

USAFA Basic Summer

On June 20, 1963 several hundred young men known as Squats, Plebes, Doolies, Sub-humans, Fourth-Classmen, or Freshmen, of which I was one, reported in at United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) at Colorado Springs, CO. I had previously been assigned to the United States Military Academy Preparatory School (USMAPS) at Fort Belvoir, VA and after successfully completing their courses of study, had been offered Military Appointments to the USMA, West Point, NY and to the USAFA. I happily accepted the appointment to the AFA and graciously declined the appointment to West Point. Upon my arrival at the AFA I was assigned to 18th Squadron of the Cadet Wing. The first few days at the AFA, a group of USAF Sergeants took care of us during a placement testing and orientation period. This gave us a chance to take in the beautiful sights at the Academy, to find our way around the Campus, and to get a feel for the place we were going to call home before we were turned over to the “First Detail.”

First-Classmen (Seniors) would spend a month of their summer trying to nursemaid the incoming Fourth-Classmen through Basic Military Training. It was their goal to run off as many as possible in the limited time they had. Those who were with us in July were the First Detail and those in August were the Second Detail. The Sergeants made it very clear to us that life as we had known it would come to an end about noon on the fourth day. We would march onto the parade ground in Squadron formation, be brought to attention, the Sergeants assigned to each Squadron would transfer command to the First-Classmen assigned to the Squadron, and the Sergeants would retire from the parade grounds. From that moment on we would be at the mercy, or lack thereof, of the snarling, screaming, sadistic beasts known as the First Detail.

Some tried to make light of what the Sergeants were telling us about the First Detail, but I kept my mouth shut and decided to let them find out for themselves. In my three years of Army life I had had the opportunity to be around a lot of good leaders and a lot of bad leaders. I was pretty sure a group of 21 year old egomaniacs would be able to make life very miserable for a group of boys right out of High School, especially if they felt it was their mission to seek out the weak and then bring forth whatever pressure was needed to force those selected individuals to resign. Each Cadet Squadron Commanding Officer (SCO) had to be an exceptionally strong leader to be able to control his fellow First-Classmen in these situations because these College Seniors were still just inexperienced youths themselves, and it would be easy for the herd mentality to take over. He (SCO) had to see that the job got done, but he also had to control the ever present possibility of abuse. The First-Classmen had a very difficult and very important task ahead of them and only one month on each detail to get it done. They had to cram as much military as they could into a bunch of mamas boys and to weed out those who could not make the grade.

While standing at attention that day watching the Sergeants leave the parade ground and then taking a good look at the First Detail Cadets who had just taken command of 18th Squadron a feeling of dread began to set in. I wasn't sure if it was my imagination or if the “Cadet Officers” standing before us were actually growing evil smirks on their stoic

faces. In some cases it actually appeared like fangs were beginning to protrude as they caught the scent of fear in the air. Then, as if on cue, the entire parade ground erupted into total pandemonium as the First Detail descended upon us and the yelling, screaming, and cursing began. Some had the ability to berate groups of us at a time for our slothful appearance and physical inadequacies while others found it far more effective to select one individual and heap insult after scornful insult in an attempt to impress upon him what his rightful place was in the universe.

It was made very clear that we were sub-humans, lower than snake shit in a wagon track, even lower than whale shit in the Marianas' Trench. We would be referred to as Squats, Plebes, or Doolies, but we would no longer have the right to be known as humans. That right would have to be earned and it would take an entire year to do that. We were informed, however, that most of us need not worry about it because we would not last the summer, or a month, or a week. "Cage those eyeballs, Mister" seemed to be the predominant battle cry of the day. From that moment forward we were to keep our eyes locked straight ahead when outside of our dorm-rooms, classrooms, or the athletic fields. Also, if we were not in Squadron formation, we would march or double time from any one location to another location, stay to the outside edge of any area we were moving through, and we would make right angle turns at all times. Any infraction of these rules and others to be explained later would result in a special inspection where the real fun would commence.

I put forth my best impression of a soldier standing at attention and found that most of the individual screaming was directed toward the Squats around me. However, it was inevitable that my loneliness would eventually be noticed and I soon found my frame being crawled up one side and down the other by a First-Classman who may not have developed the best technique for verbally chewing on someone, but he did not lack for enthusiasm. After what seemed like an hour, but was probably only a few minutes, Squadron by Squadron we marched off to the dining hall for our noon meal. But, no one got to eat. Immediately after being assigned to our tables the screaming began anew, with increased vigor, because of our deplorable posture and eating habits. As Squats, we would sit at attention during meals with our head erect, sit on the first four inches of our chair, take each bite from our plate to our mouth at the square, sit at the end of the table, and serve drinks, etc. to any upperclassman who desired same. At the end of that meal period we marched back to our Squadron area and went to our rooms.

