



DISTINGUISHED GRADUATE AWARD

Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Susan Helms

CLASS OF 1980

By Bryan Grossman

Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Susan Helms '80 grew up immersed in the idea of service before self.

"I knew from a very young age that I wanted to be in the Air Force, just like my dad," she says.

During eighth grade, while sitting at the dinner table with her father and his colleagues, Gen. Helms first heard about the U.S. Air Force Academy.

Although he was not an Academy graduate himself, her father deeply admired those who were. He joined the Air Force in 1956 and spent his career as a pilot.

"He had put Academy grads on a pedestal," recalls Gen. Helms,

the oldest of four daughters. "He thought going to the Air Force Academy was just about the best possible experience anybody could have."

The possibility of attending, however, seemed closed to her until Congress voted in 1975, fol-

lowed by President Gerald Ford's signature, to allow women to attend the service academies. It was her mother who informed Gen. Helms of the change in law.

"Are you still interested?" her mother asked.

The answer never wavered.

"Well, yes, of course I am," Gen. Helms responded.

Her parents immediately became partners in the effort. Her father put her on a physical fitness program. Together, they worked through the nomination process. Ultimately, U.S. Sen. Mark Hatfield of Oregon nominated her, and Gen. Helms earned an appointment to the Academy's historic first class to admit women.

"People, of course, remember the negatives," she says of being a member of the first coeducational class. "But if I think about it hard, I'm willing to place money that there were way more positively supportive people around me than negative."

THE NORTH STAR

Gen. Helms arrived in Colorado Springs in 1976 for an education.

She says leadership was not what brought her to the Academy.

"At the time, I didn't think of myself as a leader," she explains.

"I went to the Academy for the education part of it. I wanted to become an engineer, and I wanted to have an Air Force career."

That changed almost immediately.

Basic cadet training exposed her to something she had not fully appreciated from the outside: Leadership was woven into every aspect of Academy life.

"It's cadets leading cadets," she says. "You learn very quickly



that it's not just about academics, athletics and the Honor Code. It was all part and parcel of what it meant to become an officer."

Watching fellow cadets take responsibility for others transformed her understanding of officership. Looking back, she sees the Academy as the place where her leadership journey truly began.

The institution also gave her something even more enduring than leadership techniques — it gave her a moral compass.

"The Honor Code and integrity really were things that I fell back on during tough times," Gen. Helms says. "If you could fall back on your character and integrity, that was the North Star. That actually was something you could lean on throughout your entire career, and the Academy instilled that at a very early age."

By the time Gen. Helms graduated in 1980 with a degree in aeronautical engineering, she was eager to leave school behind and begin her Air Force career.

"I remember thinking I was done with being in school," she says. "I was ready to really start giving back to the Air Force with my training."

At Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, she began her career as a test engineer, working F-15 and F-16 weapon-separation programs at the heart of aircraft weapon-system development.

The experience validated everything she had hoped military service would be.

"The Air Force was everything I was expecting it to be," Gen. Helms says. "It was a great way of life."

HIGHER AND HIGHER

Gen. Helms' career path quickly became anything but conventional.

The Air Force sent her to Stanford University, where she earned a master's degree in aeronautics and astronautics. She returned to the Academy as an instructor and then attended Air Force Test Pilot School as a flight test engineer.

After graduation, she accepted an exchange assignment with the Royal Canadian Air Force, flying flight test missions in CF-18s and CF-5s.

Then she took a chance.

"I thought it would be kind of cool to apply for the astronaut program," she says.

NASA agreed and, in 1990, Gen. Helms was selected as part of Group 13.

Group 13 included seven Air Force astronauts, a Navy astronaut, three Army astronauts, a Marine and 11 civilians, several of whom were former military officers.

"We got there in the golden age of the Space Shuttle — effectively 1990 to 2000ish," she says. "And by Golden Age, I mean the Space Shuttle was flying a lot. ... I'm going to say, probably six to

eight flights a year, and every flight carried five to seven astronauts. Given that the astronaut corps had about 100 people, the spaceflight opportunities were fairly abundant."

In January 1993, she launched aboard Space Shuttle Endeavour, becoming the first U.S. military woman to fly in space. Four more missions followed over the next eight years. She deployed satellites, conducted scientific research, supported development of the International Space Station and helped advance NASA's understanding of how humans could live and work in space for extended periods.

