

THE EVOLUTION OF THE OFFICE OF THE COMMANDANT

The Darling Era: Before, During, and After

By Dennis Davenport '01

In late summer of 1987, a venerable ol' pilot took his turn at the controls of an aircraft in mid-flight; it had been airborne for a long time. Those who had been passengers along the way cherished their time aboard and understood its perpetual value. From a meager start, and despite periods of turbulence, the aircraft always continued in flight, and at times reached great heights. Through no one's fault, but by means of a changing set of circumstances, the aircraft was not running well. Operating with an overworked skeleton crew, suffering from the lack of funding for upkeep, and carrying decreasingly fewer passengers, it had descended to a dangerously low altitude.

The venerable ol' pilot relinquished the controls nine years later. In spite of occasional turbulence, with a greatly increased crew, a multifaceted upkeep program was in place with a hangar constructed and in full use. Many more passengers were boarding and would do so in the future. The aircraft was in far greater condition to proceed onward and upward on its great journey with the successors at the controls. The aircraft was the Corps of Cadets, and the pilot was Tom Darling.

The Corps of Cadets, under the leadership of four commandants, has progressed greatly on many fronts over the last three decades. It all began with the decision to bring in a university employed commandant—which fostered the Tom Darling era—in which the foundation for forward movement was laid and continuity established. To set the focus on the Darling Era and note elements of progress afterwards, many high-level decisions determined the course of the administration of the Corps of Cadets.

MAJOR CHANGES

Texas A&M President Earl Rudder, with vision and clout, instituted a major change in the administration of the Corps of Cadets for the 1963-1964 school year. The 12-year tenure of the highly respected Commandant, Colonel Joe E. Davis '29, United States Army Reserve, who served the Corps in many capacities since around 1930, ended. COL Davis' staff consisted of uniformed assistants, a few administrative personnel in the Trigon, and Tactical (Tac) Officers in the dorms. Bill Presnal '53, Perry Shepard '53, and Worth Blake '54 served as Tac Officers. They recall working with Cadets in an advisory capacity, administering rams and discipline, counseling, overseeing daily operations, and more. Significantly, COL Davis and his staff, mostly reservists, were A&M employees rather than in active duty ROTC capacities. Their efforts were primarily focused on college business. However, as a high percentage of the Corps was on contract status, they performed some ROTC duties.

President Rudder's restructuring re-established the ranking active duty Army officer into the twofold role of Professor of Military Science (PMS) and Commandant of Cadets. Thus began a 24-year and five active duty Commandant continuum. Active duty ROTC staff members also replaced the A&M employed Tac Officers. The Professor of Air Science was designated as Deputy Commandant.

The post restructuring side of the Commandant's Office—referred to as “civilian personnel” in the 1964 *Aggieland*—consisted of three uniformed non-active duty officers employed by Texas A&M under the Dean of Students, forerunner to Vice President of Student Affairs. They served as assistant Commandants in the administration of the university component of the Corps. Included within was everything outside of ROTC, i.e. daily operations, special units, activities and events, scholarships, and university discipline. Also assisting were a few administrative personnel.

Dr. J. Malon Southerland '65, now Vice President Emeritus, Student Affairs, after fulfilling his Army commitment, returned to the Commandant's Office as a counselor in 1968. He went on to serve the university in increasingly higher-level capacities until his retirement in 2003.

Lieutenant General Ormond Simpson '36, after retiring from the Marine Corps, served as Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs and Head of the School of Military Sciences from 1974 until 1985. He did not run the Corps, but had profound and lasting positive influence upon it.

Seeing the need early on, LtGen Simpson brought

in an individual to establish and ensure continuity in the Commandant's Office. Lieutenant Colonel Donald J. "Don" Johnson '55, now Brigadier General, Texas State Guard (Ret), retired from the Army and moved from ROTC to the Commandant's Office in 1975. Continuity mission accomplished! The decorated aviator became and remained the seasoned cornerstone until retiring from the university in 2004. BG Johnson served under eight Commandants. Over the years he fulfilled a broad range of duties, including Interim Commandant on several occasions.