The afternoon was dedicated to teaching the Squats how to make beds, fold clothes, room maintenance, Squadron decorum, the Fourth-Class System in general and what we were expected to learn from a booklet called Fourth-Class Knowledge. That booklet contained just about everything there was to know about military life as well as items specific to the Air Force such as specifications of every aircraft and weapon system in the inventory. And yes, we were expected to learn it all, immediately. Each "teaching" session was delivered with a high degree of gusto, volume, and intimidation. It became clear right away that some rooms needed more instruction than others. Because of my prior military service I was way ahead of my classmates on most of this and managed to have a fairly easy afternoon. A little before dinner time we were introduced to a special

inspection. We had to report to the alcove area outside the room of the upperclassman who requested the special inspection, usually in dress uniform and with our rifle. A special inspection had to be held in the hallway, not inside a room, and there was a fifteen minute time limit. We were tested on our manual of arms procedures and fourth-class knowledge. As soon as we made a mistake we would be given some form of calisthenics, usually push ups, as punishment. It was an interesting day and set the tone for the entire summer with very liberal use of special inspections and a lot of yelling.

The main emphasis of the Summer Details was basic military training for the Squats, so most of our days were filled with physical training, marching, manual of arms training, obstacle course drills, firearms classes, and military tactics. Most of our evenings were filled with special inspections which rapidly deteriorated to ordeals of the extreme. Initially we were required to recite fourth class knowledge, or do manual of arms with our rifle, or do calisthenics, but we soon found that we were required to do two of those at the same time. If the first classmen got really irritated, they might have us doing all three things at once. One of the favorite punishments for incorrigible cases was the green chair. We would sit without a chair, with our backs against the wall while holding our arms out straight palms down with our rifles on the backs of our hands. Little boys, big boys, big men, all crumble from exhaustion in short order from this exercise. A lot of punishment can be dished out in fifteen minutes, especially if no one is assigned as time keeper.

I did have an advantage over most of my classmates because of my prior military service, but my sense of humor was difficult to suppress and got me into more than my share of trouble. One of my biggest problems was being in the same squadron with Mead Myers. Mead and I had gone through USMAPS together and had a bond that the other Squats would never have or understand. We also shared a dangerous trait, a great sense of humor. It was all we could do sometimes to stifle a grin or chuckle at some of the really stupid things that were said or done and if we happened to catch the other's eye at one of those inopportune times we would just loose it. For sure, punishment was swift and punishment was long. But it got to the point that if we even sensed the other's presence we would probably start to giggle. The First Detail became equally resolute in their commitment to break us of this deplorable conduct. One afternoon Mead and I spent hours in the middle of the parade ground, in the front leaning rest position, or some facsimile thereof, while nose to nose. We continued to laugh and a half a dozen First Classmen continued to yell, scream, and curse. A movie of that episode would have been priceless.

My ability to keep my room squared away was quickly recognized by the First Detail and I started getting a series of problem roommates. There was the slob, then the cookie monster, and then the poet. The slob did not have a manly physique and no matter what he did while dressing, his uniform always looked like a bag of dirty laundry. A physical fitness retest finally did him in and they ran him off. The cookie monster was one of those guys who had to be constantly eating, maybe he had a tape worm, I never knew. To make matters worse, his mother was constantly sending him care packages of cookies. He would hide cookies everywhere and the First Classmen went nuts trying to find all his

stashes. During the first room inspection after they moved him into my room, they found a layer of cookies between his mattress and box springs. I paid dearly for those cookies because they tore the whole room apart. I suggested to one of the First Classmen that they arrange for a hold on all his mail so that he would have to be supervised while picking up any packages. The cookies kept coming, but he was put on rations. He only got a few at one time, and only if he consented to the entire squadron having some also. My last roommate during the First Detail was The Poet. This poor kid was the great-grandson, the grandson, and the son of military generals. He was mostly brain with little brawn and should have been sitting under a shade tree writing poetry rather than battling it out with the First Detail. They smelled blood and he was losing ground, physically and mentally. I pleaded with him to resign, but he said that that was not an option. I suggested he go see one of the academy's shrinks, but he said his family would disown him for being weak. One afternoon he took the only escape he thought was available to him. While I was out of the room, he went out the window and died on a concrete walkway of the interior court six floors below.

