

# YOUNG ALUMNI Excellence Awards

## Early Career Successes Lead to AOG Honor

Six USAFA graduates have been named as this year's honorees for the Association of Graduates' Young Alumni Excellence Award. The award recognizes graduates for exceptional professional accomplishment, whether in military or civilian life.

This year's honorees are Maj. Michelle Williams '07, Maj. Nathan Dial '10, Robert Lee '10, Maj. Austin McKinney '10, Maj. Michael Kanaan '11 and Capt. Victoria Perkins '14.

Nominees must be within 15 years of their graduation year to be considered. A total of 21 young alums were nominated for the award this year. The YAEA recognizes those graduates who:

- Have obtained a high level of professional or philanthropic accomplishment (civilian/military).
- Possess high standards of integrity and character.
- Reflect positively on the Academy as leaders of character.

This is the seventh year for this AOG award; and a total of 34 alumni have received the honor so far.

### **Michelle (Kolcun) Williams '07**

As an individual mobilization augmentee (IMA) assigned to Air Force Medical Readiness Agency, Maj. Michelle Williams, MSC, recently served as the chief administrator of the Headquarters Air Force surgeon general's COVID-19 vaccination program, volunteering for active

duty for over 365 days in support of mission-critical COVID-19 operations.

In this role, she built vital Department of the Air Force COVID-19 vaccine program infrastructure to efficiently manage the influx of questions, tasks and new guidance surrounding COVID-19 vaccine operations. She was an active member of the Defense Health Agency COVID-19 Operations Planning Team, serving as an Air Force representative, and helped develop foundational Military Health System COVID-19 vaccine guidance. She propelled Operation Warp Speed, coordinating the supply of 1.1 million vaccine doses throughout the Air Force, ensuring over 90% were utilized after vaccines were distributed.

Her COVID-19 vaccination team, consisting of a variety of Air Force medical providers, medical logistics and administrative staff, worked around the clock to build this program from the ground up and has been recognized for and won three headquarters annual awards for their collective contributions to the COVID-19 program mission. The team also was recognized by the Air Force surgeon general and secretary of the Air Force for their efforts.

Maj. Williams currently serves as the IMA to the chief, Medical Support Division, Air Force Medical Readiness Agency, in Falls Church, Virginia.

After graduating from USAFA in 2007, Maj. Williams served active duty for eight years: initially as a financial management and

budget officer, then transferred to the Medical Service Corps. She obtained her master's in health care administration in 2012 and her professional board certification as a certified medical practice executive in 2014.



**Michelle (Kolcun)  
Williams '07**

She transitioned to the Air Force Reserve in 2014, where she has served both as a traditional reservist and as an IMA. In her nongovernment civilian capacity, she has served in director-level and consultant health care administration roles over the past seven years.

She currently serves as the team lead for the Defense Health Agency Healthcare Optimization Access to Care Contract.

A member of the USAFA cheerleading team from 2004 to 2007, Maj. Williams also holds a record as the military member

who has been a pro cheerleader for the most pro teams while also actively serving. While on active duty, she cheered professionally for the San Antonio Spurs (NBA), St. Louis Rams (NFL), Boise Burn (AFL) and Idaho Steelheads (ECHL). More recently, as a reservist, Maj. Williams cheered professionally for the Washington Capitals (NHL) as a Capitals Red Rocker. She helped pave the way for future USAFA grads and military members seeking to cheer for and participate on professional sports teams while actively serving.

Maj. Williams also exemplifies service before self as a community volunteer. She has served as an additional duty USAFA admissions liaison officer since 2016 and joined the USAFA ALO hiring team in 2021. She also volunteers as an assistant cheerleading coach at Cocoa Beach High School.

#### **Maj. Nathan Dial '10**

Maj. Nathan Dial's career is a great example of the broad range of opportunities the Air Force Academy and operational Air Force offer.

