

Legacy Class Speech, 4 July 2023

Steve Simon

Given to the Class of 2027 in the Arnold Hall Theater

(Start by showing the Lowry AFB Heritage Minute)

“The Long Blue Line.” This vitally important phrase refers to the selective “club” of Air Force Academy graduates, but we can also include cadets and basic cadets striving toward that goal.

The Long Blue Line is our heritage and our legacy. As the video states, it began on 11 July 1955, about an hour north of here at Lowry Air Force Base in Denver. Everything we are can be traced back to this beginning, when those 306 hardy individuals took the oath as members of the Academy’s first class.

In fact, the link between them and you, through my class – the Class of 1977, your Legacy Class – is direct. As you may be aware, the Association of Graduates – my employer – has established a mentor program whereby every class is linked to the class that was here 50 years before. And while it pains me to realize that I was in your chair exactly 50 years ago, the calendar insists that it is so.

Many members of my class were born in 1955, the year the Academy began. In my case, for example, I was exactly seven weeks – 49 days – old when the Academy admitted its first cadets. So, the Class of ‘77’s beginning dates exactly back to the Academy’s. And from there, with our Legacy Class connection, my classmates and I are your link to the inception of USAFA.

Good afternoon, Class of 2027! As Cadet Keyser said, I am Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Steve Simon, a proud member of said Class of 1977. I am the history and heritage officer at the AOG. As such, I write for our quarterly *Checkpoints* magazine, research and maintain a list of significant Academy dates and events, and write and narrate Heritage Minute videos like the one you just saw. Given my position and my passion, it gives me such great pleasure to welcome you to the Long Blue Line.

And one important point about the Long Blue Line – admission to it is All Earned, Nothing Given.

Regarding that Long Blue Line, you are sitting in a very historic place. The Long Blue Line welcomed its first graduates in this very room. Cadet Bradley C. Hosmer – who would go on to become the first graduate to serve as USAFA Superintendent – walked across this very stage, the first of 207 members of the Academy’s first class, the Class of 1959. Fun fact: theirs was the only indoor graduation in Academy history.

The 50,000th graduate, Farley Pipkins, received his diploma at Falcon Stadium in 2018, and since then nearly 5,000 more men and women have followed.

You can be proud of those who have gone before. The Long Blue Line boasts so many notable people. A few numbers and names:

188 graduates have made the ultimate sacrifice, giving their lives in combat-related activities. You can see their names etched into the black marble at the Graduate War Memorial on the Terrazzo, at the base of the flagpole. The first name on that wall is Captain Valmore Bourque, who also happened to be the first cadet to be sworn in when the Academy opened its doors.

We've had 37 Prisoners of War.

1 Medal of Honor recipient – Captain Lance Sijan, Class of '65, namesake of one of our two cadet dormitories.

Approximately 850 generals and admirals, including 45 four-star generals.

Five former Chiefs of Staff of the Air Force.

41 NASA astronauts, including the first American military woman in space, Susan Helms, Class of '80.

Two former members of Congress, and two more who are currently serving in the United States House of Representatives.

43 Rhodes Scholars.

The Miracle on the Hudson pilot – Captain Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger, Class of '73. I am pretty sure that Sully is the only USAFA grad ever portrayed by Tom Hanks.

A two-time Olympic gold medal sprinter – Alonzo Babers, Class of '83.

A five-time NBA champion coach – the San Antonio Spurs' Gregg Popovich, Class of '70.

Several pro athletes, including one three-time Super Bowl winner – Chad Hennings, Class of '88.

My class boasts two of those astronauts, Thomas Jones and Charles Precourt, each of whom completed four missions aboard the Space Shuttle. Both have been inducted into the Astronaut Hall of Fame.

My classmate, four-star General Raymond Johns, commanded Air Mobility Command.

In athletics, the all-time leading goal scorer in NCAA men's ice hockey history is a member of your legacy class – Chuck Delich.

I mentioned being proud. My class motto is “Pride Rides.” My classmates and I are proud to be your legacy class. We look forward to seeing you blossom and grow over the next four years, and we pledge to stand alongside you every step of the way.

