

The US Air Force Academy Class of 1963 Honors Janet Edwards

Photos and article by Jimmie Butler, Class of 1963



NOTE: When I write my summaries of Memorial Services, I include things you might have learned/observed if you'd been beside me as I took the pictures. So as I cover the genesis of this portrait revealed at our 63-Year Reunion Banquet, I will highlight a few observations you might have had as we attended about 70 Memorial Services Janet was in charge of for our class.

One of the highlights of our 63-Year Reunion occurred at our Friday evening banquet where we had a special unveiling of the portrait of Janet Edwards, the USAF Academy's Mortuary Affairs Officer for the last 30+ years. It was particularly appropriate that her parents and sisters were present at the banquet and ceremonies to see the Class of 1963 honor Janet.

Background:

At our 60-year reunion in 2023, we wanted to present a gift to Janet for all the professional services she has provided over the years to the families of our deceased classmates and of some of their families. At the end of our lives, Janet has been there just as Mrs. McComas was there in Arnold Hall to help us at the beginning of our cadet lives.

We were reminded that a gift of monetary value would run afoul of longstanding Civil Service regulations. So the best we could do was a bouquet of roses. At the end of her presentation on the mortuary services provided at the USAF Academy Cemetery, Jim Fain made some remarks about the great appreciation the class has for her extraordinary support she provides over the years and presented the roses to Janet.

In the visiting afterward, she told me she wanted a picture of her with her roses to send to her mother. So that gift from the class was particularly special to her.

A Painting of Janet:

Those of us who have routinely seen Janet oversee our memorial services several times a year thought Janet deserved more recognition from the class than just the roses. Mrs. McComas earned a portrait of her in Arnold Hall. We felt Janet deserved a painting accompanied by information about how well she has always been there. I believe the appropriate place is in Doolittle Hall that is focused on grads.

I worked up some of the justification. In 20+ years, I have photographed about 80 Memorial Services at the USAFA Cemetery. More than 70 were for our class grads and families. I believe Janet was present at close to 70, carefully watching that everything goes with the dignity the ceremonies deserve. There were some long periods when she didn't have her assistant position filled. So she was there for virtually every service at the Academy Cemetery during those times.

When I first started photographing, almost all services involved caskets. With the transition to the majority involving cremations, many families choose warmer months for their journey to Colorado. So, summers tend to be the busiest at the Academy Cemetery. A few years ago, we had 8 in June, and it was kind of a rainy June. At a Monday service, I mentioned to Janet that we had three that week. She responded: "I have eight."

Her work includes all the coordination and setup for each Memorial Service long before we gather at the Base Chapel or the cemetery. And she manages and sets high standards for the young volunteers who serve as the Honor Guards for all military services at the Academy Cemetery. And she is in charge of the caretakers who prepare the grave sites and generally keep the cemetery trimmed and looking professional.

Vic Thacker came up with some statistics. Between 9 March 1992 and 5 June 2026, Janet arranged 2028 services, including 134 for our classmates and spouses.

Vic Thacker as Class President and Jim Kuhn as VP took the challenge forward to convince USAFA officials that a portrait of Janet was very appropriate to display somewhere that grads gathered. Timing was a bit of a problem. According to Vic, "Right after we made our case to the official Memorial Committee, the Academy was hit by the tsunami of downsizing the civilian positions and other mandates of change coming from DC that pushed our request/proposal to the bottom of the priority list. I would say that almost everybody we talked with were happy with the concept of honoring Janet with a portrait".

One drawback was a problem with honoring a federal employee who was not yet retired. After a few months, General Fogleman and the current Superintendent came up with a compromise. Go forward with the painting; but, not make it public until Janet retires. At her retirement ceremony, we will unveil it again at its final location. Another celebration.

Vic and Jim selected a great choice for the artist and made the connection between the artist and Janet. Friday night we got to see the outstanding result of all that effort.