As a cadet, he was a distinguished graduate, a 200/400-meter sprinter on the intercollegiate track team, a soaring instructor pilot, a Naval Academy exchange cadet and the Fall 2009 Cadet Wing commander.



**Maj. Nathan Dial '10**

After USAFA, he earned a master's in public policy at the Harvard Kennedy School (HKS), focusing on political-economic development, diplomacy,

multi-party negotiations and quantitative methods.

In between his first and second years at HKS, Maj. Dial entered the Air Force's Language Enabled Airman Program (LEAP) for Spanish and Portuguese. He used his fluency in Spanish to serve in SOUTHCOM's J5 plans and strategy office (Miami, Florida), where he developed a tool for assessing partner nations' humanitarian assistance and disaster relief capabilities.

After HKS, he went on to the Euro-NATO Joint Jet Pilot Training Program (ENJJPT) and, upon graduation, flew the EC-130H Compass Call out of Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Arizona.

Over his four years at Davis-Monthan, Maj. Dial completed the Air Force's Aviation Safety School, Mishaps Investigations Course and Squadron Officer School as a distinguished graduate. As a reconnaissance pilot, he completed four deployments to the Middle East, amassing over 780 combat hours and five air medals.

In the summer of 2018, he was one of five captains chosen for the Chief of Staff of the Air Force Captains Prestigious Ph.D. Program. In July 2021, he graduated from Northwestern University (Evanston, Illinois) with a Ph.D. in political science, studying the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the 21st century.

Currently, Maj. Dial is an RC-135 pilot and assistant director of operations for the 45th Reconnaissance Squadron at Offutt Air Force Base near Omaha, Nebraska.

Throughout his career, he has shown an ongoing commitment to an inclusive and empathetic culture in the Air Force. He has served on the Academy Selection Committees for senators John McCain, Jon Kyl, Martha McSally and Mark Kelly for the past seven years in Arizona.

In 2020, Maj. Dial published a three-part series on race and the military in the *Air Force Times*. In 2021, he became the co-founder and board chair for the Class of 2010 Endowment, which raised \$330,000. The endowment provides a minimum of \$5,000 each semester for the top cadet squadron's morale fund in

perpetuity through the Air Force Academy Foundation.

In 2022, Maj. Dial was named one of the Aspen Strategy Group Rising Leaders. Over the next year, he will hone his leadership, policymaking and U.S. foreign policy skills with 29 other rising leaders via the world-renowned nonpartisan Aspen Institute.

#### **Robert M. Lee '10**

As CEO and founder of Dragos, Robert M. Lee supports U.S. national security and security of critical infrastructure systems around the globe.

Lee is a recognized pioneer in the industrial security incident response and threat intelligence community. He created the Dragos Platform, the first technology to detect adversary behaviors that compromise industrial infrastructure.



**Robert M. Lee '10**

In 2018, Lee set out to solve a longstanding national security problem: the lack of visibility into threats, vulnerabilities and supply chain risks among critical infrastructure operators due to barriers and liabilities around information sharing.

Lee invented and was awarded a patent for Neighborhood Keeper, a free opt-in for the Dragos Platform that allows sharing without revealing sensitive data and with full anonymity.

Lee gained his start in security as a U.S. Air Force cyberwarfare operations officer tasked to the National Security Agency, where he built a first-of-its-kind mission

identifying and analyzing national threats to industrial infrastructure. He went on to build the industrial community's first dedicated monitoring and incident response class at the SANS Institute and the industry-recognized cyberthreat intelligence course.

Forbes named Lee to its "30 Under 30" list in 2016 and described Lee as one of the "brightest entrepreneurs, breakout talents and change agents" in enterprise technology.

Lee helped lead the investigation into the 2015 cyberattack on Ukraine's power grid, helped identify and analyze the CrashOverride malware that attacked Ukraine's grid in 2016, and assisted in dealing with Trisis malware deployed against an industrial safety system in the Middle East in 2017.