While in the Army, I went through a lot of inspections while in formations and a lot of rifle inspections by seasoned Sergeants and Officers. To prepare for rifle inspection we would be brought to attention and then bring the rifle to port arms and wait. When the individual conducting the inspection stepped in front of us, we would swiftly open the bolt of the rifle, take a quick glance into the open bolt to insure there was no round in the chamber, and then remain at port arms. If the inspecting individual wanted to examine our rifle more closely, he would reach up with his right hand and grasp the rifle firmly by the fore stock as we dropped our hands to our side. If we did not let go quickly enough, he could twist the rifle around and hit us in the groin with the butt of the rifle. If he did not grasp the rifle firmly enough and quickly enough, he might lose control and drop the rifle. Not only was that embarrassing for him, but he had to clean the rifle before returning it. Because of this gamesmanship that could be played out during rifle inspections, it sometimes became a real test of skills. I had practiced a lot for rifle inspections and had the ability to drop my hands so quickly that it surprised many who were not concentrating on the task at hand.

During the first rifle inspection in ranks by the First Detail, the Cadet Officer who was conducting the inspection was being a real showoff trying to humiliate as many Squads as possible. I could not resist the temptation. When his right hand started to move toward my rifle I snapped my hands down to my side leaving my rifle sitting suspended in mid air. He missed the fore stock and my rifle went clattering to the ground. I remained at rigid attention while he groped around picking up my rifle and while trying to regain his composure. Even through the little tittering of laughter that followed, I stood firm with my eyes caged. He was humiliated, but his embarrassment was not complete until he reported to my room later that evening and had to subject himself to my inspection of the rifle before he could return it. And yes, it was spotless. The word got out quickly and at every inspection after that, the First Classman would pause long enough while in front of me that everyone knew he was trying to get up the courage to try, but would eventually move on to the next man without the attempt.

Towards the end of the Second Detail we had a very formal inspection by our newly assigned Air Officer Commanding (AOC), a regular Air Force Captain. Each Cadet Squadron had an AOC in command of the Squadron, but separate from the Cadet Chain of command. If the SCO paused long enough while moving down the rank, the AOC would do a reputable inspection of the Cadet in front of him and usually took that Cadet's rifle as part of the inspection. As the inspection team moved in front of me, the SCO paused and the AOC started to look me over. I saw his right hand move. He was beaten before he had a chance. At first I felt bad because I knew that being an Air Force Officer he would have had little opportunity to inspect a rifle before that day. But I got over it very quickly because I knew the SCO had set him up and possibly just to make the point that if you are going to be the AOC of 18th Squadron, you better get your act together. As the AOC stood up after picking up the rifle he apologized to me for dropping my rifle and advised that he would clean it and return it to me at my room prior to the evening meal formation. He turned out to be a great AOC.

There were a lot of changes when the Second Detail arrived in early August, some because the new SCO had a head on his shoulders and some because the Academy Commandant decided that definite changes had to be made in the way Fourth Classmen were treated. The first thing the new SCO did was assign Mead and me to be roommates. We laughed our heads off in our room, but were able to maintain discipline elsewhere and caused no further disruptions. Because we both knew the military system so well, our room soon became the model room for the entire Squadron. The Commandant had to force a few bitter pills down the First Classmen's throats. He enforced the new rules that during any special inspection only one option at a time (recite knowledge, manual of arms, or calisthenics) could be utilized, only fifty pushups could be administered at a time as punishment, and the use of the green chair was abolished. He also announced that for the first time since the USAF Academy came into existence, Fourth Classmen would be allowed to take Christmas vacation along with the Upper Classmen.

