

John Villforth '52, '54g

John Villforth credits some of his success to an early dose of humility. "I nearly flunked out of my first year of college," the Reading, Pa., native laughs. Villforth says that experience ultimately helped him lead. "I was a better listener, and I would consider other viewpoints because I knew I wasn't always the smartest guy in the room." His record indicates otherwise. After completing bachelor's and master's degrees in sanitary engineering (now environmental engineering) at Penn State, Villforth was commissioned in the U.S. Air Force, went on to earn a master's in physics from Vanderbilt (1958), and rose through the ranks as a commissioned officer in the United States Public Health Service (USPHS), retiring with the rank of Rear Admiral and Assistant Surgeon General.



Villforth's first encounter with nuclear safety issues was with a Penn State engineering professor, R. Rupert Kountz, who he says "had the foresight to recognize the importance of this emerging field and taught a three-credit course on the subject." The 1950s were "The Atomic Age." The Navy was developing nuclear submarines, radioactive materials were increasingly being used in medicine, and companies were exploring nuclear energy as a power source. Villforth spent much of the decade in the Air Force, including an assignment as director of the Air Force's only radiological health laboratory. In 1961 he left the Air Force to join the USPHS's radiological health program.

Villforth's assignments during the 1960s with the USPHS included chief of the Radiation Surveillance Network, Radioactive Materials Section, Occupational Radiation Program, and Division of Medical Radiation Exposure. In 1969, he was named director of the Bureau of Radiological Health, charged with ensuring that radiation emissions from medical, household, and industrial equipment were at safe levels. During his tenure, the Bureau reduced the number of unnecessary medical X-ray procedures in the United States by one-third. In 1982, the Food and Drug Administration Commissioner and Secretary of Health and Human Services recruited Villforth to serve as director of the FDA's newly established Center for Devices and Radiologic Health, the position he held until retiring in 1990. In 1985, Surgeon General C. Everett Koop appointed him chief engineer of the USPHS as well. Villforth was recognized during his USPHS career with the service's highest awards, including two Distinguished Service medals, the Surgeon General's Exemplary Service Medal, and the Health and Human Services Secretary's Recognition Award, among others. Both the USPHS and the FDA established awards in his name.

Villforth also served in crucial roles during two major nuclear accidents. Joseph Califano, the secretary of health, education and welfare, designated Villforth the point man for all of the department's radiation emergency response activities during the Three Mile Island crisis in 1979. Seven years later in 1986, Villforth provided critical technical assistance to the Soviet government during the Chernobyl accident and assessed the impact of radioactive fallout throughout the United States.

Since retiring, Villforth has continued his work. He is cofounder, board member, and chair of the Food and Drug Administration Alumni Association, a non-profit group dedicated to supporting the agency's public health mission. He is a certified health physicist and past

president of the Health Physics Society—a group of professionals involved with protecting the public and workers from all types of radiation. Additionally, he has been a fellow of that group for more than 45 years.

Penn State has previously honored Villforth as an Alumni Fellow (2002) and Outstanding Engineering Alumnus (1987). He and his wife, Joanne '54, are members of the Mount Nittany Society, President's Club, and President's Club Circle of Pride. They have three grown daughters and six grandchildren. The Villforths live in Maryland.

*This career summary is excerpted from the 2005 Distinguished Alumni Awards Ceremony booklet (June 3, 2005, The Pennsylvania State University).