

# YOUNG ALUMNI EXCELLENCE AWARD

## MAJ. JOSEPH BLEDSOE '11



By Sam Hastings

**F**or Maj. Joseph “Paveway” Bledsoe ’11, leadership revolves around three main priorities: faith, family and being a fighter pilot. These guiding principles have taken him from his small-town roots in rural Pennsylvania to the U.S. Air Force Academy and to flying the F-15E Strike Eagle.

Although his family had no military background, he felt inspired to serve when his cousin graduated from the Academy in 2005. From middle school on, he was determined to pursue an appointment.

At USAFA, he committed himself to seizing every opportunity. After completing Basic Cadet Training, his classmates elected him class president. Bledsoe says his Academy experience taught him how to lead both vertically as a senior officer and horizontally on a peer-to-peer level.

“The Academy really forced me, in quite a few of my leadership positions, to rely on peer leadership,” he says. “That’s where it starts and ultimately finishes.”

Bledsoe studied biology, planning to attend medical school and become a surgeon. However, a firstie-year trip overseas with a C-130 unit shifted his focus.

“I was hyperfocused on wanting to be a doctor,” he says. “The experience opened the door, and then firstie year I had the opportunity to fly at the airfield. I realized I can always get into medicine, but I can’t always get into this flying gig.”

He dropped his medical school applications and submitted his name for pilot training. For Bledsoe, the shift wasn’t far-fetched.

“In medicine and flying, there are a lot

of commonalities. It’s on you to make a decision with what information you have and execute and solve the next problem,” he says. “That translates very well to the flying community.”

After graduation, he studied international relations and economic policy at the University of Maryland before training on the T-6 and T-38, and ultimately flying the F-15E Strike Eagle. He says the rest is history.

Flying the Strike Eagle provided leadership opportunities as a flight lead, instructor pilot and flight commander. He’s flown over 1,500 hours, including 70 combat missions over Syria in the ongoing effort to defeat ISIS. In addition to leading his peers, his time as a pilot gave him the chance to mentor many younger officers.

These experiences prepared Bledsoe for his current role at USAFA as a fellow with the Institute for Future Conflict, where he is researching how U.S. airpower can be applied in near-peer competition, specifically in the South China Sea. He explains that the U.S. learned many lessons from the Global War on Terrorism, and he underscores the importance of preparing for potential conflicts in new arenas. Outside of his research, he teaches and mentors cadets, whom he describes as inquisitive and forward-thinking.

However, Bledsoe’s service to his alma mater began long before he joined the IFC. After graduating, he represented his classmates as a member of the Class Advisory Senate. His work on the CAS ultimately led to his appointment to the Association of Graduates Board of Directors, where he served from 2020 to

2024. In both roles, he aimed to reduce barriers to engagement, especially for younger graduates. He was also a strong voice of support in the AOG adopting its membership-for-all-graduates model.

“There’s no shade of blue in the Long Blue Line,” he says. “Whether you’re the chief of staff of the Air Force and you graduate from here or you’re the last person to walk across the stage in the Class of 2025, everybody has the degree on their wall. That’s all that matters to be in this club.”

Those who recognized Bledsoe’s impact nominated him for the Young Alumni Excellence Award — an honor that caught him by surprise. He views the award as a reflection of the people who believed in him and the values that shaped him.

“It’s humbling,” he says. “The award wasn’t the goal, but the things that went into that award — what you’ve done for the Academy, all the things you put your family through and everything you’ve done in the Air Force — it means you’ve done things that you set out to do from the age of 12, which is really humbling.”

Being part of the Long Blue Line is especially meaningful to Bledsoe because of its rich heritage and the shared connection among all generations of graduates.

Throughout all these experiences, his priorities haven’t changed: faith, family and being a fighter pilot. Next year, he and his wife, Alicia, will move with their three children to North Carolina, where Bledsoe will continue serving a higher purpose as he returns to flying the F-15E at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base. His next goal is to become a squadron commander. 