Colonel Jim Woodall '50 served the dual role as PMS and active duty Commandant from 1977-1982. He estimates that about 70 percent of his time was dedicated to university business and noted that he had a good Executive Officer to pick up the slack in ROTC. His supplemental pay for being Commandant consisted of football tickets. In referring to the lack of university funding and limited uniformed staff in the Commandant's Office, COL Woodall quips that he and LTC Don Johnson ran the Corps on food stamps during his tenure.

Colonel Don Burton '56 was the last to hold the dual role as PMS and active duty Commandant, serving from 1982-1986. His tenure began with LTC Don Johnson as the only university employed uniformed staff member in the Commandant's Office.

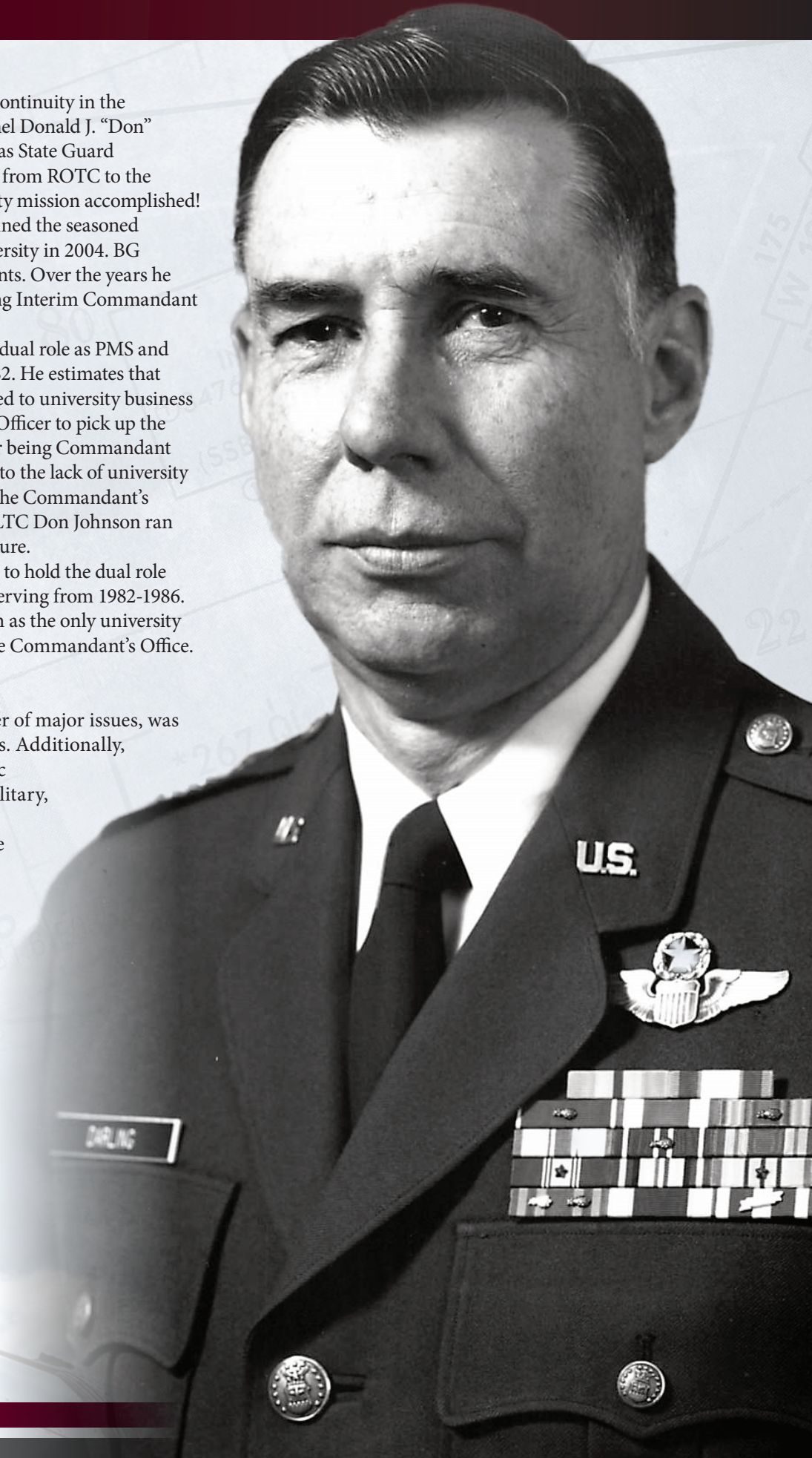
A TURBULENT TIME

The early 1980s, featuring a number of major issues, was a turbulent period of time for the Corps. Additionally, with high attrition rates, poor academic performance and downsizing of the military, the Corps was in decline. There were instances in legal proceedings when the Commandant, as a federal employee, was not allowed to give a deposition or in any manner represent Texas A&M, a state entity.

Donald R. "Buck" Henderson '62, Lieutenant Colonel, US Army (Ret), joined the Commandant's Staff in 1984 and served until retiring in 2007. Another cornerstone, he fulfilled many capacities, including the first Director of the Corps Center and a stint in-between with the Association of Former Students.

COL Burton, with a firsthand view of the declining state of the Corps, took unprecedented action to reverse the negative momentum. The

Tom Darling '54, Major General, US Air Force,
served as Commandant from 1987-1996.





The Sam Houston Sanders Corps Center opened in 1992 and houses Corps history and serves as the center of recruiting.

results of the work of this man, who was not even a university employee, continue to profoundly affect the Corps. The few remaining knowledgeable individuals from that era give full credit to COL Burton for his wisdom and actions.

Seeing the need for organized financial and political support, COL Burton sent out the call for help. As Aggies have done for the duration, many answered, and a group of influential Corps supporters came together. Overcoming resistance from some A&M administrators, the group officially became the Corps Development Council in 1984. The basic mission was to support the Corps in a manner to ensure its perpetuation. The Sul Ross Scholarship Program was greatly enhanced and is a continuing example of the unselfish benefaction of this group. The Corps Development Council is the predecessor to the present Board of Visitors.

