

# LEADERSHIP ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

COL. (RET.) CAROLYN BENYSHEK '87



## A LEGACY OF LEADERSHIP, PURPOSE AND SERVICE IN THE SPACE AGE

By David Bitton

**C**ol. (Ret.) Carolyn Benyshek '87 never expected the Air Force to give her more than it demanded of her. Yet over the course of a distinguished 31-year career, service became not just a profession but a calling.

Growing up in a military household with an enlisted Air Force father, Col. Benyshek learned sacrifice, discipline and duty at an early age. Still, she never envisioned the extraordinary path her life would take.

"Being an Air Force officer has never just been what I do — it's who I am," she says. "It's a calling, not a title. It means being part of something greater than myself: the profession of arms."

From her first days at the U.S. Air Force Academy Preparatory School to commanding missions that safeguarded national security, her journey reflects the heart of a servant-leader — guided by vision, grounded in service and dedicated to mentoring others.

Now, as a 2024 recipient of the USAFA Leadership Achievement Award — honoring graduates with distinguished professional accomplishments — she reflects on a career that not only helped lay the foundation for the U.S. Space

Force but also continues to inspire the next generation of warrior-leaders.

### A PATH FORGED IN SERVICE

For the Colorado Springs native, the Academy was more than academic and military training — it was a gateway to possibility.

"Though I didn't always know I'd wear the uniform myself, I was consistently drawn to purpose-driven work," she says. "The values, discipline and challenge of military life resonated deeply with me."

Still, her early years came with challenges. Entering a male-dominated profession, she often questioned her path.

"I didn't always get the answers I wanted, but the journey shaped me," she recalls.

She embraced the Academy not only as a place to develop academically and physically but also as a springboard to something greater. Upon graduation, she discovered her true passion in service — not just in the missions she supported, but in the people she served alongside: teammates, mentors and future leaders.

### COMMANDING THE COSMOS

Her passion for space operations emerged early and quickly propelled her into increasingly complex leadership roles.

Among her most significant accomplishments was commanding the National Reconnaissance Office Operations Squadron, where she led 160 military and civilian personnel responsible for more than 95,000 satellite missions critical to U.S. national security.

Her team's work had global impact — supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom and executing 25 flawless satellite launches valued at over \$13 billion. Earlier in her career, she led a 200-person team overseeing a \$4 billion satellite constellation.

For Col. Benyshek, the numbers were never the point. "They represent meaningful impact," she says, "achieved through collaboration, adaptability and shared ownership."

Her record of mission success and innovation played a vital role in building the case for the establishment of the United States Space Force.

### SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

At the core of her success was a philosophy of servant leadership. She believed in empowering teams, setting clear expectations, and cultivating a culture of trust and accountability.



Women from the Class of 1987 enjoy reconnecting at the ladies' brunch during their 35th reunion. (Courtesy photos)

"My leadership philosophy centers on servant leadership, trust and clarity of vision," she explains. "I focus on listening, providing purpose, and creating an environment where people feel valued and heard."

In the high-stakes world of space operations, this approach not only delivered mission success but also built resilient, cohesive teams.

She credits Col. (Ret.) Kris Henley as a formative influence, a mentor who demonstrated people-first leadership without compromising excellence.

Her achievements — including Officer of the Year, the National Reconnaissance Office Director's Circle Award, and both the NRO Gold and Silver Medals — speak to her operational excellence and leadership integrity. She was inducted into the USAFA Preparatory School Hall of Fame in 2014 and named exemplar for the Preparatory School's 2022 graduating class.

Yet she views recognition as a reflection of collective effort. "Being recognized for

my leadership is humbling," she says. "It's less about the title and more about knowing I've helped others succeed and created space for growth."

#### CONTINUING TO SERVE

Even after retirement, Col. Benyshek has remained deeply engaged with the Academy and the broader community.

A lifetime member of the Association of Graduates and a Sabre Society member, she helped lead the Class of 1987's fundraising campaign for the new Madera Cyber Innovation Center. She continues her service on the Falcon Foundation Board of Trustees, chairs its scholarship committee, and serves on the governing board. She also contributes to the Way of Life Board of Directors and as secretary of the USAFA Women executive committee.

Professionally, she serves as senior program manager and senior systems engineer at aerospace company Tech7, where she leads agile software teams, manages contracts and ensures strategic

mission alignment.

"My role allows me to bridge mission execution with long-term goals," she says. "I'm especially passionate about mentoring and building cultures rooted in trust, performance and innovation."

She remains a sought-after keynote speaker, partnering with organizations such as the National Charity League and 100+ Women Who Care.

#### GUIDED BY PRINCIPLES

Her approach to leadership and life remains anchored in principles she carries with her:

- **Never forget where you came from.**
- **You never succeed alone.**
- **Give back whenever possible.**
- **Always extend a hand up.**
- **Leave every place and person better than you found them.**






Col. (Ret.) Carolyn Benyshek '87, center, prepares to march back from Jacks Valley with other grads in July 2024.

“My success stems from strong mentorship, continuous learning and a deep sense of accountability,” she reflects. “Challenges aren’t roadblocks — they’re opportunities to grow, innovate and lead with intention.”

Rather than measuring success by rank or awards, she points to the leaders she helped shape and the support of her family.

“My family has sacrificed so much to allow me to pursue my passion,” she says. “None of it would have been possible without the unwavering support of my husband, John; my daughters, Kimi and Kassandra; and my mother, Kaoru.”

For Col. Benyshek, her legacy is not just in the satellites launched or missions led. It lives in every leader she mentored, every team she strengthened, and every individual she inspired to pursue excellence. 



Col. Benyshek, left, tours the Hotel Polaris construction site in 2024 with other grads.