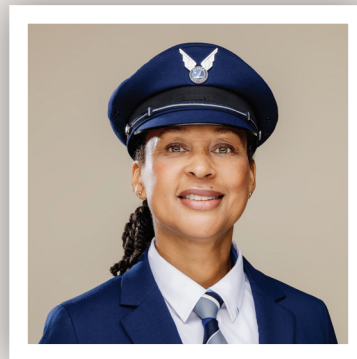


Leadership Achievement AWARD



LT. COL. (RET.) KIM FORD '90

A Pilot's Inheritance

Combat aviator, trailblazer and keeper of aviation history

By David Bitton

Lt. Col. (Ret.) Kim Ford '90 grew up a few blocks from a small Seattle-area airfield, watching Cessnas come and go until the growing neighborhood forced it to close in 1983.

She didn't need a runway to fall in love with flight. She had a father who'd served as a Signal Corps officer in France, uncles who'd come up through ROTC, a grandfather who'd served as an airman in World War II, and a view of the Blue Angels screaming over Lake Washington during the multiweek Seafair summer festival.

"I loved aviation, I loved travel, and I really wanted to serve," says Col. Ford, a 2025 Leadership Achievement Award recipient. "I was trying to figure out how to bring all those together."

Her father had the answer: Go to a military academy, where the country would pay her to fly.

The Leadership Achievement Award, which recognizes graduates who have reached a high level of professional accomplishment in military or civilian life while upholding the Academy's standards of integrity and character, would one day reflect just how far that answer took her.

What followed was a 25-year career as a KC-135 and C-17 command pilot, instructor and mission commander who logged more than 11,000 flight hours across a dozen named combat operations, and then a second act spent ensuring the country never forgets who flew before her.

Top: Lt. Col. (Ret.) Cathy Almand '90, left, AOG board chair, and Mark Hille '97, right, Association & Foundation president and CEO, present Lt. Col. (Ret.) Kim Ford '90 with the Leadership Achievement Award at Hotel Polaris.

Right: Col. Ford expresses her gratitude after receiving the Leadership Achievement Award.





Col. Ford flew the C-17 out of McChord Air Force Base, Washington.



Kim (Scott) Ford as a USAFA cadet

THE VILLAGE THAT GOT HER THERE

A single mentor didn't pave Col. Ford's path through the Academy. It was built by a community she still credits more than three decades later: fellow cadets, a Mitchell Hall janitor who took an interest in a homesick three-degree and an athletic trainer who nursed her through a firstie-year ankle injury that threatened to keep her out of pilot training.

The janitor took her to get a haircut and brought her home for dinner with his family. The trainer wrapped her ankle every day after the varsity athletes cleared out, working through pain in an ice bath while talking her through leadership and persistence.

"She really gave me that mentoring, time and support that I needed," Col. Ford says.

Then-cadet Ford passed her physical and earned her wings at Laughlin Air Force Base, Texas, her father pinning them on as her mother and siblings looked on.

A CAREER FORGED POST 9/11

Col. Ford built her career on the KC-135, refueling aircraft from Fairchild Air Force Base, Washington; McConnell Air Force Base, Kansas; and Grand Forks Air Force Base, North Dakota, before transitioning to the C-17 at McChord Air Force Base, Washington.

Below left: Col. Ford flies for Alaska Airlines.

Below: Col. Ford with a C-17



When the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks reshaped the Air Force's mission overnight, her Reserve unit, the 446th Airlift Wing, found itself flying some of the heaviest mission loads of the early war years.

"That was a moment when everybody was of the same mindset, uncertainty and concern for our country," she says.

She flew under night-vision goggles into combat zones, moving people and cargo across more than a dozen named operations — work that eventually earned her a spot in the Air Mobility Command commander's action group, supporting decisions for an enterprise of 134,000 airmen.

The shift from flight deck to command staff reframed her understanding of leadership.

"It's really from that tactical [view] to more of that big picture," she says.

She became a command briefer, memorizing a 35-minute briefing she delivered to members of Congress, military officials and community leaders.

One scenario tested her harder than any combat sortie: Flying a Kosovo air refueling mission with a green crew in a stacked nighttime formation over the Adriatic Sea, she discovered that her co-pilot didn't understand the communications due to being new to intense combat support flying operations. The mission was canceled for unrelated reasons, but the lesson stuck.

"I learned accountability, and that I am responsible for making sure that my team is ready to go," she says.

Her crew spent the next five days chair flying every phase of the mission together.

When the next opportunity came, they earned recognition as the deployment's most improved crew.

That experience crystallized what she believes about leading people.

"I believe in working very hard, I believe in not giving up, I believe in being resilient, and I believe in extending grace to others," Col. Ford says.

CARRYING THE LEGACY FORWARD

Col. Ford's parents raised her on stories of the Tuskegee Airmen and the Women Airforce Service Pilots, taking her to museums and pointing her toward newspaper clippings long before she ever wore a uniform.

After retiring, she turned that childhood reverence into action, joining the Sam Bruce Chapter of Tuskegee Airmen that meets at Seattle's Museum of Flight, where she now serves as a trustee, and building relationships with surviving Tuskegee Airmen, including Lt. Col. (Ret.) Bill Holloman and Lt. Col. (Ret.) Ed Drummond. That work led her to a Congressional Gold Medal ceremony correcting decades of delayed recognition.

She served as an escort for WASP June Leckie, placing the medal around her neck on behalf of a grateful nation.

"That was really one of the most emotional moments of my life," Col. Ford says.

Leckie's family told her afterward that their mother had never shared her stories so openly before.

Col. Ford carries the weight of her own place in that history, too, flying combat

missions and earning induction into the Organization of Black Aerospace Professionals Hall of Fame in 2025.

She corresponded with Mildred Carter, a pilot who married Tuskegee Airman Lt. Col. (Ret.) Herbert Carter but was barred from flying combat herself.

"I carry it carefully; I carry it with deep responsibility and reverence," Col. Ford says. "I try to pass along some of that pride and legacy and reverence to the next generation."

STILL FLYING

Col. Ford flies for Alaska Airlines today, recently adding Rome to her route map and hoping to qualify for the 787 before her career winds down.

She serves as a Falcon Foundation trustee and chairs the Michael P. Anderson Memorial Aerospace Program at the Museum of Flight.

Asked what sustains her, she returns to the word she's carried since the Academy: purpose.

"I think it's important for people to see what is possible," she says. "If people can see what is possible and be encouraged, that serves a very important purpose."

She credits her parents above all others for instilling the belief that she could succeed and the resilience to keep showing up.

Of the Leadership Achievement Award, she calls it a reflection of everyone who carried her there.

"I'm very humbled and honored," she says, adding, "I feel it really is a group accomplishment." 