Harlow Rawls was born in Beaumont and in 1954, at the age of twelve, Harlow and his younger sister were placed at the Corsicana State Home for Orphans.

Few details of Harlow’s family and background are known. We do know that while he was at Corsicana, Harlow received a good education and developed personal traits and standards that would serve him well in later life.

Older children at the Corsicana State Home attended Corsicana High School. Among Harlow’s classmates was Becky Reed, a girl who would later marry our classmate, Frank Supercinski ’64. Fifty-five years later, Becky remembers:

"I admired Harlow because he was always courteous and never seemed to be bitter about his circumstances. I taught swimming with him one summer during our college years at a city pool in Corsicana. I remember him as a friendly, happy person who always got along with everyone."

Becky Supercinski

Becky's view of Harlow was shared by many. Harlow’s performance in and out of the classroom brought him great recognition. In a report of the meeting of Corsicana State Home alumni, the June 14, 1960 Corsicana Semi-Weekly Light included the following news:

"...then a special presentation was made. A large loving cup was presented to Harlow Rawls....as the most outstanding State Home student this year, based on a vote of house parents, for scholarship, behavior, manners, and all-round qualifications..." Corsicana Semi-Weekly Light June 14, 1960

Corsicana State Home for Orphans

The Corsicana State Home opened in 1889 and housed 54 children the first year. At the depth of the Great Depression in 1932, the home reached a peak enrollment of 890. The home operated its own farms, laundry, bakery, and hospital until the 1960s. Older children worked part-time in these operations and thus received practical training. Children from the home began to attending the Corsicana public schools in the late 1950’s. The home closed in 2013.

Texas State Handbook
When the Fightin' Texas Aggie Class of '64 assembled in September of 1960, we all knew the first year would be difficult. We all took that challenge; many did not succeed. Those who succeeded did so with the support and encouragement of our families. Harlow Rawls made it through his fish Year and three years of "Double E" the same way he had dealt with challenges all his life...without encouragement from home.

Information about Harlow Rawls while at A&M is hard to find. Yearbook entries tell us that Harlow enrolled in electrical engineering and joined Squadron 3, known for so many years as B.C. 3, after the pre-historic comic character, "B.C."

Even though he was at A&M on a scholarship, like many of his peers, Harlow had to find a job to pay for essentials and earn spending money. Harlow became a "Duncan Volunteer"—a waiter in Duncan Dining Hall. Some might think that a job as a Duncan waiter would help avoid the haze of upperclassmen. Not true!

"What I remember is that he was a good fish waiter and was just as happy to have a job in Duncan as I was! ...we had a lot of fun together because he was right across from me standing at attention in front of our tables! He was always "buzzing" which of course was contagious! I am not sure we took the piss-heads' hazing seriously.... They couldn't hold a candle to the expert "corrections" that we received from our German Daddy!!"

Ron Luecke '64
Commander, Duncan Volunteers

From all indications, Harlow was a serious, "no nonsense" student with one goal in mind— he wanted to fly. At some point he posed for a photograph his sophomore year in those Class-A khakis we loved wearing so much. The photo shows a confident young man with a focused and serious gaze, and a subtle, confident smile.

As an upperclassman, Harlow was active in several organizations, including the MSC Great Issues Committee and the Debate Club. During his junior year, Harlow was Vice Chairman of the Great Issues Committee where he worked with two sophomores who would become prominent leaders of the Class of '65. Jerome Rektorik and Frank Muller give us an interesting glimpse of the kind of worker and leader that Harlow was:

".....he was a quality role model for underclassmen and treated all with dignity and fairness. When working on a project, he demanded the best of all involved and set the example and standard that he expected all to meet, including himself. If there were issues that someone did not understand, he was very willing and patient in helping to clarify the issues and assist that individual until the problem or issue was resolved.

