

Good Advice, Part 1  
Drue L. DeBerry, '63

After more than fifty years, some memories have faded. Some have morphed. Others remain distinct but incomplete. A few still haunt my dreams late at night like a poorly edited home movie. An image here, a film clip there, dubbed voices of faintly remembered dialogue. Though the dream is incomplete, it always ends the same way on a cold, clear Colorado morning in February 1958 in the office of Col Benjamin B. Cassiday, Jr., Deputy Commandant of Cadets at the United States Air Force Academy.

“Sir, Cadet DeBerry reports as ordered.”

Col Cassiday returned my salute and told me to stand at ease. “Well, Mr. DeBerry, this is the end of the line. You have failed to meet our standards and we are sending you home. A staff car is waiting outside to take you to the airport. My advice to you is that you should get on with your life. Make this a clean break. Forget about the Air Force Academy as we will forget about you. Good luck. You are dismissed.” We exchanged salutes.

I left the building and got into the waiting staff car. I was numb with shock, but aware enough to know that I had just experienced an earthquake-of-a-failure that would be with me for the rest of my days.

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This story began in 1956, the second semester of my junior year at Central High School in Memphis, Tennessee. Money was short and I had no plans for college. As I speculated aloud about my uncertain future, a friend’s mom suggested that I apply for Annapolis. “There’s no tuition. You get a free education and you have a career when you graduate,” she said, eyeing her daughter who sat beside me at their kitchen table. I wrote to Annapolis and requested a catalogue. Studying the catalogue, I learned that I needed several courses required for admission and I realized that I could not schedule all of them in my senior year. That seemed to rule out attending Annapolis.

A few weeks later, I saw a magazine article describing the new Air Force Academy in Colorado. The article claimed that admission depended on a congressional nomination and a competitive

examination rather than high school course work. I requested an Air Force Academy catalogue and confirmed this information. The Air Force would select the best-qualified nominees for the 306 available appointments in 1957, including six appointments from Tennessee. That evening I wrote a letter to Congressman Cliff Davis who represented Memphis expressing my interest in attending the Air Force Academy. In September, I met with Congressman Davis. A few days later, he informed me that he had nominated me for an appointment and that the Air Force would soon contact me regarding entrance examinations. Over the next several months, I took all of the examinations and waited impatiently for the results. In May 1957, I received a telegram from Congressman Davis notifying me that I had won an appointment.

I arrived at Lowry AFB, Colorado – temporary location of the Air Force Academy until completion of the permanent site near Colorado Springs – on 5 July. Senior enlisted men met us and led us through two days of in processing. By Sunday, we had completed most of the paperwork. We had our fatigue uniforms and our room assignments in one of the many two-story wooden barracks in the cadet area. The two-man rooms were comfortable. My roommate, Bud Utendorf, was a friendly fellow from Ohio. The food in the dining hall was good, Colorado was beautiful, and I was wondering why the Academy catalogue described basic cadet summer as stressful and demanding.



CAPTION: Before '61 met the ATOs. L to R, Chris Dixon, Drue DeBerry, and Bud Utendorf.

On Sunday evening, the sergeants marched us to the cadet theater for a lecture by Brig Gen Stillman, the Commandant of Cadets. Following Gen Stillman's remarks, his deputy, Col Cassiday again confirmed that our summer training would be demanding – and he informed us that as we left the theater we would meet the Air Training Officers (ATOs) responsible for that training. The ATOs were all recently commissioned officers in the Air Force. Most were graduates of West Point. "When you leave this theater," Col Cassiday said, "the ATOs will be all over you like rain and you will wish you had an umbrella. Your basic cadet training is about to begin."

The ATOs soon confirmed that weather forecast. They were demanding perfectionists and extraordinary role models. That night as we marched back to our barracks, the ATOs seemed to outnumber us at least two-to-one. Nothing about our marching met their standards. Nothing escaped their corrective attention. The march to the barracks seemed to last a very long time.

The next two months flashed by in a blur. Like every other new cadet, I was frequently in trouble with one or another of the ATOs. We wore a metal nametag holder on our uniforms with a paper nametag inserted. We had received a hundred or so of these paper nametags when we arrived. I soon learned why. When an ATO had to correct me more than once, he took my paper nametag and that evening I would have "extra instruction" with that ATO. For the remainder of the day until I could get back to my room, that vacant nametag holder attracted the attention of every ATO I encountered. After a few days of this, I figured that I needed to be better prepared – so I placed a half-dozen paper nametags in the metal holder, one on top of another. I could pull one paper nametag from the holder and still have five more. Big mistake. The first ATO to demand my nametag took all six of them. I got six evenings of "extra instruction"!

