

Celebrating Skipper

by CARRIE COX

Fifty years ago, three cadets from the Virginia Tech Corps of Cadets Class of 1964, Alton “Butch” Harper (business administration ’64), Homer “Sonny” Hickam (industrial engineering and operations research ’64), and George Fox (mechanical engineering ’64), came together with one goal in mind: to build the biggest game cannon the world had ever seen. Through their perseverance and effort and the support of the entire corps, they made the goal a reality.

On Nov. 22, 1963, while driving back to Blacksburg after picking up the barrel and carriage, the three cadets learned that President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated. Kennedy’s legacy and naval background would inspire them to name the cannon Skipper. The cannon was introduced in spectacular fashion on Thanksgiving Day during the annual football game against Virginia Military Institute (VMI).

On Oct. 31, 2013, the three 1964 cadets joined today’s cadets to commemorate the cannon’s 50th anniversary. While sharing his memories of developing Skipper, Harper emphasized that one never knows what might set the course of the rest of one’s life. For him, his course was set by the building of Skipper. He went on to create Thunder over Louisville, the largest annual fireworks show in North America.



According to Hickam, passion, planning, and perseverance are the three P’s of success—qualities instilled in the cadets because of their corps training. “It’s ingrained in all of you, whether you know it or not,” Hickam told the cadets.

Telling the story of trying to devise the charge for Skipper, Fox said they made the mistake of using cherry bombs as part of their propellant. Fox encouraged the cadets to learn from their mistakes. “If we [hadn’t], Skipper wouldn’t have lasted past that first game, let alone 50 years,” he said.

Following the presentation, the corps assembled in front of War Memorial Chapel for a 21-gun salute in honor of President Kennedy. As Harper, Hickam, and Fox approached, the Highty-Tighties played the “The Parade of the Charioteers,” the song played when Skipper was first introduced at the 1963 VMI game. The Gregory Guard, the Corps of Cadets’ precision rifle drill team, executed the first two volleys before the seventh rifleman yielded the honor of the 21st round to Skipper.

After serving proudly for 19 years, the original cannon suffered a blowout in 1982. In 1984, Paul Huffman Jr. (materials engineering ’78), whose father had created the original Skipper in his foundry, volunteered to fabricate a new cannon at no charge. The original cannon is currently on



Honoring Skipper: Celebrating its 50th anniversary with a bang, Skipper the cannon fired the 21st round during the Oct. 31 event (directly above). (Far above) Cadets Forrest Rush (middle left) and Jordan Disney (middle right), who are former members of the Skipper Crew, escorted Class of 1964 alumni (from left) Alton “Butch” Harper, Homer “Sonny” Hickman, and George Fox during the celebration.

display in the Holtzman Alumni Center, located at 901 Prices Fork Rd., until the new Corps Leadership and Military Science Building has been built.

For the past 50 years, the cannon and the Skipper Crew have become embedded as Virginia Tech traditions. One of the most recognizable icons of the corps and the university, Skipper symbolizes family, tradition, and Hokie pride. □

Maj. Carrie Cox, U.S. Air Force Reserve, is the Corps of Cadets’ executive officer.



Skipper:

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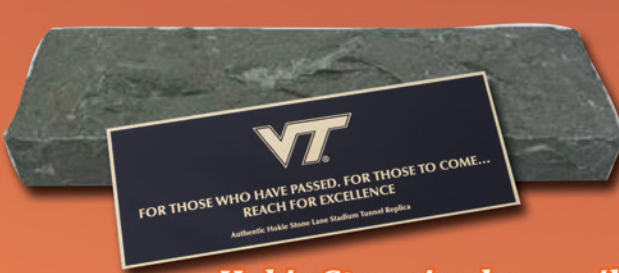


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