



The Class of 1973

-IT'S TIME



BY STEVEN A. SIMON, '77

The motto of the recently graduated Class of 2009 was simple and straightforward: “Our Time.” June 2009 is indeed their time. Class members have completed their arduous four years of Academy training and eagerly begin their careers of service to the nation. The Class of 2009, however, must share its time with a couple of other notable classes. The Class of 1959 recently concluded its fifty-year reunion, the first in Academy

history. That class’ trailblazing role will forever be celebrated (See coverage of ’59 on page 24). Class of 1973 graduates can also proudly proclaim that this is “Our time.” Whether through hard work, timing, and/or events beyond their control, many members of the Class of 1973 find themselves front and center these days.

Later this month, the Class of 1973 will assume its role as the 40-year Legacy Class of the newest crop of future officers, the

Any examination of a class such as this one is fraught with danger. First, despite all disclaimers, there may be a perception that it is an endorsement, some declaration that the class is “better” than other classes. There are no objective criteria for determining relative greatness, so that exercise would be futile. Every one of the Air Force Academy’s graduating classes has contributed and continues to contribute to the Academy’s sterling legacy of excellence. Each class (actually every member therein) contributes in its own way, based on the time in history and the personalities and expertise of its members. Every class is the Academy’s first/last/only/ best class in Academy history—in something. In my opinion, there is a 51-way tie for first place in the “Greatest Class” race. Second, a piece such as this must of necessity select a few representative individuals to highlight. This creates the problem of determining who to include, and almost without fail leaving off graduates who are equally worthy of mention. Again, how to choose? Who to include and who to exclude? Where to make the cut? In this piece, I’ve done my best to describe the Class of 1973 and some of its most notable members without taking anything away from other classes or individuals.

Class of 2013. As such, ’73 will participate in milestone events in ’13’s officer development, to include Acceptance, Commitment, and Graduation. Like the Legacy Classes before them, the Class of ’73 will have plenty of first-hand tales of “glory” to impart. The Class also has a wide variety of active duty senior officers to represent it. In fact, the Class has unprecedented representation at the top of the Air Force’s uniformed leadership hierarchy. As of this writing, members of the Class of 1973 occupy a host of senior leadership positions. General Norton A. Schwartz, who serves as Chief of Staff, is of course responsible for the entire service. Serving under him are ’73 grads responsible for most of the Air Force’s major war-fighting resources and capabilities. As Commander, Air Combat Command, General John D. W. Corley is in charge of conventional war assets. Nominated to be commander of the newly stood up Air Force Global Strike Command, Lieutenant General Frank G. Klotz (a Rhodes Scholar), will oversee nuclear capable bombers and intercontinental ballistic missiles. Meanwhile, Lieutenant General Donald C. Wurster, Commander, Air Force Special Operations Command, directs all Air Force unconventional assets. Providing the education and training needed to operate these conventional, nuclear, and unconventional assets is General Stephen R. Lorenz, Commander, Air Education and Training Command. Lieutenant General John L. Hudson commands a large portion of the Air Force’s research and development operation as Commander, Aeronautical Systems Center. In addition: Major General Michael Edwards is the Adjutant General of Colorado, overseeing all Air Force and Army Guard resources; and Major General Dan O’Hollaren serves as the Air National Guard Assistant to the Commander, Air Force Materiel Command.

Another Air Force leader from the Class of 1973, Lieutenant General John F. Regni, has served as the USAFA Superintendent since October 2005. During much of his tenure as the Academy’s 17th Superintendent, General Regni was assisted by two other ’73 grads as senior members of his staff: then-Colonel William “Trapper” Carpenter as Director of Admissions (now retired and serving as

Associate Athletic Director-Recruiting Support); and retired Colonel Johnny Whitaker as the Academy’s first Director of Communications.

Down the hill from the Cadet Area, the story is the same—’73 is leading the way. William “T” Thompson is the AOG’s President and Chief Executive Officer. As the first non Air Force retiree to hold the position, he brings a varied background to the organization. He is an award-winning entrepreneur featured in the Wall Street Journal. “T” is also a retired Delta Air Lines captain, tax attorney, community leader, and public speaker. Additionally, he served for 17 years as Commissioner of the Massachusetts Aeronautics Commission, serving three governors in both Democratic and Republican administrations.

