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Holmes flew more than 130 combat missions over Vietnam. He served 31 years in the U.S. Air Force, beginning as a college cadet in the Reserve Officer Training Corps at OU.

For the past two decades, a retired Air Force general's classroom has been the venue for the college's most popular course.

You get certain pictures in your head when you hear the words, "retired general teaches leadership class"—a ramrod instructor; a crisply run, no-nonsense classroom environment; definite ideas of how things should and shouldn't be done.

But those pictures evaporate in retired Maj. Gen. Jerry Holmes' classroom in the OU College of Engineering. Here, students are

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

A COMMANDING PRESENCE IN ENGINEERING

encouraged to explore their hopes and dreams, admit their faults and strengths, and grow in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect.

Holmes (OU 1958 BS Geological Engineering and 1964 MS Aerospace Engineering) joined the College of Engineering Board of Visitors shortly after retiring from a 31-year career in the U.S. Air Force and stints in private industry. When he and fellow board members suggested instituting a course in leadership, then-Dean Billy Crynes turned the tables and challenged Holmes to create and teach what became Leadership and Organizational Management for Engineers.

The course was launched in 1996 and has grown into the most popular class within the College of Engineering, says current Dean Thomas L. Landers. "Students often refer to it as the best course they've ever had, and in talking to alumni it is very common for us to hear the phrase, 'It changed my life,'" he says.

The course changed Holmes' life as well. Though he had led a storied career that included flying 135 combat missions over Vietnam, heading the NATO Airborne Early Warning Force Command, and running an electronics engineering company, Holmes admits that he was out of his depth when he began teaching. He began by delving into *Harvard Business Review* case studies and calling upon friends who were leaders in industry to serve as guest speakers. Among them were Archie Dunham, chairman of Chesapeake Energy, and John Brock, chairman of Brighton Energy, LLC. But the very first speaker was OU President David L. Boren, whom Holmes had known during childhood while living next door to



Hugh Scott

Although he flew combat missions over Vietnam and had completed two careers, Holmes says he felt "out of his depth" when he first began teaching some 20 years ago. Like every career in his life, Holmes was "all in," hitting the books and learning from leaders in industry and childhood friends like OU President David L. Boren.

considered a minimal expectation. What differentiates those who progress the furthest in our profession are good interpersonal skills and effective leadership."

One of the most important soft skills that Holmes teach-

the president's grandparents in Wewoka.

"I joke to my students that I can always get President Boren to come speak to my class by saying, 'If you can't come, I can get one of your cousins.'"

Holmes listened carefully to Boren and the combined wisdom of his other guests. He drew upon readings and his own intuitive knowledge and experience to develop a curriculum of "soft skills" that quickly attracted undergraduate and graduate students from engineering and academic disciplines across the OU spectrum.

His focus was appreciated in the College of Engineering, Landers says. "Employers, corporate recruiters and our own advisory board members tell us that technical competence is

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es is self-awareness. "Leadership and management start with oneself. You have to look inside yourself, a deep, personal introspection," he says.

Using assessment tools, he encourages students to set aside



Matt Renevier is a student in Leadership and Organizational Management for Engineers. Holmes, a former combat pilot, teaches some of the toughest lessons on campus—including the importance of being honest with oneself. Engineering Dean Tom Landers says, “It changed my life” is the most frequent comment from alumni of the leadership class.



Although taught by a veteran U.S. Air Force officer, the atmosphere in Maj. Gen. Jerry Holmes’ class is congenial and conversational. Holmes, standing, chats with, from left, J.C. Adams, Larry Johnson and Alex Edgeman in his leadership class in Devon Hall.

preconceived notions about their future and honestly ask themselves who they are and what they want to do with their lives. “You have to discover what you love, what your passion is, what makes you get up in the morning,” he explains.

Equally important is determining what work setting to pursue, whether it be entrepreneurship or as a member of a large corporation. Students are asked to discern their core values and make life choices that align with them. They also are asked to become a servant leader and make a lifetime commitment to use their education and talents to better the world.

“We are happiest when we are doing something meaningful,” Holmes says. “That is what gives us fulfillment.”

Most students are enthusiastic about the introspection process, and many experience an epiphany, Holmes says. But others encounter discomforting truths about strengths and weaknesses that they may have been avoiding. “It’s hard to be honest with ourselves,” he admits. “I try to get them to focus on their strengths.”

