

CLASS OF
1983

GEN. (RET.)

DAVID GOLDFEIN



Toward the end of his second year at the United States Air Force Academy, then-Cadet David Goldfein '83 found himself at a crossroads.

He'd spent much of his tenure at the Zoo fighting the system, and he was almost ready to quit.

"I didn't know if the military was a good fit for me," he explains. "My first two years were actually a fairly miserable experience."

Academically, Gen. (Ret.) Goldfein was barely keeping his head above water. He found himself on restrictions most of his fourth-class year, was always stuck on academic probation, and marched a few tours.

"But at least athletically ... I was slow," he jokes.

Fortunately for the struggling cadet, the Academy instituted a new "Stop Out" program — patterned after a Naval Academy sabbatical plan — that allowed cadets to take a year off to reevaluate their future and focus their resolve. He jumped at the opportunity.

"I had no real plan at the time," he admits. "I just knew that what I was doing wasn't quite working."

An accomplished Eagle Scout, Gen. Goldfein spent the next summer as a ranger at Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico.

By the fall, he had decided to give a career in the music industry a try. Gen. Goldfein's academic adviser had a distant cousin who was part of folk singer Harry Chapin's band, and the group agreed to hire the young man as a roadie.

"I jumped on a 10-speed bicycle, and my plan was to join up with the band,"

he recalls. "This was an opportunity to see whether that whole passion of songwriting and music would pan out."



As he pedaled his way toward New York from Texas, Gen. Goldfein heard that Chapin (a USAFA cadet for a short period of time) was killed in a car accident.

"I ended up riding that bicycle for upward of a year, covering about 5,000 miles on the back roads of America," he reports.

What he experienced during those months on the road, he now says, was the heart and soul of this nation.

"More than anything, I learned that this country is worth defending," he explains. "Because the people who took me in were just wonderful, down-to-earth families working to make a living, contributing

"The squadron, quite frankly, is where we succeed or fail as an Air Force. We needed squadron commanders to know that we had their backs and that they had the resources to take risks, make decisions, and that they could stumble, fall down, pick themselves up, and dust themselves off. That was what it was going to take in a peer fight."

-Gen. (Ret.) David Goldfein

to their community, and making their little part of the world a better place. Who wouldn't want to defend that?"

On the appointed deadline day, Gen. Goldfein called the Academy and verified that he wished to return. The second half of his cadet career went much better, thanks in part to the one-year hiatus. He eventually launched into a career that concluded with an assignment as chief of staff of the Air Force.

Gen. Goldfein's impressive resume led to his selection as one of this year's United States Air Force Academy Distinguished Graduate Award honorees.

MILITARY FAMILY

Because Gen. Goldfein's father was a military pilot, the family moved often. The future chief was born in France, but then spent most of his early life in England, Spain and Germany.

Other than his interest in music, Gen. Goldfein was deeply involved in Scouting.

"I loved the outdoors," he says. "And I loved working with other young men."

A member of the high school football team, Gen. Goldfein admits he spent most of the time on the bench — which he apparently enjoyed.

"I got to watch the cheerleaders," he laughs. "One of those cheerleaders was a beautiful and smart young girl named Dawn Duncan, who's been my bride now for 40 years."

As high school graduation approached, he applied to USAFA, but his application was rejected. Instead, he planned to attend the University of Wyoming and room with his best friend.

"I was going to study forestry and make belt buckles on mountaintops," he says. "And write music. That was going to be my future."

FALCON SCHOLAR

Weeks before starting his college career, Gen. Goldfein received a call offering him a Falcon Foundation scholarship to attend prep school. He told the colonel he wasn't interested.

That night, while sitting around the kitchen table, Gen. Goldfein told his parents about the opportunity.

"Somebody called you today and offered



ACROSS: Gen. (Ret.) David Goldfein '83 took a year off from USAFA to decide on his future path.

ABOVE: Then-Cadet David Goldfein and future wife, Dawn Duncan, at Ring Dance.

LEFT: Gen. Goldfein during his pilot days.

BELOW: Gen. Goldfein, chief of staff of the Air Force at the time, finally received his class ring at USAFA's Class of 2020 Ring Dance.



you money to go to school, and you told them no, you'd prefer to use my money to go to school?" his father asked.

The Goldfein family quickly called the colonel back and accepted the scholarship. Fortunately, he hadn't yet offered the prep school spot to someone else.

His year at Northwestern Prep was rocky at best, until Director Jim Hoiby pulled the cadet candidate aside. The educator informed the Falcon scholar that his grades weren't cutting it, and he challenged Gen. Goldfein to apply himself. The pep talk worked, and he received an appointment to USAFA.

