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LEGACY OF VALOR: VIETNAM

The Vietnam War was the first major American conflict in which multiple Black Naval Academy alumni were in leadership positions. Shipmate commemorates this milestone with the stories of two 2018 U.S. Naval Academy Alumni Association Distinguished Graduates as part of our Legacy of Valor series.

UNCOMPROMISING PRINCIPLES

CHAMBERS CREDITS CAREER TO UNWAVERING BELIEFS, COMMITMENT TO HIS PEOPLE

Unsolicited and vociferous advice was thundering down on then-Captain Lawrence Chambers '52, USN (Ret.).

Chambers, commanding officer of the aircraft carrier MIDWAY, was ensconced in chaos in the waters off South Vietnam. During the 30-hour evacuation of Saigon starting on 29 April 1975, MIDWAY would receive and process about 2,000 evacuees from Vietnam. Helicopters jammed with the last American civilians and at-risk Vietnamese nationals jockeyed for dwindling space on MIDWAY's deck.

Consequential decisions were being made in rapid fashion by MIDWAY's captain who had taken command a month earlier. Chambers was in charge of orchestrating the pandemonium. As the flight deck filled and helicopters circled overhead, Chambers faced a quandary.

Vietnam Air Force Major Buang-Ly was circling MIDWAY with his wife and five children in a Cessna 0-1 Bird Dog. Chambers didn't need to see what was on the notes Ly dropped from the plane onto his ship's deck to know what the desperate man wanted.

None of the aircraft on MIDWAY's deck were Navy property. They belonged to Air America, the U.S. Army and the U.S. Air Force.

Adding to the intensity of the situation, Chambers had an admiral loudly barking suggestions and questioning his decisions. The admin boss suggested Ly ditch his plane.

"When this young lad came out and started circling, I knew what he wanted," said Chambers, who retired as a rear admiral. "He wanted a look at the deck."

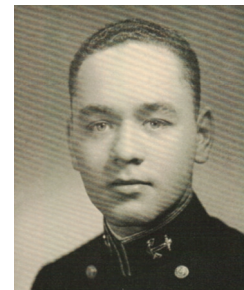
To make room for the Bird Dog, Chambers ordered the scuttling of \$30 million worth of helos into the South China Sea.

The administrative boss was yelling at him so everyone on the bridge could hear. Chambers couldn't ignore it. He let his crew know MIDWAY was his ship. He was going to do things his way. The ship and its 5,000 sailors were his responsibility and if there were consequences to face, they'd be his too.

"I had to calm them down and tell them, 'you work for me,'" said Chambers, the first Black U.S. Navy officer to command an aircraft carrier. "That's my administrative boss, that's my problem. After that, they totally ignored it.

"They didn't exactly like that the old man was getting yelled at for things he hadn't done yet."

Chambers ordered all air departments and airwing personnel that weren't on watch to report to the flight deck. He said the Marine Corps detachment showed up and aviators and crew served as deckhands. A 2,000-man working party used specially made wheels to place under the helicopters and move them across the deck and over MIDWAY's side.



**Then-MIDN
Lawrence Chambers '52**

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During a 30-hour evacuation of Saigon in late April 1975, MIDWAY's crew orchestrated the landing of dozens of helicopters and processed about 2,000 evacuees during Operation Frequent Wind.



To make room for a seemingly endless barrage of helicopters carrying evacuees from Saigon in April 1975, then-CAPT Lawrence Chambers '52, ordered aircraft to be scuttled overboard.

Before Ly could be signaled to make a landing attempt, Chambers said eight more helicopters landed on his deck. Into the sea they went, too, over the protest of the administrative admiral boss. Chambers understood the admiral's role but he wasn't in charge of the ship.

"I'm sorry, but I'm the idiot that is responsible and I have to do what I think is right," Chambers said. "Right or wrong, they're going to have my butt. If I do it right, I might cheat death. If I'm wrong, I'm not going to be in command anymore. It's a judgement call.

"When they make you skipper, it's your problem. It ain't his. No matter what everybody else is yelling at you, your job is to do what you think is right. That's the only thing you can live with."

With the deck clear, it was up to Ly to bring his small plane in. Chambers appreciates the audacity of Ly's plan and his ability to make a precarious landing.

On his first pass, Ly nosed down in the center of the flight deck but had to keep the craft at full power to keep it on deck. It was an incredible feat for a pilot with zero experience landing on an aircraft carrier.

"Anybody dumb enough to think they could come out to sea, drop a note on the flight deck and some other idiot is going to give him a chance and clear the deck to do what nobody has done before was beautiful," Chambers said.

Chambers knew his actions could lead to the loss of command or even a court martial. He said he made principle-based decisions that day. He was willing to accept any ramifications because he was content that he did the right thing and took care of his people and the thousands of evacuees who made it aboard MIDWAY during Operation Frequent Wind.

29 April 2025 marks the 50th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. Chambers' actions from that day were not punished, as other skippers in the task force made the same decision to save incoming refugees. He went on to become the first Black Naval Academy alumnus to reach flag rank. He is a 2018 U.S. Naval Academy Alumni Association Distinguished Graduate honoree and an example of character-driven leadership.

