

The Air Force Academy Experience

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U.S. Air Force Academy

There is one date that I never forget. That date is June 26, 1959, the date that I entered the Air Force Academy. As an excited seventeen-year-old that had traveled across the country by train, my bubble was about to burst. I boarded a bus at the Colorado Springs train station with numerous other young men who were just as excited and anxious as I was to finally arrive at the Academy. The bus ride north to the Academy site lasted about an hour. I took in all of the strange scenery. The Academy is located about 15-20 miles northwest of Colorado Springs at the base of a mountain range called the Ramparts. There was a lot of excited small talk as our bus pulled to a stop near a ramp and a line of new modern buildings. As we departed the bus we got the surprise of our lives. Upperclassmen were everywhere yelling at us to form a line, get your chin back, do this, do that, and march straight ahead. We didn't know what hit us! We were immediately taken to the barber shop where our hair was cut very short. We were then ordered to form lines so that we could be issued military clothing (a lot of military clothing), and we were simply run and marched ragged the rest of the day by the upperclassman. We also took an oath to the Constitution that first day, and were addressed by the Superintendent of the Air Force Academy, who welcomed us but asked us to look to the basic cadet on our left and our right. He warned that not everyone was going to make it through the vigorous training. I remember falling into bed that night, exhausted, and wondering what the heck I had gotten myself into – I'm sure I was not alone.

My first day at the Air Force Academy marked the first day of basic cadet training for my class, the Class of 1963. Looking back, I wish somebody had told me what to expect during the first year at the Academy. I had no idea what to expect. My high school years were very much like "Happy Days" on television. All that changed abruptly the day I entered the Academy. The Academy has a two-tier command system. The overall tier is made up of career Air Force officers who are in charge of the Academy. The second tier is made up of upper-class cadets who have a cadet rank structure. The freshmen cadets are called fourth classmen or "doolies." The upperclassmen are called third classmen (sophomores), second classmen (juniors), and first classmen (seniors). The highest-ranking cadet is the Cadet Wing Commander (a Cadet Colonel).

When I entered the Air Force Academy in 1959, we were all male. Women cadets were not admitted to the military academies until a change was made in federal law in the 1970s.

What I wish I had been told, by an Academy graduate, is that you must prepare yourself mentally and physically for your first year at a military Academy. It would have helped me immensely if I had been told to prepare myself for a very difficult first summer of basic military training, to not take criticism from upperclassmen too personally, and to realize that every privilege that we take for granted is going to be taken away that first summer. It would have helped me to know that this military system has been in place in our military academies throughout our history, and although questioned by some, has resulted in instilling military discipline in the cadet corps, and a bonding of classmates that lasts a lifetime.

The first summer basic cadet training period is the most difficult. For what seems like endless hours, you practice marching, as upperclassmen criticize your every move. You are commanded to get your chin in, get your shoulders back, and stop bouncing. Unfortunately, my nickname in high school was “bouncer.” I literally “bounced” when I walked. I had to work at not bouncing when I marched. The secret was digging in my heels when I marched. When you are not marching, and you are outside, you must double-time running everywhere you go, eyes straight ahead. When inside, you must march everywhere you go, eyes straight ahead. And you must square corners – no shortcuts. You are very limited with communications with upperclassmen. About the only communications you can initiate are, “Sir, may I ask a question?” or “Sir, may I make a statement.” Your only refuge was your room where you could sleep in peace at night. We were assigned two men to a room. It was important to become friends with your roommate. The two of you learned very quickly to rely on each other when facing the many daily challenges of basic cadet life.

We marched to the dining hall (Mitchell Hall) three times a day: breakfast, lunch and dinner. For basic cadets, the dining hall doubled as a special place of torture. You had to sit at attention on the front six inches of your chair. You normally could not speak unless spoken to by an upperclassman. You were expected to recite all sorts of information, verbatim, from a small booklet called Contrails. The punishment, if you did not recite the information correctly, was to sit at attention, without eating, until an upperclassman allowed you to resume eating. It did seem like torture when you were sitting at attention and the delicious-looking food was in your view, especially the dinner dessert which was always in full view at the right of your plate. All too often, you never got around to the luxury of enjoying your dessert. One rainy evening, when we wore raincoats to our march to the dining hall, I seized my chance to claim my dessert. As we all were getting up from the table to depart, I seized an opportunity to quickly shovel the piece of apple pie into my raincoat pocket. If an upperclassman saw my bold move, he kept quiet. A few minutes later, back in the privacy of my room, I consumed the most delicious slice of apple pie of my life with absolutely no interference from any upperclassman.