The main emphasis of the Second Detail continued to be basic military training for the Squats, but we started having specialized training interspersed into our training schedule. On August 6, 1963 the Fourth-Classmen from 18th Squadron went to Lowry AFB, Denver, CO for physiological training. They put groups of us into high altitude chambers and then tested us on coordination and reasoning ability as we simulated going to high altitude. I remember writing a paragraph as we went up in altitude. I thought I was doing really well. After we left the chamber they gave us back what we had written. The last part of my writing was totally unintelligible. It was about the same for everyone else. The special inspections continued throughout the Second Detail and even though the rules seemed more in our favor, the First-Classmen became very adept at stepping up the pressure in a seemingly more humane way. I wasn't learning the Fourth Class Knowledge as quickly as some wanted and as soon as I missed a question I would be given fifty (pushups). Very quickly the routine for me became, take the first question and drop for fifty (without being told), take the next question and drop for fifty, take the next question and drop for fifty, etc, etc, etc. It got to a point where there was open wagering among the First-Classmen on how many pushups I would complete at a special inspection.

Toward the end of the Second Detail, the entire Fourth-Class was taken into the mountains for a week of survival training. They trucked us into a Forest Service Camp back in the mountains west of the Academy. That first afternoon we were given lectures on the flora and fauna in that area with emphasis on what was edible. We were also given a map reading class. Then each squad was issued a map, a compass, and a list of headings and distances to follow each day. With luck we would be able to find our way through the mountains back to the academy. We would also have to carry all our camp gear and clothing on our backs, or go without. We had not eaten since breakfast at the academy, so by evening time we were starting to get kind of hungry. They came to our squad camp area, delivered one live bunny rabbit per squad, and told us that that was the only food we would be given until we found our way back to the academy. We could add to our diet any other food, animal or vegetable, that we could find along the way.

We skinned, dressed, and slow roasted that bunny on a spit over our camp fire. After we divided that little guy up among the squad there wasn't much per person, but he was sure tasty. Each member of the squad got a part that had a bone in it. We were told to keep that bone, because we might have to boil it in a canteen of water to make a bone soup meal. I boiled that bone for several meals and always got at least an imaginary taste. We were able to identify several plants that were edible and a few tubular roots. We even tried to fry up ants and grubs. There wasn't much taste to them and it took a lot to make any kind of a meal, but we thought it was better than trying to eat them raw. The afternoon of the third day we spotted a bunny at the base of a bush and were able to get him surrounded before he realized his predicament. That little guy was the best meal of the week and we got a new supply of soup bones as well.

Even though we had spent most of the previous two months marching or running in our combat boots, several of our squad had problems with their feet. It is interesting though how much a person can endure when they are in the middle of the mountains with minimal help, but getting closer to home each day. A few of the First-Classmen had been assigned to follow along with the trainees to make sure we did not get completely lost and to provide first aid when absolutely necessary. Most of them were good guys and helpful when needed, but there were a few who tried to torment the Squats as much as possible even in the back country. We observed a couple of the tormentors making a big show of eating candy bars in front of a squad that we knew had not had nearly as much to eat as we had been able to scrounge. We decided it was pay back time. We watched those guys until we identified their camp site and their specific tents and then waited until they and every one else in that camp was away. We took every item of food and candy that those idiots had and buried it where we were sure no one would find it. I suppose a candy bar or two got eaten in the process, but most of it went into the hole. For sure we did not want to get caught with any of that loot as they might consider possession of stolen property a crime of such magnitude to kick someone out of the academy. They did make a fuss, but no one talked and no evidence was found. The other First-Classmen finally took pity on them and shared some food. It did take the wind out of their sails though.

Our last night on the trail was a hungry one, but a happy one. We knew that some time the next day we would arrive at the academy and be allowed to go straight to the dining hall to eat as much as we wanted. Each squad was up and out early wanting to get to the never ending stack of food that awaited us. Squad by squad we dumped our packs in piles outside the dining hall. Then, dirty and filthy as we were, we headed for the chow line and filled our trays as full as we could with the most wonderful buffet of food imaginable. With no upper classmen around to bother us, we hunkered down like pigs at the trough and dived in. Elbows were flying and food was flying, but then something interesting happened. One by one each Fourth-Classman at the table sat back and started to groan. It is hard to explain how small someone's stomach can get in just one week with almost no food. We had hardly started on the pile of food each of us had on our plate when our stomachs started screaming, "No more." Some, who were determined to continue with the feast, went outside and threw up over the wall by the side of the dining hall, then, with renewed hunger and more stomach space, came back for round two. Most of us just staggered back to our rooms, stowed our gear, took long showers, laid down for a nap, and hoped we would not dream about the special inspection which was sure to come.

