

# alumni profile



## Captain (Ret.) William Henry Hamilton Jr. '45

### From Bullis swim team to the Navy SEALs

"Swimming has always been a big thing in my life," Captain Bill Hamilton Jr. '45 remarks in cheerful understatement. After graduating from Bullis and the Naval Academy and pursuing a naval career, he would go on to found the Navy SEALs. "I'm the guy who helped to invent them," he admits.

In June 1944, Bullis School requested additional gas from the Ration Board of Virginia for a student who was commuting in the family car from Arlington to the School's Silver Spring campus. The boy's mother wrote to express thanks on behalf of her son, William H. Hamilton Jr., 17, adding that the School could "crack down" on her energetic son if need be. "I hope that Bill will make the school proud of him." Decades later, Captain William H. Hamilton Jr. '45 has done just that.

Son of a Navy officer who flew bombing missions and commanded the USS Iowa during World War II, Hamilton was an outstanding student set on following in his father's footsteps by attending the

Naval Academy—however, graduating from Greenbrier Military School at 16, he was too young to apply. Bullis School's reputable one-year postgraduate preparatory program made all the difference for Hamilton and hundreds like him. At the time, as Bullis enrollment soared due to so many young men wanting to prepare for tough military academy entrance exams, Bill Hamilton's tuition was \$112.50 a month; his textbooks cost an additional \$19 per semester.

The Silver Spring campus "was a beautiful place," Bill Hamilton remembers of its four-and-a-half wooded acres and newly renovated building. He played right tackle on a football team that won all but one of their games that season. Though the Bullis varsity team was officially the Little Admirals at the time, "we called ourselves the 'Good Time Charlies,'" Hamilton recalls. A talented swimmer, he was also a member of the Bullis swim team, which practiced at a nearby D.C. hotel pool.

Hamilton excelled in his studies. "Bullis

prepared me so well that I was able to get a Presidential appointment to the Naval Academy. "Most appointments were granted by Congressional representatives, with a handful of candidates directly appointed by the President. While packing for Annapolis and the Academy, Hamilton received a letter from Commander William F. Bullis commending his academic performance with a check for \$50, a prize for having the highest grades in the school.

He did not need "cracking down" after all, being both an exceptional student and an exceptional officer and leader in the Navy. His skill as a swimmer, developed on the modest Bullis swim team, along with an interest in diving led him to duty as a commander—or "skipper"—of an underwater demolition team (UDT) in the 1950s. He was also asked to train Green Berets in scuba diving for the Army even though he was a Navy officer.

Hamilton's expertise in ocean waters



*From left, Captain William Hamilton Jr. '45 as a diver on an Underwater Demolition Team (UDT) in the 1950s; as a UDT diver, Hamilton descends from a helicopter off Key West, Florida; as a Navy test pilot Hamilton poses beside a Boeing B-54 bomber; and Hamilton in his formal (circa 1980) Navy officer portrait.*

also brought him an opportunity to serve as a test pilot for ejection seats in Navy aircraft when the Navy wanted to improve the versions that had been used in WWII. Hamilton piloted a plane over the sea off the Florida coast and detonated an explosive charge under his seat. Propelled into the air, he dropped into the water by parachute and was rescued via helicopter. He won a Legion of Merit award for the test. “I proved to them that it could be done,” he says. “I was alive—that’s what proved it.”

In 1962, following the Cuban missile crisis and the Bay of Pigs invasion, John F. Kennedy recognized the need for more American special forces. Captain Hamilton had already suggested that UDT teams take on covert operations, and soon a presidential directive to the Navy ordered Hamilton and a team of officers to develop a new force based on the Navy’s underwater teams: “Sea, Air and Land,” or SEAL teams.

Captain Hamilton is widely credited for his significant role in creating the first Navy SEAL commando units, organizing SEAL Teams One and Two, appointing Lt. Cmdr. Roy Boehm as the first team leader, coordinating the program design and authoring the SEAL mission statement to define the force’s purpose and function. Hamilton maintained both an active and administrative role in developing the SEALs over his long career. “The SEALs have become one of the most elite forces in the world,” he says. “I am very proud of my part in their creation.”

Nor does he forget where it all started for him. “Bullis gave me the edge that I needed to get into the Naval Academy,” he says, “and gave me the smarts that I needed in the Academy and for the rest of my life.

“I remember only good things at Bullis,” he concludes. “That school did a lot for me.”

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