The challenge you have undertaken by applying for and accepting an appointment to the United States Air Force Academy is daunting. You will face obstacles – physical, academic, mental – that will test your resolve and your will. At those times, take solace in the fact that young adults

have been meeting that challenge for nearly seventy years. In fact, you will be here for a significant milestone: next year will mark the 70th anniversary of the Academy's founding on 1 April 1954. Yes, April Fool's Day. It's not our fault that that was the day President Dwight Eisenhower signed the legislation establishing the Air Force Academy, though our West Point and Annapolis counterparts occasionally mention that fact.

Always – always always – remember that you are not here alone. First and foremost, you have your classmates. They will have your back, and you will have theirs. Some of your classmates might just make the difference between you getting through the Academy and leaving short of graduation.

They will be key to your success, because it is impossible to know everything and to be perfectly prepared for what you are going to experience.

I am the son of an Air Force Master Sergeant. I thought I knew what I was getting into, as I'd grown up in the military. I'd spoken to my admissions liaison officer and other military veterans, including a Medal of Honor recipient who lived in my hometown. None of that helped. The culture shock I felt upon arrival – and that you may be feeling right now – was intense. There was SO much I didn't know.

Here's an example: Checking mail during BCT was a big deal. I assume it still is. We would go to the mail room as a group, as I expect you will. Hoping for a letter or perhaps a package was a key motivator. As we would prepare to fall out and check our mailboxes, our cadet cadre would tell us that, if there was a pink slip in our mailbox, we were to give it to them immediately. I was so clueless that I was horrified about getting a pink slip, because in my mind that meant I was going to be fired. "So that's how we find out that our cadet career is over," I thought. Actually, it meant that we had a package. Last week, I checked at the Cadet Post Office and was told they now give out yellow slips instead of pink ones, so no more confusion.

That's just one instance of my naivete. Here's another. In fact, this one occurred on this very day, the fourth of July, fifty years ago. My class reported to the Academy on the second of July. I thought that was perfect. In-process on the second of July, sort of get settled in on the third, and then we would have the fourth of July off. A day of rest! Imagine my shock and surprise when the yelling and training started bright and early on July fourth. On a holiday! The fireworks that day were not in the sky. Yeah, some hard-earned lessons.

Anyway, back to the importance of classmates. Who here are preppies, either from the Academy Prep School or one of the Falcon Foundation schools? How about prior enlisted? With your added experience, you will be stars of the class, particularly during BCT.

I was fortunate to be paired with a roommate who had gone to USAFA Prep. Despite my military brat background, I internalized everything and was a mess. As the days of BCT went by – very very slowly – I grew more despondent and worried. One day, I returned to my room in Vandenberg Hall. I'd just been chewed out on the Terrazzo for some infraction or another – it doesn't matter what it was. I described my tale of woe, my great misfortune, to my roommate, Monroe Ratchford.

Ratch started laughing. As you can imagine, that really pissed me off. But then, he proceeded to put things in perspective. He patiently explained that the training is demanding, and it involves everyone. The cadre's job is to keep a close eye on us and ensure we are coming up to and then maintaining the standards expected of an Air Force Academy cadet. The stress and pressure are required, like the stress and pressure necessary to make coal into diamonds. Essentially, it was their job to yell at me, and it was my job to take it, and to learn from it. Nothing personal.

It took me a few days to internalize that lesson, but once I did, the training made more sense, and I was able to navigate the program much better. It wasn't any easier, but I had made the attitude adjustment needed to continue. For me, that intervention by a classmate and my course correction made a world of difference.

In addition to your classmates, your cadet, officer, and enlisted leaders will also be there for you. As with every aspect of the Academy curriculum, they genuinely want you to succeed. It might not feel like that, but it is true.

Along those lines, if you need extra help, ask for it. It's not always easy to admit that you are struggling, but it is the right thing to do. Again, it matters not whether it is physical, military, academic, or emotional. Do not feel that you have to labor on alone.

