

'A band of bad brothers': The Naval Academy Class of 1952 reunites at Willow Valley

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From the left, Vice Admiral Bill Rowden, USN Retired, Rear Admiral Jim Nunneley, USN Retired, Captain Norman "Red" Stein, USN Retired, Lt. Col Wendell Stockdale, USAF Retired, and Captain Jerry Zacharias, USN Retired, all members of the Naval Academy Class of '52 are some of the men who moved to Willow Valley and get together at least once a month, sit and chat about their fondest memories on Thursday, March 12, 2020.

Suzette Wenger

Meet the Members

On a late winter afternoon, LNP | LancasterOnline interviewed five of the members of the Naval Academy Class of 1952 who have reunited at the Willow Valley Communities in Willow Street. The men led fleets, commanded submarines, flew missions and performed other duties during their service.

Vice Adm. William H. Rowden, USN (Ret.)

Rowden commanded the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean Sea from June 1981 to July 1983. In August 1981, during an exercise in the Gulf of Sidra, Rowden ordered the shooting down of two Libyan aircraft in what became known as the Gulf of Sidra incident.

Capt. Norman F. Stein, USN (Ret.)

Stein served several tours on diesel-fueled submarines, including two years as captain of the Seafox from 1965-1967. Among his missions on the Seafox was a search-and-rescue mission in the Gulf of Tonkin and a 47-day patrol of the East China Sea.

Rear Adm. James K. Nunneley, USN (Ret.)

After graduating from the United States' Naval Academy in 1952, Nunneley went on to earn a degree in naval engineering and a Master of Science in naval architecture and marine engineering from MIT. Nunneley was chief engineer of the USS Northampton, ship design

On a warm and sunny morning, June 6, 1952, the Naval Academy parade grounds in Annapolis, Maryland, were lined with 1,566 empty shoes arranged in neat rows. Members of the Class of '52 were set to attend their graduation ceremony that afternoon at Dahlgren Hall and march in their final parade. They abruptly stepped out of their shoes and marched on in their socks. The maverick class's motto was "Tough shoes to fill," and their stunt nearly cost them their commissions.

"The superintendent — Adm. (Virgil) Hill — was furious," Capt. Jerrold Zacharias, a member of the Class of '52, says with a mischievous smile. "But when he found out that a quarter of our class that went into the Air Force — because there was no Air Force Academy at that time — had already been commissioned, he had to relent. If he had held up our commissioning, they would have been senior to us, and that's a big deal. So he relented, and we made him an honorary member of the Class of '52."

Now, decades later, six of the members of the infamous Class of '52 live in Willow Valley Communities in Willow Street. On a late winter afternoon, five of them — Zacharias, Vice Adm. William H. Rowden, Capt. Norman "Red" Stein, Rear Adm. James K. Nunneley and Lt. Col. Wendell B. Stockdale — gathered around Zacharias' dining room table to talk about their time in the service and what the continued camaraderie of the Class of '52 means to them.

First class

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, they would gather weekly for coffee and sweet rolls at the Panera Bread on Lincoln Highway and once a month for dinner at one of their apartments. Now, Zacharias writes in an email, the group stays in touch over the phone or through emails.

The Class of '52 was notable for more than just their mischievous sense of humor. The class boasted a few firsts for the Naval Academy, including the first black graduate, Rear Adm. Lawrence Chambers. "Fifty-two" was also the first class to have four members go on to become astronauts, including Tom Stafford, commander of Apollo 10, and Jim Lovell, commander of Apollo 13. Even nearly 70 years later, their camaraderie remains strong.

manager for the nuclear-powered frigate USS Virginia and shipyard commander of Puget Sound Shipyard among posts.

Capt. Jerrold M. Zacharias, USN (Ret.)

Zacharias flew in 87 missions in North Vietnam during his service as a naval aviator. Zacharias earned a Navy Cross for a particularly challenging mission over Hanoi.

Lt. Col. Wendell B. Stockdale, USAF (Ret.)

Stockdale was among a quarter of the Naval Academy class of 1952 that went on to the Air Force since there was no Air Force Academy at that time. Stockdale's first assignment was with the 45th Day Fighter Squadron in French Morocco, where he flew F-86 fighter jets.



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"A band of bad brothers, I guess you could call it," Stockdale says. "I'm very proud of all of them."

After graduation, life sent them in different directions.

Some men went to war and had brushes with death; some traveled the world; some left the service and went into business. But now, six of them are together again.

"There's that bond that started a long time ago, and it gets reignited," Nunneley says of his fellow classmates.

Reunions

A different class reunion served as the catalyst to bring these members of the Class of '52 together at Willow Valley Communities.