During this period of time, COL Burton came to a paramount conclusion: a Texas A&M employed Commandant should be in charge of the university side of the Corps, and the ROTC Colonels should run their programs and not be involved in university business. Thus, he began advocating for the change.

Pursuant to the strong case presented by COL Burton, Texas A&M

President Frank Vandiver established a board of A&M personnel and other knowledgeable professionals. Designated as the Select Committee on the Corps, their charge was to conduct a study and subsequently advise as to the future role of active duty personnel in the administration of the non-ROTC side of the Corps, and specifically, whether the Commandant should be an active duty officer or a university employee. Upon the recommendation of the committee, President Vandiver, with Dr. John Koldus, Vice President of Student Affairs in agreement, concluded that the commandant should be a university employee, specifically a retired Aggie flag officer. Significantly, that would preclude a future ROTC colonel from being the Commandant.

The search for a new Commandant was in process by the time COL Burton retired in 1986. Dr. J. Malon Southerland '65 came over from the Office of Student Affairs to serve as the Interim Commandant for the 1986-1987 school year.

THE DARLING ERA

Certainly the man for the challenge ahead, Tom Darling '54, Major General, US Air Force, was selected to be the new Commandant. Highly decorated, he was

a long-time command pilot with over 500 combat hours over Vietnam in a B-52 and also a part of the at-ready airborne strike force during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Significantly, Maj Gen Darling also served in leadership capacities in educational and large command settings.

Maj Gen Darling, upon completing his immediate duties, retired from the Air Force and came aboard in July 1987. Weary of the controversial issues and negativism related to the Corps during his time in office, President Vandiver's initial guidance to the new Commandant was that he wanted "no bad news and accountability." Additionally, Dr. John Koldus suggested that Darling take a few months to evaluate the situation before making any major moves. Elated to have a retired Aggie general officer as Commandant, many high-ranking A&M officials and Corps supporters, both on and off campus, enthusiastically welcomed Maj Gen Darling.

