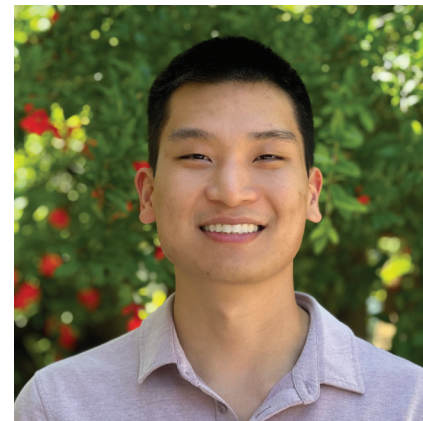


YOUNG ALUMNI EXCELLENCE AWARD

MR. ANSON CHENG '18



By Bryan Grossman

Born in the United States to Taiwanese immigrants, Anson Cheng '18 says he chose to attend the U.S. Air Force Academy because he wanted to serve a nation that had provided his family with so many opportunities.

"Watching the people in our community show up for my family was a really rewarding experience that resonated with me," he says, "and that was a huge part of why I wanted to find a way to give back to this country."

And when the time came to choose institutions of higher education, Cheng says he was influenced by his father, who served as a mechanic in the Taiwanese Air Force.

"It was an easy connection," Cheng says. "He grew up really into planes, and I grew up going to a bunch of air shows because of his interest."

Cheng studied a wide variety of subjects while at USAFA, from philosophy to his eventual major, operations research.

"I tried to load on extra courses — a lot of foreign area studies, geography, history, just a lot of additional electives that were kind of outside the scope of what I needed to graduate," he says. "Part of that was trying to make the most of the Academy experience."

Cheng also made the most of the leadership opportunities while at the Academy, including creating a Wing-wide volunteer program and organizing financial literacy classes.

"I loved it, honestly," Cheng says of being a cadet. "Every day was me living by some of my closest friends that I still keep in touch with today. ... Whether it's the random things that happen in the dorm

when you're spending time with friends, the military training or all the other events that the Academy puts on — I think those experiences have really stuck with me, and it's something I still look back on fondly."

As an officer, Cheng distinguished himself as an operations research analyst at the Air Force Institute of Technology, where he researched artificial neural networks and later presented on his work at the 100th annual American Meteorological Society meeting.

Cheng also contributed to the development of new analytical frameworks at the 86th Fighter Weapons Squadron and later helped lead cybersecurity operations at the Defense Information Systems Agency, including during historical events such as the SolarWinds breach, the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Cheng moved to the private sector in 2023, a transition that caught him somewhat off guard.

"The biggest lesson when I separated was that as much as you prepare, it still kind of hits you like a brick wall," he says. "There are moments where you feel like you lost your sense of community and belonging when you leave the military. And that was something I wasn't expecting, or I thought I could handle. But one thing that really stuck with me was just how the military and veteran community, whether it's USAFA alumni or the larger community as well, really shows up for you."

As a civilian, Cheng has excelled, bringing his expertise to Plato Systems, a technology startup, and to SkyFi, a satellite imagery company, where he applied AI tools to both military and civilian uses.

He also interned at Google in the Privacy, Safety, and Security Division supporting privacy efforts.

Beyond his professional work, Cheng has volunteered with Service to School for the past three years, currently serving as the organization's CFO, helping fellow veterans pursue higher education.

Currently pursuing dual graduate degrees at the Wharton School of Business and Harvard Kennedy School, Cheng says the Young Alumni Excellence honor is "super humbling, just because I know all my friends from my class are still out there doing a lot of great things. I'm just honored to be able to represent one of the young alumni for the year. It's just another reminder to put my best foot forward every single day. But remember that again, there are a lot of other people who are out there killing it."

He then reflects on what it means to be part of the Long Blue Line.

"It's everything," he says. "It's something that no one can take away from me. It's part of who I am for the rest of my life, and it's continuing to inform who I'm going to become. I'm really thankful for being part of the Long Blue Line, the experiences at the Academy, the people I've met, the people I'll continue meeting. Every day is a new experience for me, so, I'm really thankful for it." 