

"On behalf of the USAFA Class of 1977, welcome to one of the finest educational institutions in the world and to what may be the most important four-year period in your life. That last part probably sounds a little dramatic to you, but from the perspective of looking back over the nearly 50 years since our own graduation, we think it rings true. The struggles, successes, failures, and most of all friendships you experience and form here will echo through your life as you move on to face the additional challenges of career, family and service.

As part of this welcome and introduction, our class wishes to offer you something that did not exist at the time we were handed these precious volumes of Air Force and Air Force Academy culture—the example and guidance of 68-year-old USAFA graduates. Virtually all of us were less worldly, less thoughtful, and less accomplished than you are now. But like you, we arrived at the Academy in the middle of enormous social change and political upheaval. Our nation faced tremendous domestic and foreign challenges, including an existential threat that was the focus of our professional military careers for almost two decades. You are better prepared than we were to meet those challenges, and this marvelous institution will refine and sharpen that preparation.

If you ask any of us what the most important aspect of our time here was, we would almost all say it was the people we met, and the resulting bonds we formed with each other. Two phrases from classical literature reflect the importance of the relationships that

form the backbone of the USAFA experience: "Iron sharpens iron and one man sharpens another," and "Know thyself."

You will have the opportunity to test your wits, endurance, strength, courage, and character against people who are just as talented, thoughtful and competent as you are. Take advantage of every opportunity to sharpen yourself, your ideas, and your worldview with your classmates. You will learn that you can rely on them, and that they will learn to rely on you. And you will learn more about yourself—your strengths your weaknesses, your limits—in that process than by doing anything else.

In writing this letter, the author is looking at his own copy of Contrails. It is battered and misshapen from days in his back pocket, where it resided throughout most of his fourth-class year. It

represents all of the things that you are likely feeling right now—trepidation, anxiety, doubt, and the rest. Every one of us who entered here 50 years ago felt exactly the same way in those opening days. Trust your talents, lean on your classmates, and (and this very important) keep your sense of humor. Trust us, 50 years later, almost all of this is going to be very funny.

Welcome to our Academy. Take a deep breath and make the next four years your best.

---The Class of 1977"

"Pride Rides"