Jerome Rektorik '65
Frank Muller wrote:

"He was quite intimidating and always demanded complete work on any Great Issue project we as underclassmen were involved. He was fair, somber, and always did more than anyone else. He demanded results. He ... made you plan, rehearse, and think. He was a quality role model who was always prepared."

Frank Muller '65

After an active and apparently successful junior year, there are hints that Harlow’s life began to change as his senior year approached. At some point, probably in 1963, Harlow learned that the Air Force would not offer him a flying opportunity due to a medical limitation. In June, there was a confusing article in the Corsicana newspaper suggesting that Harlow would not return to A&M in the autumn.

"According to an article in the Corsicana Semi-Weekly Light, he left A&M and went to work for Atomics International in the electrical engineering department in June 1963."

Jerry Soper '64

The job with Atomics International might have been a summer internship, although careful reading of the article suggests that the departure was permanent and this was more than a summer job.

The Aggieland yearbook shows that Harlow returned to campus in September and began his senior year as President of the Navarro Hometown Club. However, all evidence indicates that he did not finish the Spring Semester at A&M.
HARLOW W. RAWLS '64

After Texas A&M...

Although no one seems to know exactly when, Harlow apparently left A&M before the Spring 1964 Semester. We also do not know why he left school at that time, although anyone familiar with the EE curriculum can understand why he would want to leave and why the Association of Former Students carries Harlow as "Did Not Graduate."

"Harlow joined the Navy on April 14, 1964 to become a naval aviator, after being turned down for flying training by the Air Force ROTC during his A&M years because of a medical problem caused by playing football in high school. He was commissioned on October 12, 1966 and subsequently went through flight training and became a pilot."

Jerry Soper '64

We know few details about Harlow's life from Early Spring of 1964, when he left Texas A&M, until his death in early 1969. We know that after he joined the Navy, he served as an enlisted man about two years until early 1966, when he was selected for Officer Candidate School (OCS). Harlow did his officer training at NAS Kingsville where the Navy ran a fifteen-week Aviation OCS.

From there, Ensign Harlow Rawls would have completed six months of Primary Flight Training, another six months of Advance Flight Training, and nearly six months of Strike Fighter Training.

Finally, after all this training, Harlow was a skilled fighter pilot, eager to deploy, and with only one remaining stop for fleet orientation training. That is what brought him to California, to NAS Lemoore and Strike Fighter Squadron 122 (VFA-122).

Harlow Engaged

On June 2, 1966 the Corsicana Daily Sun carried a large photograph of Miss Margaret Louise Gay with caption announcing her engagement to "Harlow William Rawls, Aviation Cadet, Kingsville, Texas." The caption explained that Margaret's mother lived in Nacogdoches and that Harlow was "...the ward of Mrs. Faye Campbell of Frost and Desoto." The early fall wedding they planned did not happen.

Training for War is Dangerous Business:

Everyone realizes that war is dangerous. However, what we often forget is that training for war is also dangerous. If training is to be realistic it must involve an element of danger. Every commander strives to achieve a balance between realism and safety. In World War II, for example, the Army Air Corps lost almost 15,000 airmen and 13,000 aircraft to accidents inside the continental United States.

Harlow Rawls died in a training accident while preparing for deployment to Vietnam.
Naval Air Station Lemoore

NAS Lemoore is located in the southern portion of California's San Joaquin Valley, about 170 miles southeast of San Francisco and 200 miles northwest of Los Angeles. Year-round favorable flying weather was the main reason the Navy chose Lemoore. The relatively flat farmlands of the valley extend without interruption about 60 miles east-west and 200 miles north-south offering a large, uncluttered environment for flight training.

There are challenges to the east. About 70 miles east of the air station, the southern ranges of the Sierra Nevada rise up to elevations of 10,000 feet to 12,000 feet only 30 miles from the valley floor. This is some of the most rugged terrain in the United States. Mount Whitney, the highest mountain in the continental United States stands at 14,505 feet and is only 95 miles from NAS Lemoore.