Years ago, Zacharias and his wife, Rita, attended Rita's 50th class reunion at Linden Hall in Lititz and decided Lancaster County would be the perfect place to retire. They moved into the Willow Valley Communities apartment complex.



A special patch from the U.S. Naval Academy shows a pair of shoes from the class of '52, as their class motto was "Tough Shoes to Fill." The graduates removed their shoes for graduation and really ticked a nerve of their superiors who were going to withhold assigning the graduates their new positions on Thursday, March 12, 2020.

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Members of the Naval Academy Class of '52 as well as a couple of other graduating classes, have all moved to Willow Valley and get together at least once a month, are pictured at a gathering at Panera in 2011 on Thursday, March 12, 2020.

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Zacharias told his classmates about Willow Valley, and soon members of the Class of '52 began moving in.

It's easy to see the camaraderie and respect the group has for each other. As each man takes a turn telling stories, the rest listen attentively, chime in with friendly jokes, or aid with a forgotten detail when someone can't seem to remember a certain part of their story.

Joining up

The men all come from different backgrounds and parts of the country. One grew up amid the plains of Oklahoma, another in Pittsburgh, another on a farm in Vermont. Their reasons for entering the Naval Academy are varied: some of them joined to follow in a family tradition, others for a good education and at least one joined because of a young Hollywood actress.

"I was 6 or 7 years old and I saw Shirley Temple in a movie called 'Shipmates Forever' and that was it," Stein says.



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Captain Norman "Red" Stein, USN Retired, listens to Lt. Col Wendell Stockdale, USAF Retired, both members of the Naval Academy Class of '52 are two of the men who moved to Willow Valley and get together at least once a month, sit and chat about their fondest memories on Thursday, March 12, 2020.

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Stein, who would go on to become the commanding officer of a submarine called the Seafox, had his own brush with Hollywood royalty. Doris Day filmed some scenes of "Move Over, Darling" on his submarine.

"She was unreal. She was just like she played in the movies," says Stein, who then recalls sharing a meal with her. "Voracious appetite. She had one steak and was well on her way on the other before we quit."

Stein had his own harrowing adventures at sea, including a severe storm north of Sweden and Norway, but it's his sense of humor that brings about his fondest memories.

He says once during a presentation at the White House, he made former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger laugh.

"I could have walked across the (Potomac) river afterwards," Stein says.

If Stein is the class clown of the group, Nunneley might be its most serious student.

After graduating from the Naval Academy, Nunneley went on to MIT, where he earned a degree in naval engineering and a Master of Science in naval architecture and marine engineering. He also earned a degree in international affairs while studying in San Francisco and San Diego.

A good education was certainly a factor for some of the men's decisions to attend the Naval Academy. For Stockdale, it was the thrill of listening to the annual Army vs. Navy football game on the radio that made him want to attend. For others, the desire to follow in their families' footsteps brought them to the Naval Academy.

Family ties

Zacharias' history with the Navy begins with his father, an Office of Naval Intelligence officer. His father, who graduated from the Naval Academy in 1912, was fluent in Japanese and he would hold special poker games at the family's Washington, D.C., apartment. One of his father's special guests was Isoroku Yamamoto — the Japanese admiral who would go on to lead the attack on Pearl Harbor.

"While my father had (the Japanese officers) over to the house, he had his people going through their apartments," Zacharias says. "They found a cipher book and they took pictures, and it helped them break the Japanese code."

His father eventually learned of plans the Japanese had to potentially strike the U.S. Navy at Pearl Harbor. But Zacharias says his dad was laughed out of the office when he relayed this information to his superiors. His father went on to tell his stories in two bestselling books.

When he grew up, Zacharias followed in his father and his older brothers' footsteps and entered the



Vice Admiral Bill Rowden, USN Retired, a member of the Naval Academy Class of '52 and one of the men who moved to Willow Valley and get together at least once a month, sits with his friends and chat about their fondest memories on Thursday, March 12, 2020.

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Naval Academy.

Soon Zacharias had his own war stories to tell. He flew in 87 bombing missions over North Vietnam, including some hair-raising missions over the Red River Valley and downtown Hanoi. Zacharias details bombing missions over “the most heavily defended city in the history of air warfare” in “As We Recall: Reminiscences of the Naval Academy Class of 1952” — a book of stories from the class published for the group’s 60th reunion.

Much like the book “As We Recall,” the group could fill hours with entertaining and exciting anecdotes about their days at the Naval Academy and during their years of service, interwoven with a healthy dose of humor. That winter afternoon wasn’t any different. The camaraderie and respect among the friends is evident.

“If I hadn’t of gotten involved with them back then, I don’t know who I would have been friends with. I wouldn’t have that many, I’m sure,” Stockdale says.

Zacharias nods and then adds, “Shipmates stand forever.”

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