Friday Evening Banquet:

We gathered at the Polaris Hotel, just beyond the North Gate, on Friday evening, 5 June, for the reunion's closing banquet.



Janet and her proud parents, Mike and Barbara Norris, were seated front and center.



Lieutenant General Mike Gould (18th Superintendent of USAFA) and his wife, Paula, and General Ron Fogleman also were at the main table.



Vic Thacker introduced General Gould for Opening Remarks

I had been curious about General Gould's presence. He quickly explained that he and Paula had hosted Janet at their home many times, so they were well acquainted with Janet. Also, I had met Paula at least once at our services when she represented the USAF Academy Ladies, offering condolences to the family at the end of a graveside service.

General Gould had gathered comments from about half a dozen former Superintendents expressing their appreciation for Janet's incomparable service to the USAF Academy. I was delighted to hear that much high-level knowledge existed on how important Janet was to the USAFA mission.

That was on top of our visit to Wecker Hall where I had told retired 4-star and former Commandant, Steve Lorenz, I was looking for a good place to hang Janet's picture. We talked about some of the rules (which he thought we might get around), and he was definitely enthusiastic about honoring Janet in the way she deserves. He's with the Foundation and briefed us on the outreach to outstanding high school seniors, which he oversees.

While I concluded that Wecker Hall with its locked front door wouldn't have the exposure we want for Janet's portrait and story, General Lorenz likely could be a strong ally when we eventually try to get a place of honor (with lots of traffic) in a refurbished Doolittle Hall.

General Gould also made our analogy of Janet being the Mrs. McComas counterpart for USAFA grads.

During General Gould's sharing about Janet's professional expertise, he reminded us that her job wasn't only supporting grads and their families. Janet also manages large funerals, such as that for Brigadier General Robin Olds, Fighter Pilot, Triple Ace in World War II and the Vietnam War, former Commandant of Cadets, and legendary leader loved by many who flew with him--and sometimes an irritant to superiors who didn't earn such loyalty.

On 30 June 2007, Janet supervised his Memorial Service at the USAF Academy Chapel and Cemetery. Here are a few pictures that illustrate the scope of that job.



Dozens of cadets with their swords and Patriot Guard Riders with their American flags set the scene to honor General Olds. Janet used the Riders and their Flags as sides of a corridor leading to and from the Chapel.



Notice Janet's expression and professional watchfulness is pretty much a match for what the artist captured in the painting. If you didn't know, you would have never guessed that this woman standing alone was in charge putting together the entire ceremonies to honor General Olds.



Janet integrated the large contingent of Patriot Guard Riders and their American flags as part of the grandeur of the ceremonies at the cemetery. Janet is Hands-on when she needs to be. Here she is making sure the folded flags for General Olds's daughters will be with the Honor Guard members who need to have them.



The Honor Guard with General Olds's Flag and Urn has just marched through the corridor of American flags held by the Patriot Guard Riders.



Lt Gen John Regni, USAFA's 17th Superintendent, presents folded American flags to General Olds's two daughters.

The crowd at the cemetery was the largest I witnessed in 70+ Memorial Services.



Janet arranges clearances and timing for flyovers, when scheduled. The P-51 Mustang is one type of fighter that helped General Olds become a Double-Ace in World War II. The MiG represents a type of North Vietnamese jet fighters he earned four additional aerial victories against in North Vietnam to become a USAF Triple Ace.



Following General Gould's remarks, he and General Fogleman unveiled Janet's portrait.

About a year ago, I had a phone call with Cynthia Feustel, the artist chosen to paint Janet's portrait. I explained Janet's significance and why we were determined to honor her. I didn't make any suggestions of what I thought the portrait should be. Cynthia was going to meet Janet and discuss ideas about what would be appropriate.

Seems like I had seen Mrs. McComas's portrait hanging in Arnold Hall, and I remember it as kind of a standard sitting portrait.

