

From firsts to futures — and what we owe the next generation

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



I've attended a lot of events at our U.S. Air Force Academy over the years — reunions, football games, graduations, groundbreaking, dedications, board meetings, retirement ceremonies and more. But the events commemorating 50 years of women at USAFA, held April 23-26 in Colorado Springs, were something different — something I didn't fully have words for until I was somewhere over Texas on the flight home. Let me try now.

Walking into Doolittle Hall on April 23, I was immediately struck by what I saw in our alumni center: women from every era of USAFA's rich history filling the assembly area in a way I simply never experienced as a cadet. I graduated in a wing that admitted only 18 percent women — a number that felt perfectly normal until a weekend like this reframes it. Seeing so many classmates, so many members of the classes that came before and after mine, and so many faces I didn't yet know reminded me of how much this graduate community has grown — and how much it has to offer when we combine our efforts.

I spotted about 20 of my Mighty '90 classmates, which alone would have made the trip worthwhile. But I didn't anticipate I'd reconnect with my T-38 instructor pilot, Dr. Kathy (Garrity) Hughes '88. If you've flown, you know what an IP means to you: part instructor, part standard-bearer, part motivational coach. Seeing her again reminded me of how long these connecting threads run, and how much they still matter all these years later.

The conference breakout sessions at Hotel Polaris were world-class. I sat in

rooms with generals and astronauts, a former Miss America, a pioneering fighter pilot, an amputee who returned to the cockpit, entrepreneurs and even an American Gladiator. Each one of these remarkable graduates carried herself with a combination of substance and ease that I found myself quietly trying to absorb. I can only hope a little of it rubbed off.

I also spent time with cadets from all four classes and heard about what they're working on and thinking and dreaming about. Conversations with cadets are always clarifying. They cut through everything else, underscore the values that unite all of us — integrity, service and excellence — and remind me of why our institution matters.

But what stays with me most is harder to put words to or quantify. It's the spirit of the weekend — a genuine, unselfconscious lifting-up of one another across five decades, across rank and across career paths. Women who had never met treated each other like they'd been in the same squadron. There was a shared fluency built on shared experience, though separated by time.

I'll be honest: I can't wait for the next cross-class celebration. Whatever form it takes, I hope it captures even a fraction of what this one did. In the pages to follow, you'll find a photo essay featuring memorable moments from the weekend. This issue also includes wonderful reflections from cadets on what our nation's 250th birthday means to them [see p. 86]. Please check it all out.

Before I sign off, I want to thank the 8,963 graduates who participated in our 2026 survey conducted in March. The

survey's 20% participation rate may seem low but that's actually quite good for surveys of this type. For comparison, the 2022 survey had a 17% participation rate.

Overall, the survey results indicate that graduates continue to have strong connection to and pride in our Academy. We're proud of enduring a difficult and rigorous 47-month program, USAFA's academic and military excellence, our military service, what it means to live according to our Honor Code, and the Long Blue Line. Our pride isn't simply based in nostalgia; it's rooted in how the Academy shaped each of us.

Yet the survey results indicate that these difficult times have affected pride for some of us. It's important that we as the Long Blue Line focus on all that brings us together, starting with our willingness to take the hard path and come to the Academy to begin our service to the nation. That commitment to service is in each of our hearts, and we saw and felt it yet again when the Class of 2026 graduated and commissioned last month.

In the months to come, your Association will share the results of the survey on our website. Meantime, thank you to all who made their voices heard.

I wish you a safe, enjoyable summer as we celebrate our great nation's 250th birthday. 🇺🇸

Sincerely,

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