We completed basic training with a field encampment at Buckley bombing range several miles east of Lowry. When we returned to Lowry from Buckley, the academic year began. The ATOs turned the Class of 1961 over to upper class cadets – the Class of 1959 and the Class of 1960 – now deemed ready to take charge of the cadet wing. The ATOs dispersed to other assignments throughout the Air Force.

After completing a tough summer training program, I looked forward to starting classes. I expected fourth class training to give way to academics. The prescribed curriculum included chemistry, math, English, philosophy, engineering drawing, physical education, and military training. The Academy assigned us to fifteen-man sections according to our entrance exam scores or our high school grades. Every few weeks during the semester, section assignments shuffled according to grades. I began the fall semester in middle sections of English, philosophy, and math. I began in the bottom section of chemistry. Col Woodward, head of the chemistry department, taught the last section.

As the semester progressed, I had considerable difficulty balancing my fourth class duties and my studies. By mid term, I was in trouble in chemistry. I soon found myself slipping in math and behind in fourth-class knowledge. As I struggled with grades, I became depressed. I lost sight of my ultimate goal and I started wondering if this free education was really worth the cost. I coasted in everything else and tried to concentrate on chemistry.

In those early years, fourth-class cadets remained at the Academy for the Christmas holidays. Semester final examinations occurred in late January. My family drove to Denver to celebrate Christmas with me and I tried to forget about my chemistry problems for ten days. The Christmas break helped restore my motivation but did nothing for my academic problems.

After semester final exams in January, I had failing grades in both chemistry and math. Following a brief period of intense study, I took new final examinations – turnout exams – in both courses. I failed both and the Academy Board recommended my dismissal for academic deficiency. A short time later, I found myself standing before Col Cassiday's desk on that fateful February morning.

I returned to Memphis, dejected, embarrassed, and ashamed. I also returned with great respect for the Air Force Academy and the men I had met there. Everyone I encountered at the Academy had given me the professional support and encouragement that should have made a difference. Col Woodyard had provided extra instruction in chemistry; my AOC (Air Officer Commanding), Capt Ellis had counseled me like a Dutch uncle about my attitude. To no avail. I crashed and burned. As I flew home, I resolved to get on with my life as Col Cassiday had advised, and I

acknowledged that the failure I experienced at the Academy was mine alone – that my real downfall was less an academic failure than a failure in attitude.

By the time I arrived home, my dad had arranged for my conditional enrollment at Memphis State College. I registered for classes on the following Monday morning and attended my first classes the same day. I returned to my previous job at Memphis Public Library and settled into college. I enrolled in Air Force ROTC with the idea that I might still earn a commission.

Late in my first semester at Memphis State, I had a long conversation with Dr. A. B. Weir, our family physician and my Sunday school teacher. Dr. Weir had written a letter of recommendation for my admission to the Academy and he was very surprised that I had washed out. He believed I could do better – and he urged me to go back and try again. Go back and try again – that idea had never occurred to me.

I considered Dr. Weir's suggestion for a couple of weeks. Could I start over? Did I really want to start over? I was not eager to repeat basic cadet training a second time, but I knew that would be required. I also knew that none of the college credits earned at Memphis State would transfer to the Academy. If I could win a second appointment and graduate, I would be two years behind my classmates in the Class of 1961. If I stayed at Memphis State, with summer classes, I could still graduate in 1961 and probably earn an Air Force commission through ROTC. I weighed the alternatives. Then I wrote Representative Cliff Davis and ask if he would consider nominating me a second time – this time for the class entering in 1959. He replied that he would and I began the application process for a new appointment.

In the summer of 1958, I completed four more courses at Memphis State. That Fall I enrolled in chemistry, math, Spanish, cartography, and Air Force ROTC. By Christmas I had earned a 3.0 semester GPA and a B in chemistry. In the spring of 1959, I completed another math course and the second semester of college chemistry – and I completed the entrance exams for the Academy. In May, I received a telegram informing me of my appointment to the Academy Class of 1963. Soon afterward, I received a second telegram informing me that my appointment was subject to approval by the Academy Board – the same Board that had recommended my dismissal in 1958. After several anxious days and nights, the Board confirmed my new appointment.

*The second half of this article will appear in the September 2010 issue of Checkpoints.*

Good Advice  
Part 2  
Drue L. DeBerry, '63

*This is the conclusion of an article that began in the June 2010 issue of Checkpoints.*

I reported to the Air Force Academy – now located at the permanent site near Colorado Springs – on 26 June as one of the 755 new appointees to the Class of 1963. This time, instead of Air Force sergeants to ease us into our new military life, the upperclassmen who would supervise our basic cadet training – cadets from the Classes of 1960 and 1961 – started that training as we arrived. I immediately recognized many of those upperclassmen. Moreover, they remembered me – or someone who looked like me.