In addition to the constant marching practice, we all participated in various forms of physical exercise almost every day. I particularly remember being dressed in our exercise outfits (Academy tee-shirts and shorts), being outside on one of the many athletic fields, and going through many repetitions of push-ups, sit-ups, jumping jacks, etc., etc. I felt sorry for classmates

who were in poor physical condition. They simply could not keep up with the physical demands, and were taken aside for special training. In addition, we regularly went on runs, in our fatigues and combat boots, to Cathedral Rock (about a two or three-mile round-trip run. After we were issued M-1 rifles, we carried the heavy rifles (9 lbs.) on our Cathedral Rock runs. I loved the M-1 rifles, and I loved being outside. All of that physical activity made us stronger and leaner. I weighed 150 lbs. when I entered the Academy. I weighed 137 lbs. at the end of the first summer.

For me, the highlight of the basic cadet summer was the survival training week at Jack's Valley in the mountains west of the Academy grounds. We were taught how to make shelters from parachutes, and how to find food in forests and fields. The end of the training involved a hike of several miles through the mountains and back down to the Academy grounds. My many experiences of hunting and fishing in West Virginia proved to be invaluable in that outdoor training environment. We also engaged in pistol and rifle training at firing ranges. Naturally, I loved firing the .38 revolver and M-1 rifle at the ranges. I was awarded an expert pistol marksmanship ribbon. Some basic cadets decided the rigorous military and physical training was simply not for them. My first two roommates decided to leave the Academy during the first summer. I must admit that played on my mind. I was homesick and the thought of attending a less-demanding civilian college was appealing. I also missed Dianne, my high school girlfriend. However, I decided to stick it out for at least one semester and then see how I felt. That turned out to be a very wise decision for me.

The beginning of the fall semester brought some welcome changes. We shifted from the physical rigors of the first summer to the academic challenges of a full schedule. My Academy transcript shows that during the first semester I was registered for General Chemistry, Human Physiology, Composition, Speech, and Introduction to Literature, World Civilization, College Algebra and Trigonometry, Boxing, Judo, Swimming, Gymnastics, and Intramural Sports. I must admit, I was a bit intimidated by the fall schedule but I was determined to do my best. I was most apprehensive of chemistry, because I had not had a strong chemistry teacher in high school. I was most confident concerning algebra and trigonometry, because Perry Hill had been an exceptionally effective high school math teacher. As it turned out, I passed all of those classes with room to spare. I made a grade of B in most of my classes. Occasionally, I made a C or an A, but an A grade was hard to achieve. I believe I grew up that first semester. I learned that I could survive in the Academy environment. Although we were not allowed to go home for a visit during the Christmas break, we were allowed to socialize with our classmates at the Academy, which was a very welcome break from the demands of the normal routine. I joined the Cadet Hunting Club and went on an exciting deer hunt in western Colorado. I also enjoyed some challenging cadet skiing trips in the mountains west of Denver. On my second ski trip I made the mistake of failing to get off the ski lift at the intermediate slope. The result was that I was taken to the top of the 14,000-foot mountain for the start of the expert slope. I lost count of how many times I "wiped out" trying to ski down the mountain. However, the Good Lord was with me. Luckily, I arrived at the bottom of the mountain with no broken bones!

If I remember correctly, an amazing field trip took place during our first summer. We were flown to various military installations around the United States to get a taste of routine

military life. I spent a week with a Navy submarine crew at San Diego. The experience of being on a deployed submarine was unlike anything I had ever experienced before. Although the quarters were close, I did not feel too claustrophobic. The strange red lights and sounds played on my mind as we dived deep into the ocean. The men on the crew seemed to be well-trained to perform their various duties. Next came visits to George AFB in California and Selfridge AFB in Michigan. I flew with an F-100 pilot who broke the sound barrier over the desert in California, and I flew with an F-102 pilot who practiced intercepts of other aircraft in the skies over Michigan. Last but not least, we visited Ft. Benning, Georgia, where we were introduced to paratrooper training, and where we witnessed an incredible artillery training exercise. The firepower demonstration was extremely impressive; it seemed that the barrage of artillery shells destroyed everything in sight. The noise was deafening! Two other momentous things happened before the summer of 1960 came to a close. I completed parachute training with the Army at Ft. Benning, Georgia, and I got to return home for a week's leave to my hometown of Athens, West Virginia.

