciated the precision needed to fly, he wasn't eager to test how close he could get to his lead aircraft. He was fine with never being a Blue Angels candidate.

"That really piqued my interest because I had fallen in love with instrument flying," Bolden said. "Everything everyone else hated, that's what I wanted to do."

By the time Bolden began running sorties over Vietnam in 1972, President Richard Nixon had withdrawn all American forces from South Vietnam. Midway through his year in Vietnam, his squadron had migrated to flying night operations at 500 feet and 500 knots. Pilots had designated targets then went searching for munitions transfers from North Vietnam and China into South Vietnam.



Then-MIDN Charles Bolden '68

**"Don't ask
your troops to
do something
you're not
willing to do."**

U.S. operations, dictated from Washington, DC, routinely used the same routes on bombing missions. That was a recipe for disaster.

On one mission, Steve Berry was filling in for Bolden's regular bombardier/navigator. Anti-aircraft fire lit up the sky and Bolden considered aborting the operation.

Ultimately, Bolden fulfilled the Marines Corps' mission-first ethos.

"They knew when we were coming and how we were coming, like clockwork," Bolden said. "We tried to fool them by coming in from different directions and different altitudes. This night was like a fireworks show. I knew there was no way we were going to make it. There was just no place to go.

"I thought, well, maybe we could turn around and go back, just forget about it tonight. I realized every moment I spent jockeying or turning, was going to be more time in the flack. I told Steve, let's just press on to the target, we'll get through this."

Bolden said Berry momentarily took his head out of the radar boot and saw all the flack surrounding the plane.

"He let out an expletive and put his head back into the boot," Bolden said.

Berry and Bolden made it through the wall of fire without a scratch.

"God was with us that night," Bolden said. "We should have been dead."

By completing his mission, Bolden embodied a credo he lived throughout his Marine Corps career.

"Don't ask your troops to do something you're not willing to do," Bolden said. "Give them the example so they can follow you."

Captain Ken Reightler '73, USN (Ret.), saw that policy put into practice. He met Bolden when they were students at the U.S. Naval Test Pilot School. He credited Bolden for turning his career trajectory toward becoming an astronaut.

Reightler was nearing the completion of his graduate work at the Naval Postgraduate School when he was reviewing possible assignments for a newly selected Aerospace Engineering Duty Officer.

He said a liaison job at Johnson Space Center seemed like a strategic step for a prospective astronaut. Reightler sought Bolden's advice. Bolden inquired what Reightler's other options were. One was returning to the Naval Air Station Patuxent River as a test pilot.

"To me, working with NASA at JSC would considerably help my chances of becoming an astronaut," Reightler said. "Wisely, Charlie knew better and I was told to 'go fly F-18's' instead of flying a desk in Houston, TX. I took that advice, and things worked out. In 1987, I finally caught up to Charlie and joined him as a member of the astronaut office."

Bolden's respect among the astronauts and training and support personnel at Johnson Space Center was immediately clear to Reightler. He supported two of Bolden's Space Shuttle missions: one from the Launch Control Center and another as a part of the Mission Control Team.

"Watching him lead his crews on these highly successful missions was a master class in leadership, coaching and mentoring," Reightler said. "A few years later, I had the chance to fly in space with Charlie as part of the STS-60 crew, assigned to perform the first U.S./Russian joint space mission.

"He handled all the additional attention and pressure with grace and style. It was clear that in delegating to me many of the responsibilities of working to get our cosmonaut crew members and their families settled, as well as other duties such as leading formation flights and making presentations, he was mentoring me on how to be a good shuttle commander."

MajGen Charles Bolden '68, USMC (Ret.), has mentored Marines, astronauts and midshipmen during his time as deputy commandant at the Naval Academy. Bolden is seen here with midshipmen in October 1994.



PHOTO COURTESY OF USNA

TAKE CARE OF YOUR PEOPLE

Ethel and Charles Bolden Sr. ingrained the importance of treating people the way you want to be treated into their son at an early age. Ethel was a librarian who established the first library for Black students at Waverly Elementary School in 1940 in Columbia, SC. Charles Sr. was a successful football coach at C. A. Johnson High School. The football stadium is named in his honor.

The junior Bolden said his parents regularly assisted Black kids, some of whom went to rival high schools. Charles Sr. took football standouts to some Big Ten schools that integrated during the 1960s to help them secure scholarships.

Charles Bolden Jr. had opportunities, thanks to his parents' emphasis on education, to be part of integrated education camps while in high school. While he was the only Black participant, he studied chemistry in National Science Foundation summer programs in North Manchester, IN.

At Carnegie Tech—home of the first computer UNIVAC—in Pittsburgh, PA, he studied computer science.

Primed with a stellar academic record, Bolden sought an appointment to the Naval Academy. He was accepted to Yale University and the University of Pennsylvania. However, his home-state delegation (Senator Strom Thurmond, Senator Olin D. Johnston and Congressman Albert Watson) refused to forward any Black names to Annapolis.

Anticipating this, Bolden began writing then-Vice President Lyndon Johnson as a high school freshman. The vice president can nominate U.S. citizens without geographical restrictions but by Bolden's senior year, President John F. Kennedy had been killed and Johnson was no longer handling those duties.

"The congressional delegation had made it quite clear they had no interest in appointing a Black candidate," Bolden said.

At his mother's encouragement, Bolden wrote to President Johnson and reminded him of their previous correspondence. He didn't hear from the president but several weeks later a Navy recruiter showed up at his home. A couple of months after that, Bolden said Johnson sent a retired federal judge around the country looking for qualified Black and Hispanic men to apply to the Naval Academy.

Chicago Congressman William Dawson made Bolden's appointment to the Academy. Although it nearly took an act of Congress to get Bolden to Annapolis, he said he only experienced one overtly racist incident while a midshipman.

During Plebe Summer, he and his roommates were studying when the Brigade of Midshipmen reformed. Their Bancroft Hall door flung open and two Caucasian men—one from Alabama and one from South Carolina—made it clear he wasn't welcome.

"They addressed me and said, 'Mr. Bolden we're here to let you know you're not going to finish this year,'" Bolden remembered. "I said, 'with all due respect sirs, what makes you say that?' They said, 'because we're not going to let you.'"

"I said, 'again with all due respect, we will see about that.'"

Bolden said the harsh reality of plebe life quickly transformed his dream of attending the Naval Academy into



a nightmare. During Plebe Summer, he called home every week crying, thinking he made a big mistake.

"I was about to throw in the towel," Bolden said. "Then, these two guys came in. I don't think I liked the Academy anymore, but I decided I wasn't going to allow them to run me out. I began to knuckle down."

Bolden held his own academically and was elected president of his class at the end of his plebe year.

"I learned to tolerate what went on," he said. "Contrary to what they thought, they didn't drive me out. Things started getting better after that." ⚓

Five NASA astronauts and a Russian cosmonaut squeeze through the tunnel that connects the shirt-sleeve environment of the Space Shuttle Discovery and the SPACEHAB module. SPACEHAB is located in the spacecraft's payload bay. MajGen Charles F. Bolden Jr. '68, USMC (Ret.), mission commander, is at upper right. Others, clockwise from the commander, are Ronald M. Sega and N. Jan Davis, mission specialists; Franklin R. Chang-Diaz, payload commander; Cosmonaut Sergei K. Krikalev, mission specialist; and CAPT Kenneth S. Reightler Jr. '73, USN (Ret.), pilot.