I was surprised and delighted at how well the painting represents Janet's story over these 30+ years. I would never have thought of using the cemetery as the background. And the expression captures what I have witnessed dozens of times. Professional, dedicated to excellence, taking in all the details to make sure nothing goes wrong, setting a decades-long standard no one in the future will ever match.



Some of you might wonder about the size of the American flag. I offer this recent photo for some perspective. The cemetery now has a huge American flag to honor the service of grads.



Vic introducing artist, Cynthia Feustel.

The setting sun is giving us some problems. I try not to intrude any more than necessary when I'm taking picture and the room is very packed. So I chose this angle from the side that I would never otherwise use. The result was several different photos that I actually liked, though the angle wouldn't have been my first choice.



Cynthia talked about getting ideas from Janet and her appreciation for being selected for the project.



Janet followed to express her thanks for the honor from the Class of 1963.



Crowd shots listening to Janet.



I almost discarded the 2nd picture as I often do discard some when going through all the pics from a photo shoot. Then I decided to use it for the symbolism of Vic being the guy behind the painting who led in making it reality.

If I'd been so smart with the idea when taking the picture, you would see more of Vic in the picture.

Janet's comments ended the formal part of the ceremony. I continued taking pictures that Janet had requested and of whoever wanted to be photographed with the new painting.

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Janet and her proud parents, Barbara and Mike Norris.



Janet and Vic.



General Gould, Janet, and General Fogleman.



Paula Gould, Janet, and General Fogleman. He is presenting something, perhaps a coin involving his service as the USAF Chief of Staff, the first USAFA grad to attain that honored position.



Janet and her parents in front of our flags.





Janet, her parents, and sisters, Sherry Hicks and Kerri Castleman

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As I spend a few hours processing a set of photos, my mind sometimes picks up patterns I hadn't foreseen. In this case, I decided I had never seen Janet smile so much in all these years. That was a nice conclusion to reach. Of course, our interactions over the years amounted to pretty much one visit to her office, a chance meeting in Sam's, two chance encounters in the parking lot when she was leaving Sams, and about seventy funerals. Not the stuff big smiles come from.

It was great that the Class of 1963 could give Janet an evening of such big smiles.

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After the ceremonies, I introduced myself to General Gould. I asked if Janet had ever talked to him about the Class of 1961's 40-Year Reunion. He said he didn't remember her doing so.

That was kind of an out-of-left-field question to ask without context.

I said if Janet had told him, he would remember--because it involved Nine-Eleven.

The Tuesday of 61's upcoming reunion was September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001!

One morning nearly 20 years ago, I had visited Janet's office near the South Gate. She had told me a story that one doesn't forget.

A significant event scheduled for the 40-Year Reunion was a Memorial Service for their USAFA classmate, Victor Apodaca, Jr. Vic had been shot down while flying fighters out of Danang, AB, SVN on 8 June 1967, 6 years and 1 day after graduation.

Thirty-four years later, Vic's remains had been identified through the forensics laboratories in Hawaii, and Vic finally was on his way home. Vic's son was accompanying Vic from Hawaii, and on Tuesday morning, they were in Minneapolis awaiting a scheduled flight to Colorado Springs.

Our world changed that morning. Before noon, all flights over the continental United States, except military flights, were grounded. There would be no commercial airliner flying from Minneapolis to Colorado that morning or for the rest of the week.

Many of us in the class flew small Cessnas as Forward Air Controllers most of a lifetime ago. Our missions in the air over Southeast Asia involved looking for trouble, immediately assessing whatever had happened when trouble found us, quickly devising a plan to get things back under control, and implementing that plan. Usually the elapsed time was a matter of minutes as lives could depend on us acting without delay.

If I had been with Janet that September morning, my best analysis would have been the attack on the homeland was such a cataclysmic event that the week's reunion would be over before Janet could solve the problem.

Nevertheless, Janet started calling her contacts in the Pentagon, and I imagine no one believed her problem was solvable within the week. But Janet persisted.