The parachute training at Ft. Benning took place in August. As southerners know so well, Georgia can be very hot in the summer. My main memory of parachute training was that we started at sunrise every day to try to beat the heat. We did not succeed. It was very hot! They shaved our heads to a burr haircut. We ran a lot to get in good shape. An Army captain died of a heart attack on one of the runs. We wore fatigues and combat boots. There was a lot of parachute landing practice in sawdust pits. You can imagine the mix of sawdust and sweat inside fatigue shirts and pants. Thrilling! There was also a lot of time devoted to training from towers. We would wear a harness apparatus that was connected to a steel cable high up in a tower. The idea was to simulate leaving an aircraft open door and a static line pulling your chute open shortly after you left the tower. That was good practice but it was also a bit intimidating. It was much like the sport of Zip-lining. Finally, in the third week we made five jumps from propellor transport aircraft. I will never forget the first jump. As the aircraft approached the drop zone, I saw nothing but pairs of large eyeballs staring straight ahead. The jumpmaster yelled for everyone to stand up and connect their static lines to a cable that ran down the length of the C-119 aircraft. When my turn came to stand in the door and exit everything was a blur. As I jumped out the door I was hit by the airstream with great force and it appeared that my static line was going to encircle my neck! Thankfully, that emergency quickly corrected itself and the static line pulled out my parachute. The next sensation was peacefully floating to the approaching ground. I was overwhelmed by how quiet and peaceful it was to descend in a parachute. I made a respectable parachute landing fall and I was most thankful to still be alive. I made four more jumps before being awarded my Parachutist Badge. It was then time for a week's leave in Athens. I was truly excited to go home after a full year and visit my family and Dianne.

It was pure heaven to be home again in Athens. My Mom was happy in her marriage to Professor Andrew ("Monte") Montgomery. I had a new baby sister, Becky, to play with. And, of course, I was anxious to spend as much time as possible with Dianne. I must have looked strange to all of them with my burr haircut. My brother Daniel said that I even sounded different. I suppose I had lost much of my West Virginia accent. Dianne and I enjoyed seeing movies together again, especially at drive-in theaters, and just spending time together at her house. All

too soon, it was time to return to the Academy and start the 1960 fall semester. Dianne was about to start her first semester at Concord in Athens.

My Academy transcript shows that I passed a total of 186.50 hours in four years. The Academy curriculum reflected a balance of engineering and liberal arts classes, with interesting field trips scheduled during the summers. A good high school math foundation was the key to scoring well in the engineering classes. Thank you again, Perry Hill. I also scored well in the liberal arts classes. I particularly liked the aeronautics, navigation, law, literature, and geography classes. Unfortunately, the Academy did not have basic pilot training and soaring as a part of their curriculum while I was there. Those great additions came years later.

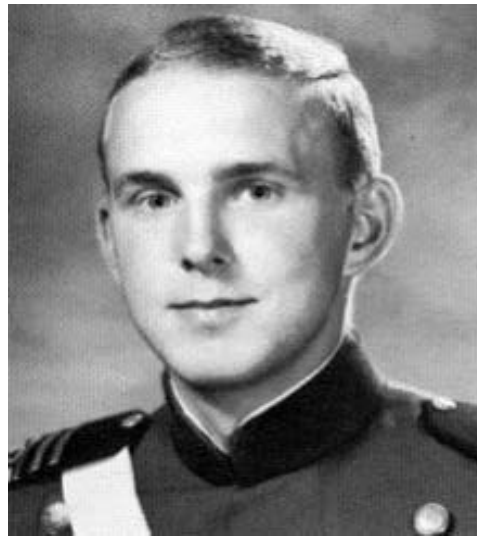
I cannot write a story about the Air Force Academy experience without emphasizing the importance of the lifelong friends I made while a cadet at the Academy. The military training challenges forced us to band together to be successful. A strong bonding took place which has passed the test of time. Among my best friends at the Academy were: Dave Rotz from Libby, Montana; Cliff Haney from Woodland Hills, California; Glen Shaffer from Fairfield, Connecticut; Gary West from Christopher, Illinois; Merrill Eastcott from Torrance, California; John Borling from Chicago, Illinois; Mike Tomme from Chicago, Illinois; Stu Fenske from Kenosha, Wisconsin; Gary Wallace from Eugene, Oregon; Bill Heinlein from Newburgh, New York; Pete Ognibene from Silver Spring, Maryland; and Vic Thacker from Philippi, West Virginia. There are many more, but these are the names that immediately come to mind. Our paths have crossed again many times after graduation, especially during class reunions that are held every five years at the Air Force Academy. We still stay in touch. I treasure those friends and those memories.

