

ASSOCIATION OF GRADUATES 
BUILDING A *Better* ACADEMY



2010— A Retrospective; 2011—Opportunity

BY WILLIAM "T" THOMPSON, '73, PRESIDENT AND CEO

I had the true pleasure of going down to San Antonio, TX last month to attend a Change of Command and retirement ceremony for my classmate and friend, Steve Lorenz. Steve served as Commander of Air Education and Training Command (AETC) and devoted 37 years of service to our great country. He has been a strong supporter of the AOG and it felt good to support him at this transition point in his life. AETC will be in good hands as another grad, Ed Rice '79, steps forward to take the Command to even greater heights.

As several of my classmates and I enjoyed the revelry at Randolph AFB, one of them opined that the AOG was moving in the right direction and for the first time in awhile he was feeling good about the Association. I told him it was the result of strong leadership from a committed graduate Board of Directors and the efforts of a talented and dedicated staff. Indeed, we have improved over the past twelve months and as we come to the end of another year, it's natural to reflect on some of the progress we have made.

We began the year having recently signed the agreement with the USAFA Endowment. After years of confusion, misunderstandings, and quite frankly strong disagreements among some of our graduates, we were able to begin to move forward in a collaborative effort for the benefit of the Academy and the graduate community. Over the past year, we have "moved the ball down the field" to use a football analogy and have made some good "first downs." One of the strongest confirmations of this positive movement was the funding and ground breaking for the Holaday

Athletic Center. Bart and Lynn Holaday stepped forward and made a \$5 million gift to assist in the construction of the indoor practice facility. Their contribution was the single largest gift to the Academy ever made by a graduate. The AOG assisted in this effort by providing both administrative support to the Endowment's fundraising efforts and with a \$5 million contribution received through the Moller Trust which earmarks its gift for the benefit of the Academy.

The AOG also instituted an aggressive Chapter Development Program this past spring. As a point of reference, West Point has over 120 Societies (their name for chapters) and Navy has over 100 chapters. In contrast, our AOG had 31 chapters when we rolled this initiative out in early April of 2010. Borrowing heavily from the best of the West Point and Annapolis programs (with their permission, I should add) we totally revamped our program to better meet AFA needs. We also devoted appropriate resources to the endeavor including hiring a '99 graduate, Stella Grayson, to drive the effort. The results have been extremely positive. Our goal was a 30% increase for the year which would have taken us to 40 chapters. As of this writing, we have reached 54 chapters, a 75% increase, and are in active discussions with 18 other graduate groups. This success demonstrates the great interest and outstanding support from our graduate community.

This past summer we also took on the tough problem of AOG membership. The West Point model is different from both ours and Navy's which is quite similar. Nonetheless, accounting for

the differences, we are still far behind both of our sister service academies in alumni participation. The membership rate at West Point is 100% and at Navy approaches 90%. Conversely, our membership rate was at 58% when we instituted some major changes to the program. We began by introducing a new “tiered” dues structure based on the number of years after graduation. We also put in place a different dues structure for married graduates. Finally we segmented the marketing message to the graduate community based on years after graduation. The results have been encouraging. We have picked up over 2,000 new members with about 15% of that total becoming life members. We have also seen a significant rise in the number of parents who are opting for affiliate membership. Finally, we have been able to reinstate the Life Membership At Graduation (LMAG) program for cadets, which will bode well for future membership participation. Since Navy instituted this program in 1980 they have enjoyed a 95% participation rate and, in recent years, a 99% participation rate of incoming midshipmen in the Naval Academy Alumni Association.

There have been numerous other indices of progress for the AOG over the past year, including a revision of our By-laws (see page 81), adoption of both Board Committee and Operations Strategic Plans, further expansion of the Heritage Trail with the dedication of the Southeast Asia Memorial Pavilion and the development of the Falcon Alliance/True Blue program, our local business outreach effort, just to mention a few. But we can't rest on our laurels. In truth, there is much more work to be done if we are to play on the same level as our service academy counterparts. While the challenges are significant, they also present tremendous opportunities to move our collective organizations to a new zenith in our growing history.

