

AFA '73 grads turn out for advance 'Sully' screening

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The Air Force Academy's "Illustrious Class of 1973" was well represented Thursday at a pre-screening of "Sully," the new movie based on the famed "miracle on the Hudson" plane landing by fellow classmate Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger.

Event organizer Mike "Jens" Jensen wanted to "get the grads all together at a unifying event to celebrate Sully's accomplishments — and have some fun," he said.

The group gathered for dinner and drinks at Bar Louie before heading to the Cinemark IMAX next door. As the theater filled to capacity with Academy grads, the class of '73 talked about their class and about their famous classmate.

John Stefonik, who met Sullenberger several times, was excited to see the movie.

"It's really an incredible story. I flew tankers, C-130s, and UV-18s, jump planes at the Academy," he said. "I've flown an Airbus out of LaGuardia (Airport) in that little bit of airspace and every time after that event in 2009 I said to myself, 'If it's my turn let me do as well as Sully.' He did a wonderful job in a terrible situation."

The group reminisced about their days at the Academy. "We started out with 1406, and 844 graduated," said Al Maurer. "There were 40 squadrons and so most of us only knew the guys in our own squadron," he said, "but there are a couple dozen of us from the Class of '73 in Colorado Springs and we all stay in touch."

Mike Arnett said his graduating class was one of distinction.

"We are called the Illustrious Class of 1973 because of Sully, and because we had a Chief of Staff of the Air Force," he said. "Five of the seven major commands came from our class at one point. We like to be humble, but at the same time recognized by others as an example of what you can achieve." Dale Birch said the class holds a reunion every five years, and it seems to grow every year "as more of them retire and move here," he said. "Our class had the largest reunion in the Academy's history." Stefonik added that the last reunion attracted more than 700 grads. "Our class is pretty close," he said, "and a dozen or so of us get together every month for lunch."

Class of '84 alum Jensen, who organized the showing through the USAFA Network, said the Class of '73 was special. "Obviously everybody's proud of Sully and what he did. But the whole Class of 1973 was really a fantastic group. They've worked well with the AOG (Associate of Graduates) and they sponsor the National Character & Leadership Symposium every year, and we're proud of all of them for what they do," he said.

The group gave the movie high marks. "I thought it was great," said Dennis Haugh, "but Clint Eastwood always does a great job."

Arnett, a former cargo pilot, said, "My heart was thumping, and when Tom Hanks said his heart rate was 110 I think that's where mine was, too. Flying big aircraft, water landings were something we practiced for as far as how to prepare for impact, but also with the assumption that if you were involved in one you were probably going to die." Some movie-goers compared the film to the autobiographical book "Highest Duty: My Search for What Really Matters."

"I just finished reading his book," Birch said, "and they did a really good job with the film. He didn't cover any of the investigation in his book, but he did cover a lot of his pilot background."

The film focused on the landing and subsequent investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board. "I'm proud to be his classmate," Maurer said, "these investigations always focus on the pilot and human error. I don't think the NTSB was necessarily trying to pin what happened on Sully. It's hard to imagine what it's like to make decisions in those circumstances when the adrenaline's flowing," he said.

There were some minor criticisms as well. Arnett noted that the "only thing in the movie that was not quite accurate was that they did not use a real ring," he said, referring to the Class of 1973 ring that appeared prominently in several close-in shots of Hanks. Others were pleased that the ring was shown, though.

“They did a good job of putting the Academy Crest on his ring,” Haugh said, and Arnett showed his own ring for comparison. “Every class has the Academy Crest on one side. Ours has the big 73 on the other side, and you see that in the movie. They also accurately depicted the F-15 Eagle (fighter aircraft), and it says United States Air Force Academy around the bezel,” he said.

Arnett’s wife, Pris, said the movie did not really talk about Sullenberger’s experience as a glider pilot. Mike agreed.

“I know they can’t include everything in the movie, but Sully was a glider instructor pilot — sailplanes they called them at the Academy,” Mike said. “He knew very well how to gauge how far he could go at that altitude without power. I think it may have been even worse than the movie showed, because if his engines seized the blades wouldn’t have been turning at all like they showed in the simulation. There would be no air going through those engines and they’d just be big blocks dragging the plane down.”

Maurer had only one complaint. “I have to tell you,” he said, “Sully is much better looking than Tom Hanks, so it was a kind of a downgrade to have Hanks play him ... but maybe that’s just me,” he said