



By Michael C. Sirak

Craig R. McKinley, AFA President

As a boy, Craig R. McKinley knew he wanted to fly Air Force fighter jets. By the time he retired from the Air Force as a four-star general in late 2012, he had accomplished that and much more. As his Air Force career blossomed, so did his work with the Air Force Association.

"I always wanted to be an Air Force pilot," said McKinley. "I was exposed to aviation early in my career and loved every minute." In fact, at age 15, McKinley earned a private pilot's license—before he even had a driver's license.

During his 38 years in uniform, McKinley rose to become the first-ever four-star National Guard Bureau chief and the first NGB leader to sit in the permanent seat Congress created for the Guard on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He seamlessly moved back and forth between the Active Duty component and the Air National Guard over the years. This career progression, he said, reflects a "continuum of service" that represents a strength of the Air Force.

"What an amazing Air Force and an amazing compenency we have that gives people the chance to go beyond what they initially think they can do," said McKinley.

McKinley was born in Jacksonville, Fla. His dad was a mining engineer, his mom a homemaker. He attended high school in Faribault, Minn., south of Minneapolis. As a senior in the Air Force Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps program, McKinley received an Air Force ROTC scholarship. That allowed him to earn a degree in business administration from Southern Methodist University in Dallas in 1974.

He met Cheryl, his wife of 40 years, in college. They have two children: Patrick, 33, and Christina, 30, and are expecting their first grandchild in July. "That will change my life dramatically," said McKinley.



After flight school at Moody AFB, Ga., in 1975, McKinley became a T-38 Talon instructor pilot. During an assignment some four years later at Laughlin AFB, Texas, he formed a friendship with another T-38 backseater: Dick Newton, today AFA's executive vice president. McKinley counts Newton as one of his many mentors and friends. "We are each other's best wingmen," he said of Newton.

After five-and-a-half years on Active Duty, McKinley made "one of the toughest decisions" in his life: leaving Active Duty by taking advantage of the Palace Chase program to transfer to the Air National Guard in 1980. He got his shot flying the F-106 with Jacksonville's 125th Fighter-Interceptor Group. The unit became a fighter wing in 1995. It transitioned to the F-16 and then the F-15 during his time there. After commanding the wing, McKinley's subsequent senior assignments included Air Force deputy inspector general, 1st Air Force commander, and ANG director.

McKinley became AFA's president in October 2012, but his work with the association spans nearly four decades. An AFA Life Member since

1976, he said he "learned the ropes" working his way up from a chapter president, state president, region president, Under-40 national director, an elected board member, and then an Executive Committee member.

McKinley said he took the president's job because he wanted to continue to support airmen and their families. "I could think of no better place to complete a life serving the Air Force than to come here," he said. "When you look back, I have been blessed with a wonderful military career, a great family, and now, the opportunity to serve here."

In his current role, McKinley said he realizes the strength of the association lies in "a combination of strong chapters, strong members, and a very qualified, highly competent professional staff." By bringing the association's governance, leadership, and field activities closer to the national office, "we will become the strongest and most effective organization" to "support those who serve and ... to fight for a strong national defense and the world's greatest Air Force," he said.

Along those lines, McKinley sees *Wingman Magazine* as an important new means of outreach. "I think *Wingman Magazine* will be the venue by which all of our voices can be heard in a really constructive way," he said. ■

Michael C. Sirak is editor of Wingman Magazine.



Photo courtesy of Craig R. McKinley

AFA President Craig McKinley, as a young pilot, stands next to a T-38 trainer.