In 2022, his team at Dragos uncovered PIPEDREAM, a highly flexible framework to attack industrial infrastructure globally — before adversaries had a chance to employ it. Lee's work has been featured in the book "Sandworm" and on "60 Minutes."

Lee is routinely sought after for his advice and input into industrial threat detection and response. He has presented at major security conferences and the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in Davos, and has testified before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce and the Senate's Energy and National Resources Committee.

His community service involvement includes serving as vice chair of the Department of Energy's Grid Resilience for National Security Subcommittee. He's also a member of the Electricity Advisory Committee for the Department of Energy, a committee member for Cyber Resilience in Oil & Gas for the World Economic Forum, and an adviser to the Cyber Resilient Energy Delivery Consortium.

#### **Maj. Austin McKinney '10**

Maj. Austin McKinney is focused on strengthening American national security through technology development, international diplomacy and economic statecraft.

He graduated as the academic valedictorian of the USAFA Class of 2010 — earning the top spot among 1,012 cadets. While

at the Academy, he served as a cadet group commander and was selected to represent USAFA as a second-class cadet in the Academy's inaugural semester exchange program with Mexico.



**Maj. Austin  
McKinney '10**

Upon graduation from the Academy, Maj. McKinney became a Marshall Scholar, studying at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He then began his service as an acquisitions officer at Hanscom Air Force Base, Massachusetts. He volunteered for several deployments, including as the executive officer to the A3 in the Combined Air Operations Center at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar and two tours in the security cooperation office at the U.S. Embassy in Bogota, Colombia.

After transitioning from active duty into the Air Force Reserve, Maj. McKinney completed an MBA at Harvard Business School. After graduation, he started employment with software company HubSpot as a senior manager for strategy and operations. He leveraged his prior experience to help HubSpot launch its flagship Latin American office in Colombia. In this international market expansion, Maj. McKinney strengthened American technology in the region to counteract rival Chinese software.

In the Air Force Reserve, Maj. McKinney has also focused on cutting-edge technology development. He served four years with the Defense Innovation Unit to accelerate the adoption of commercial technology into the Department of Defense.

He now works with the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Research and Engineering on the promotion of strategic defense technologies.

More recently, Maj. McKinney joined the U.S. Department of State as a foreign service officer focused on economic diplomacy such as trade, investment and promotion of the U.S. technology sector. His first assignment was in Mexico, where he served during the ratification and implementation of the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement. Following Mexico, he was assigned to the U.S. Embassy in Pakistan. He will focus on advancing U.S. strategic interests in the region after the recent fall of the Western-backed government in Afghanistan.

His community service involvement has included chairing the Air Force Academy Nomination Board for Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and volunteering with Service to School, a nonprofit organization dedicated to assisting veterans in gaining admittance to the nation's best universities. In addition, he serves on the board of the 2010 Class Endowment.

"It's truly an honor to receive this award from the Association of Graduates," he says. "I am so grateful to USAFA and my fellow graduates for helping make me the person I am today. I hope to represent the Academy well through continued service and impact."

#### **Maj. Michael Kanaan '11**

Maj. Michael Kanaan is one of the Air Force's most recognized voices on the development and use of emerging technologies.

After graduating from the Academy, he attended the Air Force's Intelligence Officer initial skills course and was first assigned to the National Air and Space Intelligence Center. As the mission commander for the Airborne Cueing and Exploitation System Hyperspectral (ACES Hy), he earned the C4ISRNET "Elite 6" award for the discovery and removal of 37 tons of illicit material from the battlespace during Operation Enduring Freedom.

Operational successes there led to a special operations deployment as the deputy director of intelligence for the Army's 2nd



Ranger Battalion in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. Upon returning, he became the chief of target development for the 51st Intelligence Squadron on behalf of Air Force Central Command in Operation Inherent Resolve.