Her pleas for help finally produced an order for a Special Air Mission for a USAF C-130 escorted by two, armed F-16s to fly from Minneapolis to Colorado Springs and bring Vic home in time for his Memorial Service at the reunion.

That exemplifies Janet's professionalism and dedication to serving the graduates of the Air Force Academy and their families.

NOTE: I shared a week of dining in Mitchell Hall in the summer of 1959 with Victor Apodaca. I got to know him a bit. Then, in the fall on a Saturday evening after a football game, he was Table Commandant for our table full of Doolies. He was much more pleasant than in the summer and had a more ready smile during that short encounter. He was Native American from Arizona, I believe, and I liked him based on that evening meal. Met his son and got a little acquainted at the dedication of the Southeast Asia Pavilion in about 2015.

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One other story of Janet's service to the Class of 1963. . . .

12 January 2007: Probably the most Miserable Weather ever
for a Graveside Service at the USAF Academy Cemetery

When I woke up that morning, the temperature in Colorado Springs was 4 degrees and probably with a little light snow. It had been a wetter than usual winter. We were in a cycle of a blizzard a week for four weeks. This was one of those four days.

Our service that day was for George Byron. The drive to the chapel was okay, and as I drove the road up to the Cadet Area, I emerged into bright sunshine above the clouds. Not bad. Not bad, at all.

An empty hearse was in front of the chapel. I climbed the stairs and entered the chapel, but it was empty. After waiting and wondering for about 15 minutes, someone came by. I explained that I was looking for a Memorial Service. The person suggested that they probably were in the Catholic Chapel on a lower floor. That was the day I learned there was a Catholic Chapel on a lower floor.

I found it, and as a Type A personality, I kind of sneaked in the back. One of the Priests was speaking about George and seemed to have a lot of inside information. I thought he had really researched us.

A few minutes later, I recognized that the Priest was my friend, and our classmate, Jerry Adinolfi. Wasn't my best day.



At the end of the chapel service, the Honor Guard carried George's casket into the bright sunshine. The temp had risen to about 10 degrees. So far, so good.



Then we descended into the clouds and snow that had kind of a polar-world feel to it. You'll notice in most of the pictures that except for the pine needles, flags, and casket, I could have been shooting the pictures with a black-and-white setting.

The HonorGuard had recently received new cold-weather gear, or this one likely would have to have been rescheduled. When I got my cameras out of my car, I left a glove behind. The air and wind were so cold that I had to put that hand in a pocket when I wasn't taking a picture.



This probably is the most classic shot I took at any of the memorial services. I later offered a copy to one of the NCOs in USAFA Public Affairs. He had been a photographer with USAF Public Affairs at the Pentagon. He had seen thousands of Air Force photos. He told me that very seldom had he ever seen a photograph he wished he had taken—but this was one. It was published on the front page of the base newspaper.



The Honor Guard folds George's flag as Willetta looks on. Notice the concentration. I believe the NCO on the middle of the left side was in charge. Shortly after they started the smaller triangular folds, I believe he decided the result wasn't going to be a tight enough triangle, so he called for restarting the triangles. Folding the flag with heavy gloves is probably more of a challenge than with the thin, white gloves usually worn.

I took that as an indication of the standards of perfection Janet had taught the Honor Guard to meet each time. So we all stood a little longer in the freezing cold while the Honor Guard took the time to get it right.



Janet is standing behind Willeta as the ceremony closes. Notice Janet's expression is very similar to what the artist captured in the painting nearly 20 years later.

One reason I said this is likely the worst weather ever for a graveside service is because about 4 months later in 2007, the Memorial Pavilion opened and bad weather services are pretty much held with the audience inside and Honor Guard outside for military honors. And, without the all-weather gear, services likely would have been rescheduled.

On that occasion, I heard Janet utter a memorable observation. After 30 years, the USAFA Cemetery now has rest rooms on site.

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Jimmie