

Chief's Mentorship Built Leaders

Vásquez honored for dedicated service to USAFA cadets

By David Bitton

Shoutings “HEIRPOWER!” while high-fiving cadets between classes in Fairchild Hall and taking time to listen were some of the ways Chief Master Sgt. (Ret.) Bob Vásquez positively impacted a generation of future military officers.

His 19-plus years of dedication and service at the Air Force Academy’s Center for Character and Leadership Development were recognized during a March 19 ceremony where the Association of Graduates inducted him as an honorary member.

“Chief Vásquez has certainly met and exceeded the requirements for being named an honorary member,” Association of Graduates and Air Force Academy Foundation CEO Mark Hille ’97 commented during the ceremony.

Vásquez mentored and instructed thousands of four-degree cadets in the basic character development course, VECTOR (Vital, Effective, Character Through Observation and Reflection). He also helped craft similar courses for the entire Cadet Wing.

As course director, he grew and developed the curriculum and expanded its offering from a few evening hours after classes to an eight-hour session each semester.

Admittedly, Vásquez says that wasn’t enough time to develop character but it provided an opportunity to plant seeds in future Air Force and Space Force leaders.

Cadets often told the chief that the course allowed them to think about and reflect on their purpose for attending USAFA and the Academy’s mission of developing leaders of character.

“The four degrees loved being there,”



Chief Master Sgt. (Ret.) Bob Vásquez, third from left, is congratulated by Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Dr. Hans Mueh '66, from left, Lt. Col. Carl Chen '06 and Mark Hille '97.

Vásquez says. “Feeding them helped.”

He joked that enlisted personnel at the Academy liked that the future officers had to get through him and VECTOR to graduate, which was true.

HAVING AN IMPACT

Vásquez’s impact didn’t stop with the character development course. He was intentional in when and where he interacted with cadets every day.

Most school days at 9 a.m., the chief would walk around McDermott Library talking with four-degrees.

“I’d say, ‘Good morning, how are you?’ The important part is I would listen for the answer,” Vásquez says. “When I heard, ‘Outstanding, sir,’ I’d say, ‘How are you really?’ That’s when they would open up.”

“If I had any significant impact, it was

from one-on-one conversations.”

The chief tried to make sure each cadet he worked with felt heard.

“We say that leaders lead people,” Vásquez says. “Really effective leaders lead persons, individuals. How are YOU doing? Not y’all.”

His impact didn’t end at the library.

Vásquez has fond memories of walking the long hallway on Fairchild Hall’s east side, watching cadets quickly and quietly heading to their next classes. That’s when his, “Hello, how are you?” and high-fives would break the silence and lighten the mood.

Over the years, the chief often asked first-degree cadets what they would miss most about the Academy.

The initial answer was often, “You, sir,” with the second being their fellow cadets.

Chief Master Sgt. (Ret.) Bob Vásquez's Military Career

- ★ Served more than 30 years in the USAF (1972-2002)
- ★ Led as chief master sergeant for more than a decade
- ★ Entertained around the globe as a musician in Air Force field bands
- ★ Performed for every U.S. president from Richard Nixon to Bill Clinton
- ★ Played for the queen of England
- ★ Worked with Jennifer Lopez, Ja Rule, Kid Rock and Arturo Sandoval
- ★ Served as an Air Force bandsman for 24 of the nearly 31 years on active duty as well as commandant of the Noncommissioned Officer Academy at March AFB, California; senior enlisted advisor to the commander of the 92nd Air Refueling Wing at Fairchild AFB, Washington; deputy director for the then-Family Support Center at Ramstein AB, Germany; superintendent for 86th Mission Support Group at Ramstein AB, Germany.
- ★ Program director for fourth-class Character and Leadership Development Workshop (VECTOR); curriculum developer for Commandant of Cadets at USAFA

"They embraced the suck together for four years," Vásquez says. "They are now part of a Long Blue Line family."

INDUCTION CEREMONY

Now an honorary member of the Association of Graduates, Vásquez jokingly says he's part of the Class of 2024.