In addition to Maj Gen Darling, the 1987-1988 Commandant's Office consisted of LTCs Johnson and Henderson, three administrative personnel, including Shelley Wedemeier, who remains the backbone of the entire operation. The only other staff member still on board is COL Jay Brewer '81, Sr. Associate Director of the Aggie Band,

who will retire at the end of this school year. The Military Properties Warehouse (now Uniform Distribution Center), the Aggie Band and Corps Housing were realigned under the Commandant's purview at that time. ROTC personnel continued to serve as Military Advisors but in a more limited capacity.

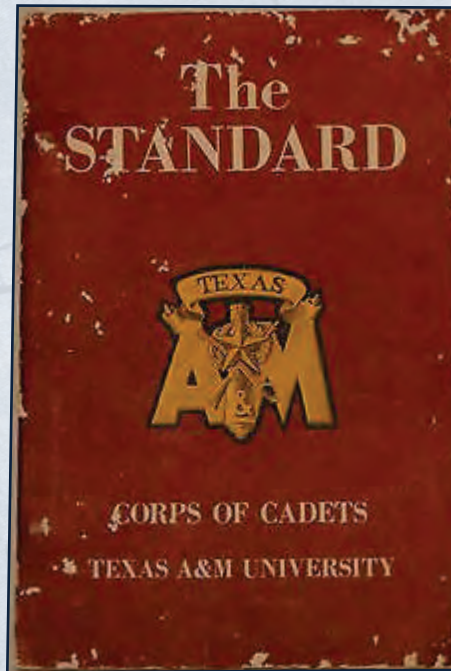
Maj Gen Darling observed the state of the Corps firsthand during his initial time in office. Areas of need were easily identified. Increasing the current small staff, both professional and administrative, would be critical in the strengthening or development of programs. Targets were recruiting, academic support, scholarships, a program for D&C Cadets, an after-hours duty program, updating *The Standard* and *The Policy and Procedures Guide* and implementation of technology. Of course, funding was the common denominator to any progress. Unfortunately, in the wake of the infamous "Texas Oil Bust," Texas A&M was in the midst of difficult financial times. Budget cuts and a hiring freeze were in effect.

Two major turning points occurred in the spring of 1988 that provided early and unanticipated impetus for progress: Maj Gen Darling had been giving periodic briefings to the Board

of Regents since coming aboard in the previous summer. These consisted of basic, noncontroversial items, such as numbers, scholarships, recruiting, etc. However, for the March 1988 meeting, he was asked to note problems, issues and needs. Hearing that information for the first time raised the immediate attention and support of the Regents. The Commandant got a firsthand view

of some of the politics at that level, as the Regents took action, which resulted in good things for the Corps. A large sum of money from the Collegiate Licensing Fund, now Office of Brand Development, was set up to be committed to the Corps on a continuing basis for scholarships. Those funds were the genesis of the Commandant's Leadership Awards. Also, having been authorized, Maj Gen Darling requested and justified funding for additional staff. Included were three Tactical Officers, a Recruiting Coordinator and administrative clerk, and an upgraded secretarial position. Additionally, as most records were still being kept by "stubby pencil," the new Commandant requested funding for a computer system that would eventually upgrade all phases of record keeping. Also on the list was to revise and reprint *The Standard* and *The Policy and Procedure Guide*, which were long out of date. These requests were approved, and the expansion of the Commandant's office started to take shape in the summer of 1988.

A short while later, Maj Gen Darling also presented his first report to the Board of Directors of the Corps Development Council. Sensing things were going well, he spontaneously closed with an "I Have a Dream" type



The Standard provides Cadets with information and policies they must abide by.



Cadet Training Officers (CTOs) pictured here at March to the Brazos, are now a large part of training in the Corps of Cadets.

speech about a facility to showcase the Corps. In true Aggie manner, a few members responded immediately. The Commandant had \$250,000 to begin the project, which would become the Sanders Corps of Cadets Center in 1992.