Others will look out for you as well. Your family, of course. Members of your sponsor family. Depending on your extracurricular activities, your coach, club representative, or other leader.

To all of these, I will add your Legacy Class, my Class of '77. We are also here to help. To begin that connection, several of us were at Doolittle Hall for the ice cream social the day before you in-processed. Many of us were back at Doolittle the next day, while you were in-processing up here in the Cadet Area, meeting with your family members and assuring them that you were in good hands.

When we see and talk to you, the years melt away and we are right there with you, standing on the footprints at the base of the ramp, getting the haircuts, learning the knowledge, marching around the Terrazzo – sitting in the Arnold Hall Theater. The memories are crystal clear, as if they'd happened yesterday. Believe it or not, despite the decades, we can totally relate to you and your current situation. While most of us would not want to trade places with you – I certainly would not – we remember and empathize as if we were basic cadets ourselves.

It might not help in the day-to-day, but I hope you can take some solace in the knowledge that everyone here is vested in your doing well. Think about it. This whole place exists for one reason – to educate, train and motivate cadets – you! The success of this institution and everyone involved in it depends quite literally on your success. We are all rooting for you.

One quick aside. I mentioned extracurricular activities. Academic and military performance is, of course, of utmost importance – and very time-consuming. It is also important, however, that you have an activity or two that allows you to take a break from those stressors, to recharge your batteries. I urge each of you to find and pursue your passion, whether it is a sport, a club, or another activity. The Academy abounds with such opportunities. In my case, I was an equipment manager for the football team and a DJ at the Academy radio station, K.A.F.A. In

fact, I am still a KAFA DJ. The mental respite and the down time those activities provided made me more focused and more attentive when I returned to the academic and military tasks at hand.

The Heritage Minute video showed an image from the Academy's dedication ceremony at Lowry Air Force Base on 11 July 1955. One of the speakers at that nationally televised event was the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General Nathan Twining. In his remarks that day, he challenged the new cadets by using the now-iconic phrase – forever associated with the Air Force Academy – that America would, quote “expect great things” unquote from them. That expectation is as applicable today as it was back then.

As your Class of '27 progresses through its days, weeks, months, and years here, it will develop its own identity. It seems that every class can point to one thing or another that makes it totally unique – something that distinguishes it from every other class. As an example, my class has at least two claims to fame that set it apart:

- We were the first class to command a co-ed Cadet Wing. When the first 157 female cadets arrived on 28 June 1976 as members of the Class of '80, '77 was the Firstie or senior class.
- When we graduated on 1 June 1977, we had the distinction of having the last “Tail End Charlie.” At that time, diplomas were handed out by graduation order of merit, from beginning to end – in our case, from 1 to 867. (Nowadays, after the Distinguished Graduates walk across the stage, diplomas are presented alphabetically by squadron.) Anyway, the 19-year “Tail End Charlie” tradition called for every member of the class to give a silver dollar to the classmate finishing last in the class ranking. The incoming Superintendent, Lieutenant General Kenneth Tallman, ended the custom the following year because he believed it was not appropriate to quote “reward mediocrity” unquote in this way. Not only that, but now and then cadets vying to finish last would cut things a little too close and get kicked out. John McNulty, Class of '77, was the final “Tail End Charlie.”

It will be fascinating to see what distinctions your class will have.

Again, on behalf of the members of the United States Air Force Academy Class of 1977, I welcome you to the Academy and to the distinguished ranks of the Long Blue Line. My classmates and I are keenly interested in your journey and your success. We look forward to joining you at many of your milestone events, including the acceptance parade next month, recognition, your exemplar dinner, your commitment dinner, your ring dance, and, of course, your graduation. And while it doesn't seem possible now, before you know it you will be throwing your hats in the air at Falcon Stadium as the Thunderbirds roar past.

As for me, despite my travails in BCT, I was able to graduate and go on to a successful 22-year active-duty career, followed by 11 years as an Air Force civilian here at the Academy, and now six years and counting at the Association of Graduates.

And, for better or worse, I never got a pink slip.

Thank you.