Speculation runs rampant on why this class has so many of its members in leadership positions, particularly within the Air Force. After extensive research and contemplation, I think the best explanation is that there is no explanation. While taking nothing from the individuals who have assumed these leadership positions, Class President Bob Munson attributes it largely to timing. “It could be that our class is different, or there was some inspiration that gave us an extra push. However, I’m more convinced that our class had a good number of GOs [General Officers] simply because our class had the luck of timing. If you graph out the number of GOs per grad class you will see there are periodic peaks at about five-year intervals. It seems that clusters of GOs in one class seem to block promotion opportunity for ‘downstream’ year groups. While those in the ’68 year group achieved one star, then two star, and so on billets, they blocked the ’69-’72 promotion opportunity. As the officers from ’69-’72 classes got blocked they had to retire ... that’s the way our service works. When those senior officers retired they created more opportunity for ’73 grads that didn’t exist for ’69-’72.”

Statistics do seem to bear out Munson’s hypothesis of peaks and valleys. The Class of ’68 had four four-star generals, the largest number thus far among USAFA graduating classes. The four classes that followed had a combined total of two four-stars. After that valley, ’73 and ’74 each have three classmates who have



From top, left: Gen. John Corley, Gen. Norton Schwartz, Gen. Stephen Lorenz, Lt. Gen. John Regni, Capt. Chesley Sullenberger, William 'T' Thompson, Lt. Gen. Donald Wurster, Lt. Gen. Frank Klotz, Lt. Gen. John Hudson



risen to four-star rank—so far. The Class of 1973 does hold the record for most grads who have attained three- or four-star rank, with 11. The next closest class is '64 with eight. And in keeping with Munson's cycle argument, the Class of '78 stands poised to eclipse all General Officer numerical records. They have by far the most General Officers, with 44, far ahead of second place '64 with 31. The smaller early classes will quite correctly turn the argument to per capita comparisons, but that is a discussion topic for another day. And, of course, raw numbers only tell a small portion of the story. (All statistics provided by the Academy Plans and Programs office.)

Scott Mills agrees with his classmate Munson's assessment that it is fruitless to try to explain the numbers, adding, "I wish I could enlighten with possible reasons such as the Vietnam era, our high class attrition rate, the Academy leadership during our tenure, the upper class that trained us, the dynamics of staying in one squadron all four years ... but to be honest, I just don't believe that any one or combination of these factors can be used as rationale or basis for a particular class' success. More likely, it is serendipity and luck based upon a particular pool of graduates who had the

same Academy training and experience that all grads have been exposed to regardless of what year they graduated."

As Mills alludes, The Class entered USAFA in tense times. The turmoil of the 60s and the Vietnam War made a military career decidedly unpopular. The specter of having to fly and fight in the deadly skies of Southeast Asia hung over the Class. Don Rightmyer, '73, recounts how, "... there were often announcements made from the (Mitchell Hall) Staff Tower during meals concerning things that had happened to USAFA graduates during the Vietnam War. 'The Association of Graduates regrets to inform you that Captain _____, Class of _____, was killed in action while flying a combat mission in Vietnam/Thailand, etc. ...'" Their friends

back home were receiving draft notices. As it turned out, however, the War essentially ended while they were cadets and Vietnam played almost no role in the careers of '73 grads. The wartime class had almost no wartime experience. As Munson says, "'73 served in a generation of relative peace; not many of us got combat time and when we did we were senior: O-4s, O-5s, and O-6s. You'll have a tough time finding war heroes in '73 ... we didn't have that opportunity. We don't have Medal of Honor winners, Silver Star winners, etc. ... heck, very few of us have air medals."

Which is not to say that the Class of '73 is totally devoid of war heroes. Munson reports that, "One of the first (maybe the first) combat aircraft to cross into Iraq at the start of Desert Storm was piloted

by Lt. Col. Rich Comer (later two star) who let in the attack helicopters that took out the Iraqi radars.” Arguably the most inspirational story to come out of post-9/11 America is that of Army Staff Sergeant Rowe Stayton, Class of ’73. Sgt. Stayton graduated number two in his Class’ Military Order of Merit. After flying F-15s, he left the Air Force in 1981 to attend law school, but continued to serve in the Iowa Air National Guard until 1988. In response to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, he enlisted in the Army National Guard as an infantry soldier, and has served two tours in Iraq as a squad leader. Stayton’s patriotic military service, along with that of General Schwartz, would seem to give the Class of ’73 the distinction of being the class with the widest breadth of rank, ranging from staff sergeant to four-star service chief of staff.

Class of 1973 contributions are by no means limited to military service. Among the notables who have made a mark in the “civilian” world are: retired Major General John Barry, Superintendent of the Aurora (Colorado) Public School District; philanthropist John Muse, Chairman of HM Capital, a private equity firm that specializes in leveraged buyouts; Monsignor Steve Rossetti, a priest, psychologist and author nationally known for his work with troubled priests; and Kirk Samelson, Chief Judge for the Fourth Judicial District in Colorado.