CAPTION: The Class of '61 welcomes the Class of '63 to the Air Force Academy, 26 June 1959

“Mister, do I know you? Do you have a brother that attended the Academy?”

“No, Sir. I do not have a brother that attended the Academy. And Yes, Sir. We have met. I was your classmate at Lowry in 1957 and 1958.”

Eyes rolled. Heads shook. I sometimes found myself doing pushups for “poor judgment” or as a “welcome back.” However, we soon settled into an appropriate professional relationship – the Class of 1961 and me – and we got on with summer training. Happily, I was just another Doolie.

The one exception to this pattern occurred about a week after '63 entered. Bud Utendorf, my roommate during the summer of 1957 was now my flight sergeant. He entered my room, sent my '63 roommate out, and closed the door. Then Bud told me that my unique status had raised some issues. Since I had completed basic cadet training in 1957, some folks in the Commandant's office were questioning if I should complete a second “Doolie” summer. The Commandant's staff had decided that since I completed most of my first Doolie year, I should not be under fourth-class customs during the academic year. There was even some discussion about immediately sending me home on leave until the start of the fall semester. Bud asked if I had any comments about these alternatives.

This conversation came as a complete surprise. I had always believed that starting over meant starting over. I expected the same treatment as any other new cadet. Even so, I was intrigued by the prospect of a freshman academic year without fourth-class customs. I told Bud that I did not want to go home for the summer and try to explain that to my friends in Memphis. I wanted to stay at the Academy and complete summer training with the Class of 1963. Things worked out that way. I completed a second Doolie summer with my new class.

I also learned that while the Academy would not accept transfer credit for core courses in 1959, entering cadets could take Academy final examinations in a number of courses and, with a passing grade, validate those course requirements. I took every examination offered and validated four courses: world geography, world civilization, American history, and – *drum roll, please* – both semesters of freshman chemistry. I also received transfer credit for three “enrichment” courses in geography and I scored high enough on other validation exams to earn advanced placement in several courses. I was thrilled with these results.

At the end of Doolie summer, I moved to 12<sup>th</sup> squadron. Someone briefed the upper classmen in 12<sup>th</sup> squadron on my status, and my transition went smoothly. I never went through any

“recognition training” – instead, I purchased prop-and-wing collar insignia at the cadet store and began life as a recognized fourth classman. Like every other Doolie, I took my turn serving as “hot pilot” or “cold pilot” at meals, and sharing in other fourth class duties. My ‘63 classmates and I soon discovered the advantages of having a recognized fourth classman in the fold. As long as I was discrete, there were many ways that I could help them cope with the “system” – and I did.

When the fall semester began, I plunged into academics with enthusiasm and completed the semester on the Dean’s List – his good list. I lost that status in my sophomore year when I encountered thermodynamics and calculus. I worked hard at both subjects but at the end of the spring semester in 1961, I had a failing grade in calculus. That was one of my lowest points as a cadet. This time my failure was not due to a bad attitude or a lack of determination. I just really did not understand calculus. The turnout examination proved that. Fortunately, the Academy Board gave me a second chance and allowed me to repeat the course that summer. For several weeks, I concentrated on nothing but calculus. The second time through, I passed the course.

The summer of 1961 proved memorable in several ways. In May of 1961, I met Betty Critchett on a blind date in Denver. By September, we were dating but since she was attending the University of Wyoming – 204 miles north of the Air Force Academy – we did not see each other very often. In June, I sat in Falcon stadium and watched the Class of ’61 graduate – and regretted that I could not graduate with them. Only later did I realize that but for my dismissal from the Class of 1961, I never would have met Betty.

By August of 1961, I was ready to get back to academics. I always did better in the humanities than the sciences so I usually added a history course when I had an elective option to fill. Those history courses helped pad my grade point average. I needed that help in the fall of 1961 and the spring of 1962 to balance against two semesters of electrical engineering and two semesters of mechanics.

One feature of the engineering courses, partial credit, always gave me some hope. If I got the procedures right when trying to solve a problem in mechanics, for example, I would get partial credit even if I got the wrong numerical answer. Partial credit could mean the difference between scoring zero on a test and scoring sixty-five or seventy percent – a very important consideration

in my case. I had some trouble with the second semester of electrical engineering but passed the course and looked forward to my senior year with hope and confidence even though I had one more semester of electrical engineering to complete.