Family, friends and colleagues joined him for the ceremony at Doolittle Hall.

Vásquez left a lasting impact on Lt. Col. Carl Chen '06, who currently serves as operations branch chief for NORAD and USNORTHCOM at Peterson Space Force Base in Colorado Springs.

"His most important lessons ingrained in us the understanding that those we lead are real human beings who should be treated with compassion, dignity and respect," Col. Chen commented during the gathering. "The chief once told me that when it was time for him to advance to the rank of chief master sergeant, he was asked if he was truly all in. What I can tell you is that he was all in then, he was all in during his more than two decades of service for our Academy and he's still all in today. There's no one more deserving of this honor than you. Congratulations."

Col. Chen nominated Vásquez for the honorary membership and Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Dr. Hans Mueh '66, a member of the AOG board of directors, says the board voted unanimously to induct Vásquez as an honorary member.

"I asked if any of the board members knew the chief," Gen. Mueh, a USAFA Distinguished Graduate, said during the

ceremony. "After the laughter died down, better than half the board explained that I wasn't the only one familiar with the chief's impact on graduates."

Gen. Mueh has known Vásquez for more than 20 years and says Vásquez helped improve the Academy's honor and ethics education for all cadets.

"He led that effort and can rightly take credit for the authorship of most of the honor lessons we still use today," Gen. Mueh says. "To me, he's been a friend and mentor, and I'm in awe of the consistent message of integrity he has lived and shared."

CHIEF VÁSQUEZ

After posing for photos as the latest Association of Graduates honorary member, the chief started his speech this way:

"I'm Chief Master Sgt. retired Bob Vásquez.

"I produce shining stars for the United States of America. Now, let me tell you something about this place we call America. There's no place like this place, anywhere near this place, so this must be the place. Isn't this a great day to be an American?!"

Cheering and applause followed.

"My heart is about to explode with pride," he said while looking out at his wife of more than 46 wonderful and fulfilling years, Debbie, his two daughters and two of his six grandchildren seated in the front row.

"He was very passionate about his time with the cadets," Debbie Vásquez says. "It was hard for him to retire after 30 enlisted years and 20 years at the Academy, but

he's ready to do his own thing, like more writing and traveling."

Tesa Vatcher, who lives in Colorado Springs, says she can't go anywhere in town where someone doesn't know her famous father.

"She's heard responses like, 'Oh my goodness, we love him,' and 'He shouts HEIRPOWER! in the hallways.'"


At first, many cadets would assume the chief was shouting "air power," referencing the U.S. Air Force's dominance in the skies, but that isn't the case.

Vásquez says his main purpose in life is spreading the idea of "heirpower."

His book, "Wisdom Acquired Randomly (W.A.R.): What I learned at the United States Air Force Academy without ever graduating!" shares lessons of cadets/heirs being shaped into the leaders of tomorrow.

"An heir is a successor. Power is a capacity to act effectively," he explains.

Vásquez thanked Col. Chen for the nomination, Gen. Mueh for his support, the Association of Graduates for welcoming him with open arms, and his family for all their backing over the years.

"It was an incredible feeling when I heard the nomination was accepted," Vásquez says. "Chiefs don't cry, but sometimes our eyeballs sweat." 

The Honorary Member program permits the Association of Graduates to recognize non-graduates who have championed the AOG's mission to serve graduates, preserve the heritage of the Academy and Lone Blue Line, and support USAFA in its mission to develop leaders of character for the Air Force, Space Force, and nation. The designation is limited to 25 living recipients. Vásquez is the 46th individual to be inducted as an honorary member in the history of the AOG.

The first honorary membership was awarded on Oct. 3, 1981, to Gail McComas, the Academy's first Cadet Wing hostess, who served from 1955 until 1977. Other selectees include former Arizona U.S. Sen. Barry Goldwater, World War II aviation hero (and AOG headquarters building namesake) Gen. Jimmy Doolittle, and former Dean of the Faculty Brig. Gen. Robert McDermott.