

Developing future leaders

Burkel honored for dedicated service to USAFA gymnasts

By David Bitton



Thinking back to the countless stuck landings followed by cadet-athlete fist pumps still brings a smile to the face of longtime Air Force Academy gymnastics coach Lt. Col. (Ret.) Louis Burkel.

His 30-plus years of dedicated service were recognized at an Oct. 17 ceremony during which the Association of Graduates inducted him as its 47th honorary member.

"There's no doubt Col. Burkel has certainly met and exceeded all the requirements for being named an honorary member," Mark Hille '97, CEO of the Association of Graduates and Air Force Academy Foundation, observed during the ceremony. "Col. Burkel has been an ever-present friend, supportive coach, mentor and guide for our cadets as long as anyone can remember."

In 1975, Col. Burkel graduated from Air Command and Staff College and was assigned to the Air Force Academy Depart-

ment of Athletics, where he served continuously for the next 30 years.

He began as a Physical Education Department executive officer, physical education instructor, T-43 navigator instructor and assistant men's gymnastics coach.

In 1978, Col. Burkel earned a master's degree in education from the University of Northern Colorado. In 1979, he became head coach of men's gymnastics and, in 1982, began nine years of service as the deputy head of the Physical Education Department (six months as acting department head).

"I love the Air Force Academy and I cannot tell you how much this honor means to me," Col. Burkel said.

During his tenure, Col. Burkel coached multiple cadets to All-American honors as well as Western Athletic Conference and national championships. He was recognized as regional coach of the year numerous times.

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Col. Burkel served as president and vice president of the College Gymnastics Association and chairman of the NCAA Gymnastics Committee.

In 2008, Col. Burkel received an Honorary Lifetime Membership Award from the College Gymnastics Association.

Beyond coaching and administrative

duties, teaching was his primary responsibility at the Academy.

Col. Burkel's favorite class was teaching water survival because of its value to each cadet.

"I loved teaching," he said.

SELFLESS SERVICE

Family, friends, students and colleagues joined Col. Burkel for the induction ceremony at Doolittle Hall. His wife of 56 years, Sandy Burkel; daughter, Kristen Burkel; and grandson, Jack Burkel, beamed with pride from the front row.

"He's done a lot for the Academy and for cadets," Sandy Burkel said. "So it's an honor and privilege for him to be an honorary member of the AOG."

Kristen Burkel echoed her mother's thoughts, adding, "I'm so incredibly proud. My dad is there for anyone 100 percent of the time. He goes the extra mile and always does his best."

Lt. Col. (Ret.) Thomas Eannarino '84 can attest to Col. Burkel's going above and beyond.

During the ceremony, Col. Eannarino shared some of his memories during his time as a cadet gymnast.

"Like for many, my cadet days were a struggle, but my time in the gym with Lou and my teammates was always the best part of my day," Col. Eannarino said. "We worked hard. We played hard. We laughed a lot, but most of all, we looked out for one another."

He remembers how Col. Burkel greeted the team with a smile, maybe a joke, before jumping into the day's practice.

"He could read us like a book," Col. Eannarino recalled. "With a quick look into our eyes, he knew immediately whether we got any sleep or passed our exams that day."

Col. Burkel led by example, praising athletes freely in public and counseling them in private. Col. Eannarino looks back fondly on those conversations, remembering that he always left the office knowing the issue and exactly how to address it.

During his first year, Cadet 1st Class Eannarino told Col. Burkel that he was planning to go into security forces so he could carry a gun.

"He [Col. Burkel] grinned, as if he agreed with my logic, and then asked me if I was out of my mind," Col. Eannarino recalled. "He said, 'This is the U.S. Air Force. We fly planes in this business.' He advised me to go to nav [navigation] school, work hard and get into a fighter."

Col. Eannarino took the advice, met and married his wife of 39 years, Jayne, and loved flying fighters, including the F-15E Strike Eagle.

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Seven years into his Air Force career, Col. Eannarino returned to USAFA as an assistant gymnastics coach.

Col. Burkel had him work with freshmen who were struggling. Some of those cadets served as career Air Force officers.

"[It's] just another example of Lou's outstanding leadership," Col. Eannarino said. "He selflessly serves and sacrifices for others and takes care of his people above all else. I'm proud to represent the hundreds of former Academy gymnasts, such as I, to collectively say, 'Thank you, Coach, for all you've done for us.'"

Col. Eannarino worked with two other former assistant coaches and Lt. Col. (Ret.) Garry Dudley '68, a member of the AOG board of directors, on Col. Burkel's nomination.



From left: Maj. Joseph Bledsoe '11, Lt. Col. (Ret.) Thomas Eannarino '84, Lt. Col. (Ret.) Louis Burkel, Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Brian Bishop '83 and Mark Hille '97 during Burkel's induction as an honorary member of the Association of Graduates. (Photos by Ryan Hall)

"A ROLE MODEL FOR US ALL"

Maj. Joseph Bledsoe '11, a member of the AOG board of directors and USAFA Institute for Future Conflict fellow, congratulated Col. Burkel on being the AOG's newest honorary member.

"Your lifelong contributions and dedication to this institution, its graduates and our Air Force made this one of the easiest decisions our board has ever faced," Bledsoe said. "You're a true leader and clearly demonstrate the developing-leaders-of-character mentality that our institution holds fundamentally as one of its pillars. Your unwavering commitment to excellence, your ability to inspire others and your dedication to fostering a positive environment make you a role model for all of us."

Bledsoe also shared a bit about Col. Burkel's early military career.

Col. Burkel is a decorated navigator in the B-52 and flew 196 combat missions during the Vietnam War. He was awarded two Distinguished Flying Crosses, one for heroism and one for extraordinary flight achievement. He also received an additional 13 air medals.

"Those stories are for another time but they highlight his outstanding service, not just to our Academy but to our Air Force and our nation," Bledsoe said.


At his induction ceremony, Col. Burkel started his speech by thanking multiple people, including his wife, saying, "If it were not for my wife, I would not be standing here today."

He applied for the Air Force Academy in 1958 but didn't get accepted, instead attending the University of Nebraska, and graduating in 1964.

"The 'N' stands for 'knowledge,'" Col. Burkel joked.

He was coaching physical education at Omaha South High School when he met his future wife and learned more about the Air Force.

He commissioned into the Air Force in 1967, attended navigator school and began his career in the B-52, before his storied career at USAFA.

"The Air Force Academy gave me far more than I gave it," Col. Burkel said, "and I'm grateful for the cadets and colleagues I worked with along the way." 

THE HONORARY MEMBER PROGRAM permits the Association of Graduates to recognize non-graduates who have championed the AOG's mission to support the Academy, serve graduates and preserve the heritage of the institution. The designation is limited to 25 living recipients. Lt. Col. (Ret.) Louis Burkel is the 47th 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.