The first hire of the Darling Era, Major Jake Betty '73, USAR, now Colonel USAR (Ret) and Lieutenant General, Texas State Guard (Ret), returned to the Commandant's Staff as a Cadet Training Officer (CTO). Another cornerstone, he served in many capacities, including Interim Commandant until retiring from Texas A&M in 2012. Two additional CTOs came aboard within that school year.

Progressing from the first CTO in 1988, the Division is now designated as Operations and Training. Currently led by Assistant Commandant John Fleming '94, Lieutenant Colonel USMC (Ret), and Deputy Tom Felts '78, Lieutenant Colonel USMC (Ret), the Division includes ten CTOs. Providing university oversight, each CTO is responsible for a major unit, which consists of four or five outfits. Pursuant to the Corps Mission Statement and the Corps Leadership Development Model, the CTOs consider themselves educators who coach, mentor, and inspire Cadets and work with Cadet Leadership to ensure policy and standards are upheld. Each CTO fulfills additional duties as an instructor in the SOMS Program, advisor to university sponsored special units or activities, and as Commandant's Duty Officer. The CTOs are retired military personnel and thereby authorized to wear uniforms. They are seen on the sidelines at football games, around the Quad, and in conjunction with Corps activities. They, along with other uniformed Office of the Commandant members, are often mistaken for active duty personnel. Operations and Training took two sad hits during the Spring of 2020 with the passing of beloved Assistant Commandant Glenn Starnes '81, Colonel USMC (Ret), who led the Department for eight years, and CTO Lee Hassman '88, Lieutenant Commander USN (Ret) who



Joe E. Ramirez Jr. '79, Brigadier General, US Army, (Ret.) serves as the current Commandant of the Corps of Cadets.

was a member of the team for 12 years.

As Corps numbers had declined to a serious low, recruiting was an immediate priority. The Corps Recruiting Program began in the basement of the Trigon during fall semester 1988. The late LTC Mark Satterwhite '70, USAR, came aboard as Director along with Staff Assistant Theresa Becka, who is in her 32nd year of service. In addition to implementing strategies for on-campus recruiting, it was imperative to develop a program for statewide recruiting. In 1989, Maj Gen Darling enlisted the collaboration of Col Don Crawford '64, who in a USAF Reserve billet, had coordinated a successful recruiting program for the Air Force Academy. The outcome was the Corps Leadership Outreach Program (CLO). Coordinated through the Recruiting Office, former Cadets again answered the call to action by voluntarily recruiting in their home areas across the state. With no funding available, five CLO volunteers pooled their money to have material printed to enhance their efforts. As additional Aggies contributed to the cause, the Texas Aggie Corps of Cadets Association was created.

GUIDING AND GROWING

From square one beginnings, featuring a carousel slide show and no budget, to the multitude of programs and cutting edge technology, the Recruiting Program developed and moved forward at full speed. The Recruiting Office is now led by Assistant Commandant Sam Hawes '81, Colonel USA (Ret). It consists of four recruiters, three administrative professionals, and 12 call center billets for student workers. In addition to one-on-one consultation with prospective Cadets, each of the recruiters manage specific programs such as AggieLand Saturday, Spend the Night with the Corps, Junior Cadets Accessions Program, Aggie Eagle Program, Cadet Recruiting chains, and the Aggie Corps Recruiting Program, successor to the CLO Program.

The initial program for D&C Cadets was implemented in spring 1989. The CTOs put together and delivered a series of classes that addressed pertinent items. The D&C Cadets met on Thursday afternoons during traditional times in which contract Cadets would report to their respective ROTCs for training. Over the next few years, the program moved forward and gained momentum. Under the leadership of Maj Becky Ray, USAFR, its authorization as a one-hour elective course and scheduling during the school day was a big step forward.

From humble beginnings, the D&C program has progressively developed. Located in the Ash 1 Leadership Learning Center and recently renamed the Hollingsworth Center for Ethical Leadership (HCEL), the program is now led by Dr. David Keller '07, Lieutenant Colonel USAF (Ret), along with two additional professional educators and an administrative coordinator. The HCEL delivers a comprehensive program that combines the formal study of leadership concepts with application and practice of leadership principles. It also provides internships, job placement assistance, and a leadership certificate to Cadets. The HCEL received the prestigious Promise Practice Award in 2019.