One “civilian” case particularly comes to mind. To go from total anonymity to the most celebrated person on the planet in six minutes must be disorienting and overwhelming, but that is exactly what happened to Chesley B. “Sully” Sullenberger III on January 15, 2009. As you would imagine from an Air Force Academy graduate, Sully has handled the pressure and subsequent media attention with grace and humility. The story is well-known by now, but here are the basic details: US Airways Flight 1549 had just taken off from New York’s LaGuardia Airport, bound for Charlotte, North Carolina, when bird strikes took out both of the Airbus 320’s engines. After considering options of returning to LaGuardia or continuing on to an alternate landing site such as nearby Teterboro Airport in New Jersey, Captain Sullenberger quickly determined that the aircraft lacked the altitude to land

safely in a heavily populated area. Instead, he decided to ditch in the icy Hudson River. Clearing the George Washington Bridge by less than 900 feet, Sullenberger instructed the passengers to “Brace for impact” and landed the stricken craft on the river. The aircraft began to take on water and Sullenberger and the crew oversaw the orderly departure of the 150 passengers. After ensuring everyone had escaped, Sullenberger was the last person to leave his plane. (For additional details, see the cover story in the March 2009 issue of *Checkpoints*.)

Among the many awards Sullenberger has captured is the James Jabara Award for Airmanship, presented annually by the Academy to a graduate whose actions directly associated with an aerospace vehicle set him/her apart from contemporaries.

Captain Sullenberger is the third ’73 grad to win the Jabara Award—only the Class of ’64 has won more. In 1981, Captain William Gillin received the Jabara “for distinguished airmanship as pilot of an HH-3E helicopter during missions to rescue survivors from the burning Dutch ocean liner *Prinsendam* in waters off Alaska.” Just after midnight on October 4, 1980, fire broke out in the engine room. Captain Gillin played a key role in what author Josh Eppinger, writing in *Popular Mechanics* magazine, called “the most successful large-scale peacetime sea rescue in history.” After the 18-hour operation, all 324 passengers and 200 crew members were rescued. As with US Airways 1549, there were no fatalities or even serious injuries. The *Prinsendam* sank in 8,820 feet of water one week later. Five years after Gillin won the Jabara, his classmate, Major Larry Faber joined him in this exclusive club. Faber received the Jabara for “his heroic actions in February 1985 which resulted in saving a valuable aircraft and his own life.” Major Faber was flying the single-seat high-altitude TR-1 on an eight-hour Creek Spectre mission when the engine RPM began to unwind. With his dexterity greatly impaired by his fully-inflated pressure suit brought about by the loss of cabin pressure, he was able to navigate the damaged aircraft toward Ramstein Air Base, Germany. After 30 minutes of unpowered flight at maximum glide airspeed, he found the airfield, manually lowered the gear, and executed a flame-out approach. This task was complicated by poor visibility and the heavy fuel weight of the aircraft, requiring

a steeper than normal pattern. Despite all of these complications, Major Faber safely landed the aircraft.

The Class of ’73 also contributed in space, as Sid Gutierrez and Blaine Hammond served as astronauts, each getting two missions aboard the space shuttle. Gutierrez logged over 488 hours on STS-40 in 1991 and STS-59 in 1994. Hammond spent 462 hours in space as he flew on STS-39 in 1991 and STS-64 in 1994.

In addition to the exploits of various individuals, the Class excels as a whole. This is best evidenced by its role as Flagship Sponsor of the Academy’s annual capstone event, the National Character and Leadership Symposium. The NCLS, in which the AOG also plays a major sponsorship role, brings national leaders and students from around the country to discuss character. It provides cadets and Academy staff with a great opportunity to interact with leaders in the field of character and leadership, hear inspiring stories of those who demonstrate character (such as Sgt. Stayton, who spoke at the 2009 Symposium), and gain a deeper appreciation for the importance of character in everyday life. Retired Colonel Tom Berry, Class of ’71 and Deputy Director, Center for Character Development, says “The financial foundation provided by the Class of 1973 insures the continued success of NCLS. Equally as important as their financial support is their participation in the NCLS steering committee, their identification of guest speakers, and their efforts as volunteers in the execution of NCLS.”

Though the reasons may be unclear, the Air Force Academy Class of 1973 is undeniably experiencing its time in the spotlight. As the Classes of 1959 and 2009 celebrate significant milestones, members of the Class of ’73 have taken their place at the top of the Air Force leadership ranks and demonstrate excellence in many other areas of service. 🟩

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