A Training Mission Turns to Disaster:

On the morning of February 24, 1969, Harlow Rawls was scheduled for a "refresher training" flight in the TA-4, the 2-seat training version of the A-4 fighter that Harlow would fly in war. Harlow's Instructor Pilot (IP) was Lt Cdr James Lucchessi, an experienced pilot with many hours in this aircraft. The purpose of the flight was to review basic instrument techniques. In the pre-flight weather briefing, Rawls and his IP were told they would have satisfactory weather in the valley. However, there would be snow squalls and limited visibility in the mountains. As a result, flight operations were restricted to west of a line 60 miles east of Lemoore.

The TA-4 piloted by Rawls/Lucchessi departed NAS Lemoore just after 10 AM. At 10:35, radar operators noticed their aircraft was approaching the 60-mile-line east of the airfield and cautioned the flight to go no further east. Rawls/Lucchessi did not acknowledge this transmission. As a precaution, the controllers told the aircraft to proceed immediately to the west because they were leaving the control area. Rawls/Lucchessi acknowledged this transmission.

The FAA Oakland Center then told Rawls/Lucchessi to remain west of the 60-mile line. Harlow's flight acknowledged these instructions and was observed by the radar controller to begin a slow left turn, away from the mountains. Oakland Center also directed the aircraft to climb and to maintain an altitude of 18,000 feet, well above any peak in the Southern Sierra's. Rawls/Lucchessi did not acknowledge this transmission.
At this point, radar showed the aircraft was not turning soon enough and crossed the 60-mile line. They issued several urgent radio warnings to Rawls and Lucchessi and heard no response. At 10:41 AM, just six minutes after the emergency began, the TA-4 disappeared from radar.

The Navy immediately launched a full air search effort. However, worsening weather conditions over the southern Sierras interfered with the effort so that a full reconnaissance of the area was not possible until after a week of heavy snow. In that time, as much as 6 to 10 feet of snow accumulated in the area where radar last detected Harlow's airplane.

On February 25, another Navy A-4 crew searching for Harlow and Lucchessi learned first-hand how dangerous the Sierra Madre can be. While scouring the mountains where they believed Harlow went down, the A-4 dropped immediately and crash-landed into a snow bank. Fortunately, the search crew survived and spent 15 hours in the frigid weather until a helicopter was able to rescue them.

On April 15, 1969, almost two months after they went missing, the Navy declared Rawls and Lucchessi dead. In a detailed but awkwardly worded letter to Harlow's sister, the Navy made the announcement:

"Based on the known circumstances concerning the disappearance of the aircraft, the severity of the weather conditions, and the extensive searches which failed to bring forth any evidence that either of the crewmembers may have survived, it has been reluctantly concluded that Lieutenant (junior grade) Rawls cannot reasonably be expected to be alive, and a determination has been made that he died on 24 February 1969."

Some Afterthoughts

Heroes come in many shapes and sizes. Many earn the title through acts of courage in the face of danger. Our legends are full of their names - Corporal Mitchell Red Cloud, Captain Horace Carswell, or Sergeant Cleto Rodriguez.

There are other kinds of heroes, those who quietly overcome daunting handicaps and unimaginable obstacles to reach their goals and help those around them. I believe Harlow Rawls was this kind of hero. The circumstances of his death may not have been heroic – it was an accident. But, the short life that Harlow led gave us all an example of how a person can use his talents and blessings to a greater good.

Because he was an orphan and never married, Harlow left no descendents. Instead, Harlow left his estate and insurance proceeds to a scholarship fund for promising graduates of the Texas State Home.

I did not know Harlow Rawls. I wish I did.
The Remains of

Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Harlow Rawls '64

United States Navy Reserve

have never been found.

Lieutenant Rawls was memorialized with full military honors at the

Houston National Cemetery, Houston, Texas

Section MA, Site 9

WELCOME HOME, HARLOW RAWLS!