

Search



The Navy Museum Online Store

International Journal of Naval History

Naval Documents of the American Revolution

Contact Us



Who We Are ▾

Support the Foundation ▾

Programs ▾

Events ▾

Newsletters ▾

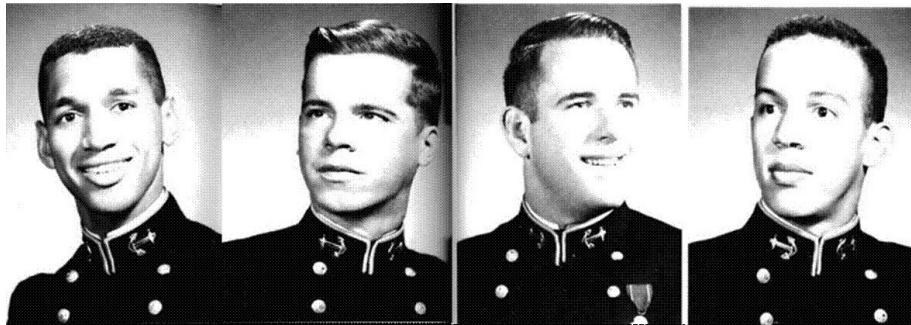
Our Partners

HOME / NAMA CONVERSATIONS WITH CLASSMATES: USNA 1968

# NAMA CONVERSATIONS WITH CLASSMATES: USNA 1968

## NAMA CONVERSATIONS WITH CLASSMATES: USNA 1968

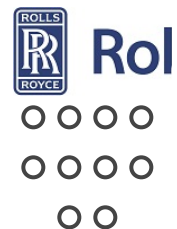
🕒 June 17, 2021 📁 Thursday Tidings



*Left to Right: Midshipmen Charles Bolden, Michael Mullen, William Cobb Jr., and R. Gillam Lucas*

On June 9th the Naval Academy Minority Association (NAMA) hosted a special event over Zoom with several distinguished members of the Class of 1968, the first in what they hope will become a series of talks between former Naval Academy classmates. The USNA Class of 1968 were trailblazers during a time of strife, as Malcom X, Dr. Martin Luther King,

## THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS:



and Robert Kennedy were assassinated and the nation faced a reckoning in the Civil Rights movement and the controversies of the Vietnam War.

NAMA Executive Director and Rear Admiral Julius Caesar, USN (Ret.) acknowledged the profound impact the class of 1968 had on his own development as an officer, noting many of the cohort's number were Company Officers when he started at the Naval Academy and consequently served as his mentors. The discussion was moderated by none other than Ms. Janie Mines, who graduated from the Naval Academy in 1980 as the only African American among the Naval Academy's first female graduates.

The panel included:

**\*Major General Charles Bolden, USMC (Ret.)**, a Naval aviator who flew more than 100 sorties in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in an A-6 Intruder before going on to serve as an astronaut, logging over 600 hours in space and becoming the second ever astronaut to serve as NASA Administrator.

**\*Admiral Michael Mullen, USN (Ret.)**, who served as the 32<sup>nd</sup> Vice Chief of Naval Operations, 28<sup>th</sup> Chief of Naval Operations, and the 17th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in addition to assignments as Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Europe and Commander, Allied Joint Force Command Naples.

**\*Rear Admiral William Cobb Jr, USN (Ret.)**, who planned all of the Tomahawk strikes for Operation Desert Storm and also served as an AEGIS Program Executive Officer and Program Executive Officer for Ships.

**\*Captain Gillam Lucas, USN (Ret.)**, a nuclear submariner who has served as a Company Officer and Engineering Duty Officer.

They began with a discussion of how each member found their way to the Naval Academy. A formative experience for both General Bolden and Admiral Mullen was watching the television anthology series *Men of Annapolis* as children, and both felt that they struggled due to their own immaturity after heading to the Academy straight out of high school. General Bolden credited his father's support—as well as the antagonism



**VIEW OUR PULL  
TOGETHER  
NEWSLETTERS**



of some white classmates—with motivating him to carry on, while Admiral Mullen’s original plan was to go to the Naval Academy for two years and then transfer to a college back in his home state of California, but after meeting his classmates from all over the country and being exposed to other perspectives, he no longer wanted to leave. He also credited mentorship from the father of one of his friends at the academy for his early career successes.