BROTHER'S FOOTSTEPS

When Gen. Goldfein arrived in the summer of 1978, his older brother, Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Stephen Goldfein '78, had just graduated as the fall Cadet Wing commander.

Living as a cadet in the shadow of his brother was a challenge for the new Doolie. But as his brother told him, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

"And he was right," Gen. Goldfein recalls.

On his return to the Academy for his second-class year, Gen. Goldfein turned the corner.

"Now, rather than fighting the system, I embraced it," he says. "I embraced what the Academy stands for. I embraced this whole idea of contributing to the defense of America and the great experiment called democracy. My grades went up, and I was off probation. A year of biking even helped me on the athletic field. It was a wonderful experience all the way through graduation, especially since my younger brother, Mike, had joined the Class of 1984. It had become a family business."

PILOT DREAMS

Not sure he wanted to become a pilot and follow in his father's footsteps, Gen. Goldfein pursued his private pilot's license to see if he liked it.

"My grade point average was not going to get me into the soaring program," he reports.

By the end of his four-degree year, he secured his license at the USAFA Aero Club and developed a love of flying.

His first assignment out of pilot training was as a T-38 instructor at Sheppard Air Force Base in Texas.

"I was devastated at the time, because all of my buddies got fighters," he remembers. "But it turned out to be the best assignment, because I got to really learn the essence of flying."

The Goldfeins thus began an Air Force journey spanning 21 assignments over 37 years. Gen. Goldfein was a command pilot with more than 4,200 flying hours in the T-37, T-38, F-16, F-117, MC-12 and MQ-9, and he flew combat missions in operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm, Allied Force and Enduring Freedom.

"I didn't miss a fight from Desert Storm through the time I retired," he says. "I saw a lot of combat."

THE WORST DAY

In 1999, while on a mission as commander of the 555th Fighter Squadron during Operation Allied Force, Gen. Goldfein's F-16 was shot down by a surface-to-air missile over Serbia.

"We were in this campaign against the tragic, evil ethnic cleansing that was going on by Serbian leaders," he reports.

As he and his squadron attempted to neutralize enemy missile positions on a full-moon night, Gen. Goldfein's aircraft was struck.

"Everything started going south. Smoke and fumes were coming into the cockpit," he says. "I'm starting to see the horizon come up, and I remember thinking ... this airplane is going to hit the ground. The only question left was whether I'm going to be in it."

As he readied to eject, he radioed to his team, "Start finding me, boys."

He hit the ground in hostile territory. Even though his survival, evasion, resistance and escape (SERE) training had occurred 20 years prior in the mountains surrounding USAFA, Gen. Goldfein reports he knew exactly what he needed to do to survive.

Hours later, he was rescued by a combat search-and-rescue team. To this day, he sends bottles of scotch to the squadrons involved and to the PJ Schoolhouse to thank them for saving his life — a story he recently recounted at the dedication of the

Academy's new HH-3E Jolly Green Giant static display.

CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Gen. Goldfein went on to serve in senior leadership roles, including commander of U.S. Air Force Central Command, director of the Joint Staff and vice chief of staff of the Air Force. He oversaw broad recapitalization that included delivery of the KC-46 and award of the B-21, T-7, MH-139, HH-60W and ground-based strategic deterrent.

"What I learned over those years — both as a supported commander and a supporting commander — was joint warfighting and how the Air Force fits in the joint warfight," he says.

In 2000, Air University published a book Gen. Goldfein wrote while attending the Foreign Service Institute. "Sharing Success and Owning Failure" has become a valued resource for up-and-coming military leaders, recounting lessons learned from some of the nation's top leaders.

"I was not looking for great success stories," he explains. "I wanted to talk about things that we all screwed up, so the next generation didn't repeat our mistakes. If the book has left a little imprint on commanders, I'm really proud of that."

His wife, Dawn, serving as the first lady of the Air Force, later wrote a companion book titled "Sharing the Journey," aimed at military spouses. Both books are now given to new commanders and spouses at every commander's course at Maxwell AFB.

FINAL ASSIGNMENT

Gen. Goldfein became the 21st chief of staff of the Air Force in July 2016 and served until 2020. His extensive background in the joint fight influenced his priorities.

"Everything I did, the staff knew, was going to be passed through a litmus test," he explains. "If it improved our ability to fight jointly, then I would take it on. If it didn't, if it was on the periphery, I would normally pass it by."

As chief, Gen. Goldfein helped shape the Air Force for the future and the return to great power competition, including the establishment of a new military service — the U.S. Space Force.