His innovative technological solutions resulted in directing a national intelligence campaign targeting ISIS on behalf of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, for which he received the presidentially recognized 68th Arthur S. Flemming Award for management/leadership (an honor shared with such individuals as Neil Armstrong, Dr. Anthony Fauci and Robert Gates).



**Maj. Michael Kanaan '11**

Next, he was assigned to the Pentagon as the chief speechwriter for the deputy chief of staff of the Air Force for Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance, and Cyber Effects and was a founding member of the Algorithmic Warfare Cross-Functional Team, Project Maven. He later became the first chairperson of artificial intelligence at Headquarters Air Force, authored the Air Force's first artificial intelligence strategy, and received the Air Force-level Gen. Larry O. Spencer Innovation Award.

Additionally, he was instrumental in creating the Air Force's first artificial intelligence partnership with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he currently serves as the partnership's director of operations.

In 2019, Maj. Kanaan was named to the Forbes "30 Under 30" List and the Fast Company Impact Council.

In his personal capacity, he is the author of the bestselling book "T-Minus AI: Humanity's Countdown to Artificial Intelligence and the New Pursuit of Global Power," serves on the board of advisers for a national nonprofit delivering education on artificial intelligence to disadvantaged youth, and participates in multiple mentoring organizations and hackathons across the United States.

Most recently, Maj. Kanaan was accepted to Harvard Kennedy School for a master's in public administration as a Chief of Staff of the Air Force fellow.

#### **Capt. Victoria Perkins '14**

Capt. Victoria Perkins is currently a KC-135 weapons instructor in the 509th Weapons Squadron at Fairchild Air Force Base outside Spokane, Washington. She is charged with forging the Air Force tanker weapons officers across three weapons systems, including boom operators.

She is a subject matter expert in future developments and capabilities for the tanker community across multiple MAJCOMs and she applies her expertise to the student syllabus to create tactics experts.

Upon graduation from USAFA, Capt. Perkins attended pilot training at Laughlin Air Force Base in Texas and then headed to Altus Air Force Base, Oklahoma. She graduated as a KC-135R/T pilot and was stationed at McConnell Air Force Base in Kansas.

She has deployed multiple times supporting operations Juniper Micron, Freedom Sentinel, Resolute Hope and Inherent Resolve and has more than 650 combat hours. In 2018, Capt. Perkins deployed to Morón Air Base, Spain, for her third deployment, as a USAFRICOM asset to support French forces.

Capt. Perkins showcased the KC-135, as well as the ability of female aviators, when she flew as a member of the first all-female aircrew at The Sky's No Limit — Girls Fly Too airshow in Abbotsford, British Columbia, one of the largest international diversity events in the world.

In the fall of 2018, Capt. Perkins commanded PYTHON 61, a KC-135R/T crew deployed as a U.S. Central Com-



**Capt. Victoria Perkins '14**

mand special operations air refueling asset providing low-level aerial refueling to special operations receivers. The crew was conducting a mission over Iraq when they were dynamically re-tasked to support a downed helicopter. She led the crew through multiple dynamic air refuelings of receivers supporting the rescue and medical evacuation. Due to the crew's ability to rapidly offload fuel and act as a secure communications relay during the situation, the 11 members of the downed helicopter were successfully extricated from the hostile environment. Because of their efforts, Capt. Perkins and her crew were awarded the Brig. Gen. Ross Hoyt Award.

After returning to the states, she worked with McConnell's wing tactics shop to rewrite the outdated KC-135 on-scene commander checklist. She is now an instructor pilot. Her role as an instructor is critical to maintaining a competent crew force capable of rapid global mobility and operating in all contested environments.

Capt. Perkins' community service involvement includes serving as president of the McConnell Air Force Base Women in Aviation chapter, volunteering with the STARBASE youth camp, and serving as the 22nd Air Refueling Wing's lead for the Air Education and Training Command's Women's Fly In. 