Yet none of those missions compared to Expedition 2.

Unlike shuttle flights, which generally lasted one to two weeks, Expedition 2 kept Gen. Helms in orbit for nearly six months.

"The space station training program involved going to and from Star City outside of Moscow, Russia, and learning the Russian language, working with the Russian instructors," she says. "We have NASA instructors in Houston; they have Russian instructors doing exactly the same thing in Star City. I got assigned to a space station crew with another American, but also with a Russian cosmonaut, and had a lot of opportunity to be embedded in the Russian culture of the day. That was re



Cadet Helms shows her mother around the Academy, including the base of the original Bring Me Men ramp.

ally interesting because it was pretty much right after the fall of the Soviet Union, and we were able to observe up close how Russia's space program was adapting to a new political paradigm."

The space station mission felt entirely unlike her shuttle flights, she says.

"There was something psychologically different about that experience," she says. "Living on a space outpost felt like you were living in a different ZIP code than Earth."

The experience reinforced her belief that the mission transcends language barriers and cultural differences.

"If you're operators, your language is the same," she says. "The cosmonauts and

the astronauts never really had any issues related to international incidents. We always just worried about making the mission happen together."

Living in orbit for months also changed the way she saw Earth itself.

Astronauts often speak of the "overview effect," the realization that human-made delineations disappear when viewed from space. Gen. Helms experienced that firsthand.

"You can't see the borders of countries," she says. "What you see is water. You see weather. You see land."

What struck her most was the thinness of Earth's atmosphere.

"It looks like the skin on an apple," she

says. "Much more fragile than I think one would expect."

The experience strengthened her appreciation for the planet and helped shape her belief that more people should experience spaceflight.

"That's why I'm a big advocate of space tourism," she says. "The more people that get up there and get a chance to see with their own two eyes what Earth looks like from that vantage point, the more they can appreciate Earth and its potential fragility."

RETURNING HOME

Despite her NASA accomplishments, Gen. Helms never lost sight of where she ultimately belonged.

"The Air Force was my identity," she says. "For some people, becoming an astronaut was their identity. For me, the Air Force was my identity."

By August 2001, Gen. Helms had spent 211 days in space and completed a career that could easily have served as a professional capstone.

Then came Sept. 11.

"When I went to NASA, I knew that ultimately I would ask for an assignment to return back to the Air Force," she says. "The question was when, not if."

She began making calls and asking where she could best serve. The answer surprised her only slightly.

"They said, 'Come back to military space operations,'" she recalls. "Unlike most people, you've actually been a satellite."

Returning after 12 years at NASA was not easy. The Air Force had changed, and Gen. Helms was reentering large-scale leadership roles after spending years in specialized astronaut assignments.

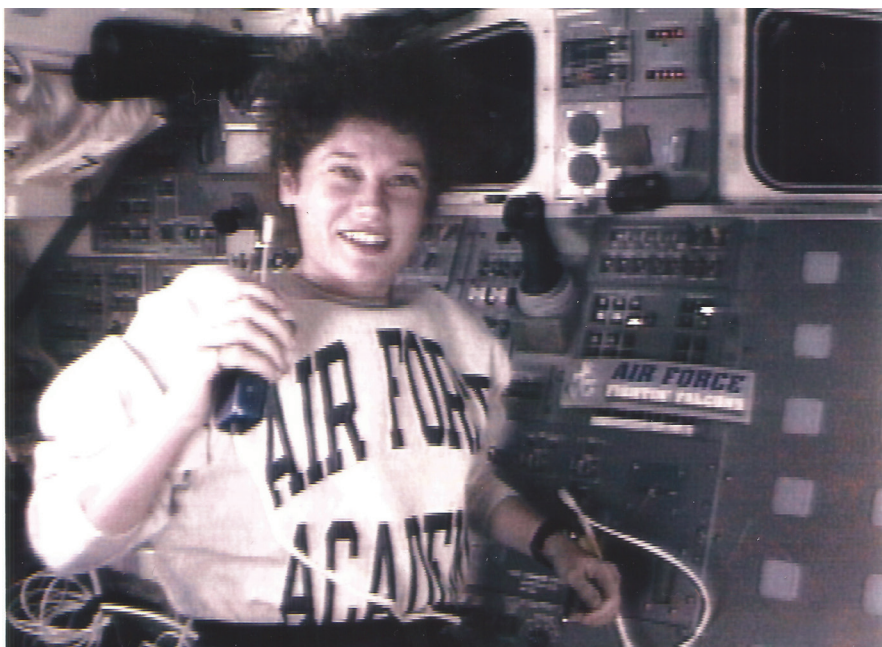
But the Long Blue Line was waiting.