Chambers was a reluctant trailblazer who inspired others.

"He had the guts to do what was right knowing he could be court martialed," said Major General Charles Bolden '68, USMC (Ret.). "He became my hero pretty quickly."

'HELLUVA LOT OF PEOPLE WERE LOOKING OUT FOR ME'

Chambers was the valedictorian at Dunbar High School where he excelled in math and science. He was three years behind Wesley Brown '49 at the Washington, DC, school. Chambers served in the Junior ROTC and was accepted into Harvard University and MIT.

Through Brown, the Academy's first Black graduate, Chambers gained an understanding of what the Yard would be like. Chambers and Reeves Taylor were the only Black plebes when they arrived in Annapolis during the summer of 1948. Chambers became the Academy's second Black graduate and Reeves, who retired as a Navy captain, graduated with the Class of 1953.

Chambers credits his relationship with Brown for helping him survive the rigors of Academy life and the scrutiny and harassment of being one of three Black midshipmen. He often took refuge in Brown's room in Bancroft Hall.

"I had one place I could go, and they couldn't find me and harass me," Chambers said. "I could study and take care of things. I would disappear. That was my only release from perpetual harassment."

While he described some of the upperclassmen's antics as sadistic, that treatment ultimately strengthened his resolve. That, coupled with some unseen friendly forces, allowed the future Naval aviator and commander of Carrier Strike Groups 3 and 4 to forge a path for future Black Navy officers.

A byproduct of his treatment at the Academy for Chambers was controlling his temper. That paid dividends when he reached the fleet and during his tours as a commanding officer.

"They made me a hell of a lot stronger than I would have ever been," Chambers said.

Chambers and his two roommates were among the top five in their class academically. He said there wasn't an academic problem that the three of them couldn't solve. He believes his living arrangement was an intentional action by the Academy's hierarchy.

"To ensure I'd have a chance," he said.

Thanks to his class standing, Chambers had a choice pick for ship selection. He said when he chose a “small boy,” commandant and future Rear Admiral Charles Allen Buchanan ’26, USN (Ret.), called him and told him he wouldn’t let him serve on a light cruiser.

“My first thought was, discrimination is still here,” Chambers said.

Instead, it was an offering of opportunity. Chambers said Buchanan wanted to send him to Baltimore-class heavy cruiser COLUMBUS, which was skippered by his classmate, Captain Gordon Campbell ’26, USN (Ret.).

“I know you’ll get a fair shake there,” Chambers remembers Buchanan saying. “He was protecting the Navy. (Campbell) was probably the finest four-striper that I ever ran into.

“A helluva lot of people were looking out for me but I had no idea.”

Following his tour on COLUMBUS, Chambers reported to flight training. He called earning his wings in 1954, “the proudest day of my life.” His aviator career included flying the AF Guardian, the A-1 Skyraider, the A-4 Skyhawk and the A-7B Corsair II.

Between 1968 and 1971, he flew combat missions over Vietnam. He would command Attack Squadron VA-15, and in 1972, skippered WHITE PLAINS.

‘SUCK IT UP AND DO THE BEST YOU CAN’

After initially being snubbed by a detailer when requesting ship command, Chambers said he sent a postcard with a simple message: Command at sea. Any time. Any place. He would not be deterred from his goal.

“(The detailer) said, ‘boy, you’re so far down the list, I’m not going to get to you,’” Chambers recalled. “He had insulted me, but I wasn’t going to be put off by the insult.”

About three months later, the detailer called Chambers, who was then serving as program manager of the A7 D/E Corsair program. Apparently, a ship based out of Sasebo, Japan,

wasn’t enticing for all the prospective captains above Chambers on the detailer’s list.

“All those wonderful people ahead of me on the list thought they were too good and nobody wanted to take their families over to Japan,” Chambers said. “I jumped right at it. Look what happens when you do that. I’m a year ahead of all those guys. Nobody thinks of that.”

He advises young officers to leap at opportunities when they arise because even if they might not be the most appealing, they can lead to greater things.

“You suck it up and do the best you can,” he said.

Racism or bias wasn’t going to keep Chambers from achieving his goals. He attributes his ascension to hard work, people-driven leadership and honesty.

“I was going to be the best son of a bitch out there so they couldn’t fail to promote me,” Chambers said. “I don’t recommend that for everybody. If you’re not a loner, it’s not going to work.”

With so few Black officers in the Navy’s ranks during his early career, he rarely saw someone who looked like him in wardrooms. He said mentoring Black officers who followed him into the service was difficult and done mostly remotely.

By the early 1960s, Chambers said the Black officer ranks slowly started to blossom.

“Everywhere I went I was the only one,” he said. “I was never sure who I could trust. I was going to give everybody the benefit of the doubt but I’m going to cover my butt all the way along. That’s not a good way to have to grow up. The more (Black officers) we got, the easier it became.

“That’s the way the world was at the time. You do the best you can. I don’t have any hard feelings about it. I don’t hold any grudges.” 🚢



Vietnamese Air Force Major Buang-Ly landed a Cessna O-1 Bird Dog on Midway’s flight deck during the evacuation of Saigon in April 1975. He had no previous experience landing on an aircraft carrier but successfully did so with his wife and five children.