

Young Alumni Excellence AWARD

By Sam Hastings



SAM ECKHOLM '18

At age 15, Sam Eckholm '18 searched YouTube for a glimpse of life at the U.S. Air Force Academy. He found very little content and few answers to his questions.

Fortunately, Eckholm had personal sources of information, including his father, a Class of 1989 graduate and former KC-135 pilot, and his uncle, a Class of 1993 graduate. Their stories introduced him to the Academy's challenges and opportunities, but Eckholm knew that many prospective cadets didn't have that connection.

He made himself a promise: If he earned an appointment, someday he would create the videos he wished he had found when searching YouTube for information.

Growing up in Dallas, Texas, Eckholm admired his father but says he was never pushed toward military service. When he expressed interest in USAFA, his father encouraged him to understand exactly what the commitment required.

During basic cadet training, letters from his father helped him persevere. As Eckholm adjusted to life at USAFA, he embraced opportunities that ultimately shaped his future, including volunteering as an Academy ambassador, starting an Instagram account for his cadet squadron and developing an interest in photography. He also joined the mock trial team, which led him to major in legal studies and strengthened his public speaking skills.

As Eckholm progressed at USAFA, he carried on a family legacy by moving into CS-28, his father's and uncle's former squadron. Seeing their names on the graduate plaques deepened his connection to the Blackbirds. During his final semester as a firstie, he served as squadron commander, leading more than 100 peers.

"That was probably, even to this day, the

most responsibility, the most stressful pressure and the most rewarding opportunity that I've had," Eckholm says.

An Operation Air Force assignment to Travis Air Force Base, California, introduced Eckholm to public affairs. The combination of storytelling, media and military service immediately appealed to him. As graduation neared, he competed for one of the few public affairs assignments available and began his career at Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Virginia.

As a second lieutenant, Eckholm earned a position with the F-22 Raptor Demonstration Team. For two years, he traveled nearly 300 days annually, managing social media, photography, video, media outreach and community engagement. During his tenure, the team's Instagram audience grew from about 16,000 followers to nearly half a million.

The experience taught him how to tell military stories that resonated with broad audiences.

In 2020, he began producing his own videos about the Academy, aviation and military service — a way to fulfill the promise he made as a teenager.

His Academy tour video has attracted nearly 3 million views since its 2023 release and is often among the first results prospective cadets see when searching for USAFA online.

After completing his active-duty commitment in 2023, Eckholm turned his growing platform into SE Media, a San Francisco-based production company. What began as a one-person operation has since expanded to include producers, editors and videographers.

SE Media's flagship series, *Access Granted*, takes viewers inside aircraft, military units and industries that are often difficult to understand or access. Productions often require six months to a year of coordination, filming and security reviews.

Amid SE Media's success and bright future, Eckholm still considers himself a guide rather than the main subject.

"I'm the host; I'm not the story," he says. "My role is to help translate this, put it into perspective, bring the audience along and connect the dots."

Eckholm says the stories belong to the airmen, service members, engineers and innovators whose work he highlights. He says the most meaningful responses come from people inspired to serve, military members who can show their families what they do, and families who better understand their loved ones' missions.

Leading a growing company has reinforced the lessons he first learned as a cadet. He focuses on building teams around a shared purpose, leading from the front and accepting that no leader can please everyone.

Receiving the Young Alumni Excellence Award was especially meaningful because it came from the institution that shaped him and helped launch his journey.

"Everything I built started at the Academy," Eckholm says. "I'm very proud, very honored and excited to represent the Long Blue Line."

Indeed, Eckholm encounters the Long Blue Line nearly everywhere he travels. Academy graduates appear in the units he visits, the companies he works with and the audiences he reaches. Each connection reinforces the network's shared commitment to service and to supporting one another.

Looking ahead, Eckholm says he has some exciting new ideas for how to continue telling meaningful stories that educate, entertain and inspire even more people.

"I think you will be pleasantly surprised and excited to see what those are when they come out," he teases. 