

## Why I am a Member

By Lee Barnby, CA State President

Tonight I found myself reflecting on why I am involved in AFA. First and foremost, I care deeply about the Air Force, its Airmen, and the future of our country. They each face extraordinary challenges; the future of the AF and our country concern me more than a little. While I may not have the reach to address many of the challenges, I can do something. Second, I believe in service before self...that's not just an Air Force core value, but a human one. I've been blessed in life beyond what I deserve and feel an obligation to give back. Today, I thought about another reason that drives me, that being that I grow from the experiences I gain while serving.

Today I had the pleasure of participating in the San Diego Chapter's annual "AFA and AFROTC Aztec 'Shoot-out' Scholarship Golf Tournament" in Escondido. This tournament is the primary fundraiser for the chapter's scholarship program. Last year, the chapter provided \$8,800 in scholarships to AFROTC Det 075 cadets at San Diego State University. One member of my foursome was Neil Black. During the BBQ afterwards, I asked Neil why he participated in the fundraiser; I wondered if he was part of a corporate-sponsored team or maybe a chapter board member. He simply stated that "He feels an allegiance to the Air Force." What Neil didn't share with me (I learned later with some internet research) was that in 1965, as a 20 year old E2, he was involved in a rescue attempt as a PJ when his helicopter was shot down. He was subsequently captured by the enemy and held as a POW for over 7 years, one of the longest serving enlisted POWs in American history. He endured brutal torture and inhuman conditions, but never lost faith in God or his country. Released in 1973, he was awarded the Air Force Cross, 2d only to the MOH in precedence. He was commissioned by fellow POWs while in captivity for his leadership, professionalism, and heroism; while his prison commissioning carried no force of effect in 1969, President Nixon authorized the direct commissioning in Apr 73. You can read Neil's story at [www.carlsbadmagazine.com/stories/vets](http://www.carlsbadmagazine.com/stories/vets).

I was struck by Neil's humility and sense of service to others. Despite the extraordinary sacrifice he made for his country, he supported the AFROTC scholarship fundraiser out of a strong, continuing commitment to our AF. Although this is as it should be, I believe it's an uncommon and honorable character trait. It was just an afternoon on the golf course, yet I learned a lot from Neil about honor, service, and commitment...it was an inspiring and energizing day and I was proud to have shared time with a national hero.

What we do is tough; we're challenged with membership engagement, Private Organization rules interpretations, and other issues. But your efforts are still needed. There's no doubt that our Airmen will continue to be placed in harm's way. AFA, especially through the grass roots efforts of its chapters (i.e., you), will continue to play a pivotal role in taking care of our current and future Airmen and their families. We make a difference. In the words of the influential Jewish scholar Rabbi Hillel, "If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, then what am I? And if not now, when?"