Holmes also works to build up students’ strengths, particularly in the area that author Daniel Goleman calls “emotional intelligence.”

“No matter who we are, we work with people,” Holmes says. “And I don’t

Holmes was appointed commander of the 366th Fighter Wing at Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho, when it was labeled “the worst wing in the Air Force.” Within a year, the base passed inspection with flying colors.

care if they're people building railroads or working with the most advanced scientific laboratories, they are people with emotions and needs who want to be recognized for what they achieve, what they contribute. That isn't limited to one nation, one culture or discipline; it's universal.”

Holmes should know. His service in the Air Force took him to seven states and five countries around the globe; at one time, he commanded 50,000 NATO troops from 12 nations. Yet Holmes, who was named to the 2014 Oklahoma Military Hall of Fame, confesses to being surprised by his own success and believes much of it can be attributed to embracing “constructive conflict.”

“**Y**ou have to not only invite disagreement, but insist upon it,” he says, adding that he pushed subordinates to confront him with both the good and bad. “I'm humble and confident enough to say, ‘I'm human, I make mistakes, and tell me where you think I'm wrong.’ Only through doing that can you build an excellent organization.”

Holmes learned some of his lessons the hard way. “You can't be afraid of making trouble, and you've got to even be willing to risk getting fired,” he says, recalling with a smile that he came “perilously close” to losing his job on more than one occasion. “But I still would have done it because that's what you do as a leader. You take some risks. You fight for what you believe is right.”

Holmes had the chance to put his philosophies to work when appointed commander of the 366th Fighter Wing at Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho, then labeled “the worst wing in the Air Force.” He was charged with turning the group around and started by asking non-commissioned officers and enlisted personnel for their ideas and empowering them to make change. Within a year, the group passed inspection with



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flying colors. “Everyone was so proud,” says Holmes, who soon received his first general's star and a new assignment. “I almost felt guilty, because they had accomplished this, and I got the recognition.”

After military retirement, Holmes entered the private sector. He and wife Nina, the high school sweetheart he had known since age 7, abandoned industry only a few years later for an OU

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adjunct instructor's salary.

“Of everything that he could have done, it was very humbling that he just wanted to be with OU students. It really shows where his heart is,” says Jesse Berdis, an OU BS Architectural



Hugh Scott

John Haley and Kayla Witthus share a laugh with Holmes during his leadership class. Holmes is an OU graduate with a bachelor's degree in geological engineering, a master's in aerospace engineering and 31 years of service in the U.S. Air Force.

Engineering '11 and MS Structural Engineering '13 graduate who now works for NASA at the John F. Kennedy Space Center.

Berdis took Leadership and Organizational Management for Engineers as a senior and asked to return the next semester as a teaching assistant. "It's kind of like a class on life," he says. "I learned more in General Holmes' class than I did in any other in college. It was just such an amazing experience."

A key part of Berdis' experience was learning to communicate with international students. Holmes challenges his students to break down the barriers between cultures. "Get out of your comfort zone," he tells them frankly. "Don't just associate with people like you—you don't learn that way."


Berdis believes that Holmes' international background helps him to relate to students from anywhere, but even more important is the fact that he allows students to know him as a person—one who cares deeply about students and has learned from them as well. "They've taught me that every human being is valuable," Holmes says.

Though at age 79 he is two generations ahead of his students, Holmes forms lasting friendships within every group that passes through his classroom. "I think that they've seen someone who is from their grandfather's generation who will listen and talk to them and understand them," he explains.

Holmes makes sure students have his cell phone number and know they can use it 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Students come to him for job advice or a word of personal encouragement. They call to let him know when they are too sick to attend class, and he makes sure that they have access to doctors and medicine. "That's what I'd want someone to do for my grandkids," he shrugs. "I respect them. I honestly love them as family, and they know it."

Students love Holmes back. At the College of Engineering's annual May commencement, he is swarmed with hugs and handshakes from graduates, and alumni call and write Holmes almost daily from as far away as Iran. Fittingly, a new leadership program has been established in his name within the College of Engineering.

Still, Holmes is preparing to step away from the classroom in two years. With two decades of teaching and a stellar military career behind him, he will devote all of his time to wife Nina. Holmes says he will miss working with students, but will be safe in the knowledge that he has accomplished perhaps the most important mission of his career.

"The greatest thing that my generation can do is to help the next generation be the best that they can be," he says. "If I'm helping these students become positive members of society contributing to make the world a better place, there is nothing better I can do." 

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