One of the highlights of the Air Force Academy experience occurred during the summer after completion of our second year of academics. We could choose among an attractive list of world travel trips, including trips to Northern Europe, Southern Europe, South America, and Asia. I chose the Southern European trip and I was not disappointed. We visited both U.S. and foreign military installations in Spain, France, Italy, Greece and Germany. We also were introduced to some of the outstanding tourist and cultural attractions of the countries we visited: including a bull fight in Madrid; the Eiffel Tower and a nightclub in Paris; the Roman ruins and the Vatican in Rome; the Acropolis in Athens; and the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. Since that trip took place in the summer of 1961, the end of World War II had only occurred some 16 years earlier. While in Berlin, our field trip sponsors somehow managed to make arrangements for us to take a bus tour of East Berlin. To our shock and amazement, almost all of East Berlin was still in bombed out ruins from air raids during World War II! The devastation was widespread and complete. We no longer had to wonder what the ravages of war looked like. We saw it for ourselves. After the official trip was over, a few of us stayed over for a side trip to Copenhagen, Denmark. Needless to say, the trip had a huge impact on everyone in my Academy class.

The following summer (the summer before my senior year) my class was involved in two major activities: basic cadet training for the new class arriving that summer; and Operation Third Lieutenant where we spent two weeks at an Air Force base doing work that would be expected of a new lieutenant. It was a real eye-opener to experience basic cadet training from the perspective

of upper-class cadets responsible for the training of new cadets who were arriving for their first summer. It was challenging to say the least. We had supervision from actual Air Force officers, but we were given the responsibility to actually train the new cadets in the areas of marching, physical exercise, military training and discipline, pistol and rifle ranges, survival, etc. It was a leadership broadening exercise for my class, and we learned a great deal from the experience. As for my Operation Third Lieutenant assignment, I was assigned as a “Third Lieutenant” at Castle AFB, California, a B-52 base, and I thoroughly enjoyed that experience. I was super impressed with the senior Air Force sergeants who were instrumental in keeping the base and the B-52 aircraft operating smoothly. I was also scheduled for a couple of B-52 training flights. Little did I know at the time that I would be returning to Castle AFB a few years later for training as a B-52 crewmember.

I was a member of First Cadet Squadron for my entire four years at the Academy. There were 24 cadet squadrons. Our Squadron motto was “First takes care of its own,” and we referred to ourselves as “Friendly First.” Our class, the Class of 1963, started with 778 basic cadets on June 26, 1959. We graduated 499 First Class Cadets on June 5, 1963. President Kennedy was an honorary member of our class. Our class motto was “Toward New Worlds.” We lived by a strict Honor Code: “We will not lie, steal, or cheat, nor tolerate among us those who do.”



Cadet Captain Roger Graham

Dianne was able to join me and be my date for two major cadet events; the Ring Dance, and the Graduation Ceremonies and Dance. I love the photos of Dianne and me taken at those two dances. The Ring Dance took place at the end of my Second Class (junior) year. It was a big deal for my class. Not only did we receive our silver gold impressive new rings, we got to attend a magnificent Class of 1963 Ring Dance in Arnold Hall with our sweethearts. Dianne drove from Athens to Colorado Springs with her father to attend the dance. During that visit we drove to the top of Pikes Peak. The view from the top was amazing; however, I would never make that drive again unless Colorado has installed guard rails along that winding, two-lane treacherous road.



Roger and Dianne at the Graduation Dance

The graduation ceremonies and Graduation Dance the following year were incredible! Not only was Dianne able to attend, my mother and stepfather attended as well. The highlight of the graduation ceremony in the Falcon football stadium was the graduation address by President John F. Kennedy. He was made an honorary member of our class, which he accepted with great dignity, and he delivered a high-impact speech challenging our class to not only defend our nation but to reach for the heavens. I will never forget the charismatic impression he made on me that day. Our commissions as Second Lieutenants were personally presented by General Curtis LeMay. He looked directly into each new Second Lieutenant's eyes as he presented the commissions. His unspoken communication seemed to be: "Are you prepared to give your life, if necessary, to defend your country?"