The relationship with the USAFA Endowment will need to be refined, strengthened and improved. Our agreement was a great first step and sorely needed. Yet it was only the beginning of a journey, not a destination. There are significant steps that can be taken to provide the Academy and the graduate community with a more cost effective and efficient enterprise. We must take these steps because our grads and donors deserve the very best we can offer. There is a Joint Coordinating Committee comprised of representatives from both organizations which is beginning to address these issues.

We'll need to continue to grow and strengthen our Chapter network. The grassroots infrastructure is one of the key components to providing connection, services and support to the graduate community while simultaneously providing graduate support for the institution we all love. To be honest, much of the “low hanging fruit” has been picked and I expect the growth to be more challenging going forward. Yet we have a great program in place and talented and motivated staff to lead the effort. I'm confident we'll continue to make steady progress.

Membership will be especially challenging. The importance of establishing a strong connection to the Academy, and with fellow graduates, through membership in the alumni association has not been a part of our culture as it is at the other military institutions around the country. I have mentioned the strong levels of support at Army and Navy but it also exists at schools such as the Citadel, VMI and Texas A & M, as well. Gary Howe, my second

in command here at the AOG, was talking with an A & M grad and asked whether she was a member of their alumni association. She said that she most definitely was and if she were not, would be embarrassed if her fellow alumni discovered that fact. I am from South Carolina, had a scholarship to the Citadel and can personally speak to the strong alumni network and support of Citadel graduates in the state. The truth of the matter is that it will be easier to shape the attitudes of our current and future cadets than it will be to change the attitudes of many of our older grads. This is why the LMAG program for the cadets will be an important part of our efforts going forward. Yet we will continue to make the case for membership to the graduates who are not members by ensuring a strong membership plan, using innovative marketing programs and, most importantly, continuing to build a strong and vibrant AOG. Our goal is to continue to make the Association an organization that all grads can be proud of and will want to join. This is a good segue to discuss the final issue I'll mention in this letter to you; our connection to the Academy and to each other as members of the Long Blue Line.

It is certainly true that we are the youngest of the service academies and the major military colleges across the country. Yet we have graduated 52 classes and our older grads are well into retirement. While longevity as an institution may be a factor as to why we are not as ‘connected’ as the other military institutions, in my view, it is not the determining factor. I believe the issue is one of focus and action. Simply stated, institutionally, we have never focused on the importance of cadet/graduate connection to the institution and each other or taken action in a systematic way to inculcate those values. Additionally, while this issue primarily evidences itself in the graduate community, it is a problem that cannot be solved by the AOG alone. Both the Air Force and the Academy have important roles to play.

Earlier this year, I penned a paper I call “The Connection Project” and sent it to both the Superintendent and the Air Force Chief of Staff. In the piece I outlined some of the issues affecting loyalty and connection to the Academy that I have noticed and experienced during my tenure as AOG President and CEO. Additionally, I offered a suggested approach to begin to address those issues. Let me pause and emphasize two points; first, I was clear that this was just “T” Thompson's opinion from where I sit and based on the information available to me. Second, I acknowledged that my suggested approach was certainly one of many, and at the least might serve as a starting point for further discussion. I believe it fair to say that the paper was generally well received. I'll also note and thank both the Chief and the Superintendent for taking immediate steps to address some issues that were raised. The Chief has also agreed that the piece should get wide distribution among our graduate community. You can go to the following link on the AOG web site to read the piece (connection.usafa.org).

In summary, it has been a productive year for your AOG and we are making progress on a number of fronts. Yet great opportunities lie ahead disguised as challenges. We will meet those challenges because as General George S. Patton stated; “Accept challenges, so that you may feel the exhilaration of victory.”

I wish you and your families a happy, joyous and safe holiday season. ▣