

# From the Commandant

Brigadier General Samuel D. Cox, '84

**O**ne year after the first class entered the Air Force Academy, my father enlisted in the Air Force. He went on to serve for thirty years—fifteen years enlisted, rising to the rank of MSgt., and then commissioned through the bootstrap program. In 1980, my parents dropped me off at the Air Force Academy and then watched as my class threw our hats in the air on 30 May, 1984. On that day, if asked about returning to USAFA, I probably would have said, “not likely,” or maybe even used stronger words. My entire life had been spent in the military as a dependent or cadet and I was ready to just get on with pilot training and the lofty rank of 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant. At that time, I certainly had no intentions of returning to USAFA and it was several years later that I began to think about returning to the Academy. Like many graduates, it took some time before I fully appreciated the Academy and how the experience provided a foundation for more than an Air Force career. My time in the Air Force has been exciting and rewarding and, now through good fortune, I find myself looking through a lens that was not planned or quite frankly ever imagined. I'd like to share my initial observations—what I see as different.

In my short time in the Commandant's chair, one constant is the reaction from graduates who return to USAFA for visits. A significant number comment on the differences between when they were a cadet and the USAFA environment today. Of course it was much harder “back in the day” than it is now, right? As an '84 graduate, I find myself conveniently placed in the middle of this debate figuratively and literally. My class finished 25 years after the class of '59 and now we'll have another 25 years between the next graduating class of '09. All of us have stories of our USAFA experience. The early years of marching every day, three times per day, and six days of academics to today's somewhat lesser marching and more individual freedoms. My USAFA experience is somewhere



in the middle, a bit more marching, slightly less personal freedom than today. There are plenty of other differences—handwritten papers to typed papers to electrons; no phones to pay phones to cell phones; posted messages to e-mail to text messaging; tile floors to carpet; marching tours to no tours to marching tours again. There are many more differences and changes that have shaped our Academy since the class of '59 began the Long Blue Line.

So, did we have it harder than today's cadets? That's a very complex question to answer. Cadets today are inundated with information. Multi-tasking for these young men and women is simply a part of life. Now, cadets have e-mail, chatting and texting to help them stay connected to family and friends, but that also means filtering through and answering electrons. The days of a weekly phone call and routine letters are a thing of the past. Does that make it easier? I believe it simply adds another dimension to the time management equation and, indeed, makes it very different.

At graduation each year, our new 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenants launch into potentially different operational environments. For my class, we started our careers in the middle of the Cold War with manpower at nearly double the size of today's force. With a heavy focus on training and moderate operations tempo, the life of an Air Force lieutenant was pretty darn good. Today's graduates will face a different world, a post 9/11

environment with very high operational tempo, emergence and importance of Unmanned Aerial Systems, reshaping of the force, and many uncertainties. Today's graduate must possess the leadership, training, character and intellect to meet the challenges of a dynamic environment where service in support of the Combatant Commander is the norm. Again, it is very different.

While there are many differences, I don't think it is important to compare one class to another in terms of difficulty. It will always be slightly different, not necessarily easier or harder, just different. I am very pleased with what is going on at USAFA. Today's cadets are civic-minded with an incredible record of community service (over 43,000 hours last year). They are setting new standards for physical fitness with some of the highest marks in more than a decade. They represented all of us magnificently in the Inaugural Parade. The list of good things could fill this issue of *Checkpoints*.

In the end, the ultimate objective remains the same—producing officers of character who are ready to lead. My goals as Commandant align with that objective and are pretty simple. First, provide stability for the cadets with no major changes in military training and discipline systems. Second, foster an environment for building esprit de corps and an appreciation of USAFA while the cadets are here, with a focus on pride in the institution, squadrons, intercollegiate teams, clubs and, of course, in themselves. Finally, build on the concept of doing the mission, and at the same time have fun in appropriate ways during their 4 years at USAFA. Cadets can be held to high standards and still enjoy the overall Academy experience. The focus is pretty clear: stability, mission, pride and fun. I know the time will fly by, so every day is a blessing to be at your Air Force Academy. Our cadets are an incredible group to work with and I'm extremely proud to serve as their Commandant. ✓

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