Corps Scholarships are managed by Associate Director, Corps Scholarship Programs Peter Siegel '96, Commander NOAA (Ret) and Administrative Coordinator Kay Cook. The program administers more than 2,400 scholarships and disburses more than \$4M annually. Greater than 90 percent of the Cadets are scholarship beneficiaries, the majority of which are endowed through the Texas A&M Foundation. Funds from licensing continue to support the Commandant's Leadership Award scholarships. Corps scholarships are separate from military scholarships, which are administrated by the ROTC Departments and require a military service obligation.

Academic success has always been a top priority and the results have progressively improved. The old "2.0 and go" t-shirts and attitudes are long gone, and the idea that Cadets can't make good grades is a long-proven misconception. The original Academic Support Program was an occupant in the Corps Center. Laura Arth '75 Corps Academic Advisor, in addition

to supporting many Cadets via personal advising, initiated tutoring and volunteer academic advisor programs, coordinated with outfit academic staffs and enhanced the Simpson Honor Society.

The current Academics and International Programs

Department is located in the Buzbee Leadership Learning Center. It is led by Assistant Commandant Meredith Simpson '03, recipient of the 2019 Division of Student Affairs Award of Distinction, along with three additional Scholastics Performance Specialists. These professionals work with Cadets directly through relationships and one-on-one consultation and indirectly by coordinating programs directed at academic success or recovery. In collaboration with the Department of International Studies and the Study Abroad Programs Office, the Department coordinates several different travel programs for Cadets.

The Commandant's Office presently consists of 54 individuals. The increase of staff, and implementation and progress of these programs over time has enabled the Corps to reach a position of excellence that could not have been attained otherwise. It is significant to note that many of these positions

and programs are funded through gift money, not state or university money.

The evolution of the Commandant's Office and progress of the Corps has been a continuing process since 1986. Ensuing Commandants, MajGen Ted Hopgood Jr. '65, LTG John Van Alstyn '66, and BG Joe E. Ramirez Jr. '79 have continued to lead the Corps into the 21st Century.

Over the past 10 years under BG Ramirez, the Corps has seen great strides in the classroom, on the Quad, and in the military. The cumulative Corps GPA has risen from a 2.72 in the fall of 2010 to a 3.11 in the fall of 2019. The Class of 2020 is the 6th consecutive class to graduate with a term and cumulative GPA above a 3.0, and they completed their time in the Corps with a 3.20 cumulative GPA—the highest class GPA on record for the Corps. The number of women in the Corps has increased to from 11% to 17%. The Corps Excursion Program has allowed 700 Cadets to travel around the world to places like Germany,

Korea, Australia, Turkey, Japan, Israel, and more. The number of Cadets commissioning has increased from 185 in 2010-11 to 231 in 2019-20.

An \$80M Quad renovation has included adding four Leadership-Learning Centers (LLCs) with six computer labs, a Starbucks, a total renovation of all of the dorms, the addition of an athletic training room to help injured

Cadets rehabilitate, and the creation of the Music Activities Center which is home to all of the university's bands with a full-sized football field for the Fightin' Texas Aggie Band to practice on. Phase II is currently under review and includes plans to add two more LLCs, a new dorm for the Aggie Band, a new student recreation center, a fully-renovated two-story Duncan Dining Center, and a renovated Trigon. All of the advancements made in the last 10 years move us toward the modern relevant focus and success that we celebrate today and will continue to help the Corps grow.

Thanks to the many who provided input to this project and to those who reviewed it for accuracy: Maj Gen Tom Darling, BG Don Johnson, COL Don Burton, COL Jim Woodall and LTC "Buck" Henderson. Credits: Keepers of the Spirit, by Dr. John Adams, Jr., and many Aggieland yearbooks. This story is dedicated to the memory of the late Col Joe West '54.



International Corps Excursions are a popular benefit for Cadets. A recent group visited Checkpoint Charlie while in Germany in 2019.