

Second Lieutenant Holden Simmonds, USAF (USAFA Class of 2013)



Second Lieutenant Holden Simmonds,
senior portrait at USAFA

For years, I had prepared myself for the Air Force Academy. I was an above average student, active in sports, music, and leadership within my community; I even had my private pilot's license. Having graduated high school at the top of my class with above average SAT scores, I thought I was a "shoe in" for the academy up until the day I received a rejection letter.

I remember the day I received my Thin White Envelope (TWE) as if it were yesterday. I found myself walking around the house in a daze, questioning how and why this happened. Having done everything they asked for, I was now forced to answer the question "Where do I go from here?" While researching my options, I stumbled upon the Greystone website and noticed that it was the only academy prep program affiliated with a 4-year accredited university. I could continue to pursue my appointment to the Air Force Academy while earning college credits. As soon as I had finished reading through the website, I called to set up a visit for my family and myself. What I thought would be a quick visit turned into a full day of touring the campus, meeting professors, and having lunch with the Greystone staff. I liked the family atmosphere and I immediately felt that I belonged.

As a student in the Greystone program, I learned to organize, prioritize, and manage my own schedule which had been filled with challenging college classes, studying, physical training, community service, and character development and leadership training. The Greystone staff appointed me to the Class President position in the first semester. In that time, I was forced with a very difficult decision. A few of my classmates had broken the Greystone Honor Code and Standards of Conduct and I had to make the biggest leadership decision of my life, turn my teammates in or ignore their behavior. Based on the extensive Leadership program we had all been through, the decision was very clear. I had to turn my teammates in. I had decided that the actions of a few were not going to ruin the goals of teammates who were willing to follow the Code of Honor and Standards of Conduct.

In the spring semester, I earned my appointment to the Air Force Academy (USNA and USCGA too!) and when I arrived in Colorado Springs that summer, I made sure to utilize all of the life lessons I learned from my Greystone experience. While at the academy, I took advantage of every opportunity. I traveled the world, experienced life as an exchange student with the Naval Academy, networked, continued to work in the honor program at the academy, held many leadership positions, and maybe more than anything else, I studied. The culmination of these five years of effort (I include my year at Greystone with my years at the academy) was earning a pilot slot and graduating in the top 100 cadets of my class.

Looking back, I don't question why I received the "TWE" anymore. I see it as a blessing. The lessons I learned at Greystone helped me during my time at the Air Force Academy and will be with me for the rest of my life.