

The Stories That Bind Us

By Lt. Col. (Ret.) Cathy Almand '90, Association of Graduates Board Chair



There are moments at the U.S. Air Force Academy that stay with you. The last weekend in July gave us several.

Some 250 graduates joined the Class of 2030 for March Back from Jacks Valley, walking the final miles of basic cadet training alongside the newest class in the Long Blue Line. This tradition says, better than any speech could, that you belong to something that carries you for the rest of your life.

That night, graduates from every decade gathered at Hotel Polaris to celebrate the newest class of Distinguished Graduate, Leadership Achievement and Young Alumni Excellence Award honorees. At dinner, I sat next to Col. (Ret.) Max Miller '59. Our emcee was 2nd Lt. Kobe Achu '26, commissioned weeks earlier. Sixty-seven years of the Long Blue Line in one room, telling one story.

DISTINGUISHED GRADUATES

We welcomed three extraordinary graduates into the Distinguished Graduate ranks.

Mr. Worth W. "Bill" Boisture Jr. '67 flew 230 combat missions in the F-4 Phantom over Vietnam, earned three Distinguished Flying Crosses, and spent four decades leading Gulfstream, NetJets and Hawker Beechcraft while mentoring countless cadets as a Falcon Foundation trustee and serving in the early 2000s on the Association of Graduates board of directors.

Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Susan J. Helms '80 became the first U.S. military woman in space. Across five spaceflights, she logged 211 days in orbit and a then-record spacewalk of nearly nine hours. She went on to command the 45th Space Wing and 14th Air Force, and today chairs NASA's Aerospace Safety Advisory Panel.

Gen. (Ret.) Tod D. Wolters '82 capped a 40-year career as NATO Supreme Allied

Commander Europe and commander of U.S. European Command, leading more than a million allied personnel. He was a three-year football letterman and went on to log over 5,000 tactical flying hours in the F-15C, F-22 and more.

Three graduates. Three very different paths. One common thread: lifetimes of contribution to the nation, our Academy and their communities.

LEADERSHIP ACHIEVEMENT AND YOUNG ALUMNI EXCELLENCE

At the Long Blue Line Awards celebration, we honored our newest Leadership Achievement Award recipients: **Lt. Col. (Ret.) Kimberly Ford '90, Col. (Ret.) Shane Hamilton '92 and Lt. Col. (Ret.) Nora Rule '02.**

Col. Ford, a combat aviator with more than 11,000 flight hours and a tireless champion of aviation heritage, is a classmate, and I'll admit to much Mighty '90 pride! Col. Hamilton spent 35 years shaping Air Force intelligence, from authoring the service's first remotely piloted aircraft strategy to briefing government leaders. Col. Rule helped redefine how the U.S. military represents sexual assault survivors as a foundational leader of the Victims' Counsel Program.

We also celebrated Young Alumni Excellence Award recipients **Maj. (Ret.) Andrew Van Timmeren '10, Lt. Col. Jeffrey Allen '11, Lt. Col. Carmilya Jones '11 and Mr. Sam Eckholm '18.** These four remind us that the Long Blue Line isn't just heritage — it's momentum.

SULLENBERGER AWARD FOR COURAGE

Finally, I want to recognize Silver Star recipient **Lt. Col. William "Skate" Parks '07**, who we honored with the Sullenberger Award for Courage for his actions during

one extraordinary night of combat over the Middle East. His story, told in the March 2026 issue of *Checkpoints*, is worth your time. What strikes me most is how Col. Parks responds to the recognition: by redirecting the spotlight to his wingman and to those who will follow. That instinct, more than any medal, is what the Academy builds in its graduates.

THE LONG BLUE LINE

These notable graduates are profiled in the pages to follow. They were nominated by fellow graduates, evaluated by committees of graduates and approved by your AOG board of directors. Every honoree humbly shared that they didn't get there by themselves. In that light, these awards tell the story of the Long Blue Line.

So, I have an ask. Look around your class, your squadron, your community. Who merits recognition? If someone comes to mind, I invite you to nominate them for an award. Nominations for the next cycle are open, and you can learn more at usafa.org/awards.

The Long Blue Line spans nearly 55,000 living graduates. That's never been clearer to me than on a July evening at Hotel Polaris, where a room full of graduates young and old, after honoring our award recipients, stood and loudly sang the Air Force and Space Force songs — one nearly as old as airpower itself, the other written for a service that didn't exist when most of us threw our hats into the air. The Line we joined keeps growing. Our experiences may differ, but our values don't.

I'm proud to stand with you. 

Sincerely,

Lt. Col. (Ret.) Cathy Almand '90