In August 1962, my senior year, I developed a serious intestinal problem resulting in persistent nausea and diarrhea. After a week or so of unsuccessful treatment and significant weight loss, the Academy hospital transferred me to Fitzsimmons Army Medical Center in Denver. I took my textbooks with me and tried to keep up with my courses. Then, as my stay at Fitzsimmons stretched from days to weeks to months, something happened that proved the truly exceptional nature of the Air Force Academy faculty. My instructors began driving to Denver once a week to give me instruction or examinations in the hospital – and they continued to do so throughout the semester. Thanks to the dedication of those instructors, I completed every course successfully.

In mid November 1962, the doctors at Fitzsimmons concluded that an intestinal parasite caused my illness and began treatment that led to rapid improvement. I expected to return to the Academy by Thanksgiving. Then a few days later, I awoke in the hospital with swelling, intense pain, and paralysis in my right leg. These conditions, never conclusively diagnosed, gradually eased over the next four weeks and Fitzsimmons finally released me to duty a few days before Christmas.

That Christmas of 1962, Betty and I had been dating for a year and a half. We did not see each other very often, but when we did, something magic always happened. With only about six months left until graduation, I felt confident enough of my future to propose marriage. Betty accepted and we set the date – June 6, 1963 – the day after I would graduate from the Academy.

My last semester included courses in aeronautics, astronautics, physics, political science, and navigation. I knew it would be tough. I realized how tough when I took my first quiz in aeronautics. The instructor that day was a substitute for our regular instructor. The substitute, teaching his first class at the Academy, did not believe in partial credit. I answered the first part of the quiz – a definition – correctly. Although I followed the correct steps to solve a problem on that first quiz, I got the wrong answer – and a quiz grade of twenty-five points out of a possible one hundred. After class, I tried to discuss partial credit with the instructor but he was not receptive. I filed the quiz in my notebook for later study sessions. When the regular instructor

returned to class the following week, he continued the familiar policy on partial credit but I neglected discussing that first quiz with him.

By May, I knew that my aero grade was dangerously low. A few days after completing final exams, I received a telephone call from the Aero Department directing that I report to the Department immediately. When I arrived, an angry department head, Lt Col Crocker, pointed to a roster listing the name of every cadet in Aero 402. “Mr. DeBerry, do you see your name just below the red line on that roster?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Out of a possible 4,800 points in this course, you needed twenty-five more points to pass. Instead, you will be taking a turnout examination. What have you got to say for yourself?”

Alarm bells rang and panicky thoughts flashed through my mind. My first thought was “not another turnout examination!” I had taken three turnout examinations over six years and never passed one. My next thought was that I needed twenty-five points to pass the course – and I still believed that my quiz at the beginning of the semester was incorrectly graded. My final thought was “I cannot get married until I graduate. How can I possibly explain a wedding postponement to Betty, to her family, and to more than three hundred invited guests.”

Col Crocker still awaited my answer. I took a deep breath and explained that I believed my first quiz of the semester was graded incorrectly and that if graded correctly, that quiz would provide more than the twenty-five points I needed to pass the course. I also explained my unsuccessful attempt to get the grade corrected.

A long silence followed. I could imagine charges of insubordination as well as a failing grade. I could visualize the consequences of postponing a wedding.

Col Crocker asked if I could produce the quiz. I assured him that the quiz was in my room. He directed that I bring it to him. I ran to my dorm room, retrieved my aero notebook, and ran back to the Aero Department.

Col Crocker examined the quiz – raised the grade from twenty-five points to sixty points – and my name moved on the roster from the first failing grade in the course to the last passing grade.

For the next few days, I kept a low profile and counted the hours and the minutes until I got my diploma and my commission. A week later, I graduated from the Academy. The following day, Betty and I were married. I did not tell her about my aero grade until well after our tenth anniversary.

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Before graduation, I had a long talk with Col Ruenheck, the head of the history department, about my wish to teach history someday. That conversation led to my third tour at the Academy – from 1972 to 1975. For three very rewarding years, I taught history and advised cadets.

I served at the Academy again from 1984 to 1988, this time on the headquarters staff as the Director of Development and Alumni Programs. While in that position, I managed the design, construction, and funding of the Goldwater Visitor Center and I led a number of other projects that secured gift funding for various Academy needs. I also taught history as an additional duty.

After retiring from the Air Force, I returned to the history department in 1999 and again in 2007 to teach history for a semester. On each of these four assignments following graduation, I tried to bring the same sense of duty and responsibility to my students that I observed in the Academy faculty and staff when I was a cadet.

For more than fifty years, my haunting dream has reminded me of the commitments I made to myself on that lonely flight home from Denver in 1958. I am certain Col Cassiday had my best interests in mind when he advised me to make a clean break with the Academy and seek a fresh start in life. That good advice worked in ways that neither he nor I could have anticipated. It became a spur for me to overcome failure.