By contrast, Admiral Cobb and Captain Lucas were both aware of the Naval Academy due to their family histories despite growing up in relatively remote areas. Admiral Cobb represented the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of his family to join the Navy, though as he grew up in the Ozarks he was subjected to culture shock when he moved to Virginia in his high school years only to find his high school was still de facto segregated. Captain Lucas grew up in Ohio never having seen a Navy ship, but he knew that his great uncle had enlisted in the Spanish American War. He first inquired about attending the Naval Academy while still a middle school student but was only able to attend after the Civil Rights Act passed. He noted that the Class of 1968 was the only class to be replenished by a second group of midshipman because so many withdrew midway through the program due to deeply traumatic experiences.

Regarding the momentous events they lived through, General Bolden noted that when he looks back on things they do not seem as bad as they actually were at the time. Similarly, Admiral Mullen noted that while he would like to say that he was in tune with everything happening internationally, but he was just trying to make his way into the fleet. Admiral Mullen and Admiral Cobb both recalled that they did not fully understand the horrors of the Vietnam War at the time, as in 1968 the reality of the horrors of the Vietnam were just starting to set in when reports started coming back to the home front. They also both recalled as junior officers experiencing the “upward seminars” of then-Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Zumwalt, and stressed the importance of having similarly awkward conversations about race today.

Captain Lucas similarly credited Admiral Zumwalt with improving race relations in the Navy, but also suggested that Admiral Coffman’s prior contributions are too often overlooked. He also related that his first wife was on the Kerner Commission and her job was to talk to people who

were rioting, so he would get detailed reports about explosions and gunfire, and her uncle was the only reporter on the scene when Malcolm X was shot, so he felt that he knew exactly the extent of the hate and discontent.

Finally, the panelists were questioned about how they have been forced to confront their own biases, conscious or unconscious. Admiral Bolden expressed regret that it took him quite some time to recognize the parallels between how he spoke to women and how he was spoken to as a black man. He realized that the things he heard growing up led him to say rude things to women he thought were complementary, and as a result he has learned to stop and think before speaking. He also stressed that diversity is not in conflict with performance, in contrast to the excuse for lack of diversity that the Navy is a performance-based organization

Admiral Mullen noted that he cannot know intuitively what differing experiences disadvantaged groups might have, so their input is invaluable for him to know how best to leverage his authority to benefit them and the Navy as a whole. What was most beneficial for Admiral Mullen with respect to determining the importance of ending the “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy was to sit down with people who were having to live a double life because of it. Admiral Mullen regards a lack of diversity as an existential threat to the navy, because the less diverse the military is, the greater the divide between it and the people it is supposed to represent. Admiral Cobb noted that learning to be more careful not just about what he says but how he says it is a lifelong struggle. He recalled how he had once neglected to highlight some of the progress toward building a safer community as he was attempting to provide safety guidance for his staff, not realizing that he might be offending some of his people who had lived in that community. He also suggested there is a need for leaders in the Navy to take a firm stand on imperative issues, citing the example set by Admiral Zumwalt and others in the “Revolt of the Admirals.”

Captain Lucas reiterated the consensus that much remains to be done. He suggested that given the myriad reasons why confidence may be lost in military officers, one of them should be recognized as bias, and perhaps this could be integrated into how we assess the competency of individuals seeking to become naval officers.

---

Spread the word. Share this post!



---

< Previous

Next >

---

## LEAVE COMMENT

Your Message



Your Name (Required)

Your Email (Required)

Your Website

☐ Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment.

**Submit Now**

---

## RECENT POSTS:

---

A History of the Naval Historical  
Foundation

December 8, 2022

War Alert in the Tropical Dawn at  
Pearl

December 7, 2022

Two Observations on Devotion

November 30, 2022



## CONTACT US:

---

Naval Historical Foundation  
1306 Dahlgren Avenue, SE  
Washington Navy Yard, DC 20374  
1-202-678-4333  
[info@navyhhistory.org](mailto:info@navyhhistory.org)

Mailing Address:

P.O. Box 15304  
Washington, DC 20003

Copyright © 2011-2022 Naval Historical Foundation. All rights reserved.

Follow Us [f](#) [t](#) [in](#) [v](#)