"Classmates came out of the woodwork and said, 'Hey, Susan, if you need help, we're here to help you reintegrate back into the Air Force,'" she says.

The support reminded her that Academy connections endure long after graduation.

One of her greatest leadership challenges came during that transition.

For much of her career, she had worked as an engineer, flight test engineer and astronaut, positions that emphasized technical expertise more than organizational leadership.



Above: Gen. Helms participates in a press conference from the flight deck of the Space Shuttle. She borrowed the sweatshirt from an on-board crewmate, who also graduated from the Academy.



Left: Because Gen. Helms was part of a crew that had a Russian mission for International Space Station Expedition 2, she was photographed in a Russian Soyuz spacesuit.

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“I was not a supervisor for a number of years,” she says. “So I really had a delayed opportunity to exercise leadership.”

That changed when she returned as a colonel to Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado, and assumed responsibility for leading military space operators.

Suddenly, she had large organizations,

toolbox to address the situation, because I need to step up and be the leader that the people around me require.”

In the following years, she commanded the 45th Space Wing at Patrick Air Force Base, Florida, before assuming command of 14th Air Force and Joint Functional Component Command for Space.

significant responsibilities and people depending on her decisions.

“The Academy experience kind of comes back right away,” she says. “It’s like riding a bicycle; you can fall back on the things you learn here at the Air Force Academy, in this leadership lab, and go, ‘OK, I know this. I have the tools in my

In those positions, she led more than 20,500 airmen responsible for missile warning, satellite operations, launch activities, space superiority and combat support around the globe.

Her leadership philosophy remained simple.

“Stay focused on your mission. Stay focused on your people. Stay focused on your integrity and character,” she says.

Those principles, she believes, remain timeless regardless of technological changes.

‘GOOD ENOUGH FOR ME’

Recognition has never been Gen. Helms’ motivation.

Ask what accomplishment makes her proudest, and she does not mention spaceflight, command or promotion.

Instead, she talks about people.

“Every once in a while, I get a note or an email from someone I worked with,” she says. “If I’ve made an impact in someone’s life, left an impression that was positive, gave them a tidbit that helps them in their leadership journey, left a breadcrumb that was an inspiration to them, that’s good enough for me.”

That perspective helps explain why being named a Distinguished Graduate feels especially meaningful.

“I know the shoes of the people I’m stepping in,” Gen. Helms says. “I’ve been watching Distinguished Graduates for many, many years, and I’ve been humbled by the things that they have done.”

When asked what it means to be part of the Long Blue Line, she pauses for a moment.

“My life, when I think about the things that make me happy, it is doing works of service,” she says. “Being a member of the Long Blue Line is ultimately the epitome of a work of service.”

Fifty years after arriving as part of the first class to admit women, Gen. Helms still views her life through the lens of service. It is a sentiment that traces back to the dinner table where she first heard about the Academy and to the father who convinced her that service in the Air Force was a calling worth pursuing.

Gen. Helms has come closer than most to reaching the stars but, since graduat



Gen. Helms arrives at the Kennedy Space Center in a T-38 for a dress rehearsal about three weeks before launch.

ing from the Academy in 1980, the North Star has remained her beacon — steering her toward a lifetime of character, integrity and service. The lifelong impact of the Academy experience awaits future USAFA graduates, she says.

“Thanks to the Long Blue Line, they’re going to be even better at this than we were.” 

Scan the QR code to watch
Lt. Gen. Susan Helms’
Checkpoints video



Top: Cadet Dan Adams '80, Capt. John Buxton, instructor, and Cadet Susan Helms stage a publicity photo highlighting the Department of Aeronautics at the Air Force Academy. Right: The members of the International Space Station Expedition 2 crew — Gen. Helms, Commander Yuri Usachev and Army Col. Jim Voss — a few weeks before launch.