On the last Saturday of the Second Detail every Squadron had a very rigid room inspection for all the Fourth-Classmen. Mead and I were up very early buffing, polishing, shining, measuring, straightening, and tightening every object in the room. Well ahead of inspection time that room and everything in it sparkled like a polished diamond. We knew we had accomplished something above and beyond the call and that we had a lock on this inspection. When the SCO and his Staff finally got to our room, they stopped short in the doorway and stood there with amazement, wonderment, and a great sense of pride on their faces. They had to admit that they had never, in their three plus years at the academy, seen a room so squared away. They were very liberal with their comments of praise and asked us to relax for a while, but to keep the room in inspection ready condition until they returned. About five minutes later a couple of our First-Classmen whom I would characterize as the weaker links in the First-Class Chain arrived at our door and announced that they were there to inspect our room. We knew that this was a load of bull, but they were First-Classmen and we did not dare to challenge them. After they recovered from their initial shock at seeing a room prepared for inspection beyond anything they had ever seen, and for sure far beyond anything they had ever achieved in their lives, they went to work. One would pull a corner of a blanket loose on a bed and the other would berate us for the sloppy condition and rip all the bedding off and throw it in the middle of the room. One would mess up some clothing in a drawer and the other would berate us for the sloppy condition of our clothes and dump all the drawers on the floor and then tip the dresser over on top of the pile. On and on they went through the closets, book shelves, etc, etc, until the entire contents of our room were in a gigantic pile in the middle of the room. Throughout the entire ordeal Mead and I stood at attention with eyes caged just hoping and praying that one of them would make the mistake of hitting or bumping into one of us while they went on their rampage. Fortunately for them and probably for us as well, they never physically touched either one of us. Liberal license to self defense would have been attached to the moment and I am quite sure we would have inflicted some great bodily harm.

A couple of minutes after the idiots had tired of their game and left our room, the SCO came through the door. He stopped short at the sight of the entire contents of the room in this gigantic pile, the color drained from his face and he stood there stuttering to himself while trying to get his brain around the sight before him. He was clearly exhibiting signs of panic and was trying to ask several questions at once which made everything that came out of his mouth a mixed up mess. As the sweat started dripping down his face he finally was able to announce that he had talked to the Commandant of Cadets, a USAF General, about the most outstanding Fourth-Class room that ever existed and the General was on his way to personally inspect this room. We finally told him what had happened and by whom. He was dumbfounded, went speechless, and looked like a man on the way to a heart attack. He finally regained enough physical ability to ask us if we could get the room back in shape for the General. Mead and I both recognized the gravity of the situation for certain members of our illustrious First-Class and we made our position on things quite clear, "NO!!!" Mead even punctuated his comments with a few words that left a lot of color hanging in the room. The SCO stood wide eyed, as if seeing some future calamity rapidly approaching. After holding his mouth wide open for a couple of seconds he tore out of the room and down the hall as fast as he could run. We could hear him screaming a couple of his classmates names as he rounded the corner toward the Squadron Office.

Mead and I crawled up on top of the pile that represented our room, sat down, and deciding to call it a day. Several people, individually or in small groups, ran up to our doorway, looked inside, and then ran off. We did not bother to acknowledge their presence or even attempt to come to attention at the site of a First-Classman. Our mood was evident and none dared to challenge us. Finally, a very squared away young man in civilian clothes walked into our room and made a very quick and professional assessment of the situation. There was something about his demeanor and soft spoken, no nonsense attitude that made us recognize he was a cut above the norm. He quietly talked to us while turning furniture upright and placing it in its proper location. When he knew he had calmed us down and had our undivided attention, he said "Look, those two knuckle heads will be dealt with, how about you helping me get this room ready for the General? I will personally owe you a big one." At the thought of covering for those two knuckle heads, Mead's nostrils started to flare. Our mystery guest said he could get the knuckle heads to put everything back, but that they were totally incapable of getting a room close to the condition we were capable of. I suggested that it might be best if they never were allowed to enter our room again. He said that could definitely be arranged. We consented to help and went to work.

The three of us were able to put that room back in order in record time. It looked absolutely amazing, but for Mead and I the sparkle of that morning was no longer there. The only visible blemish was a smudge on the highly buffed floor that was caused by a piece of furniture being tipped over. We realized that if we stood at attention a few inches forward in the room of where we would normally stand, I could cover up that blemish. The General would never know. Within moments of our mystery guest leaving the room we could hear several individuals, walking in military unison, approaching our

room. The SCO stepped into the room, let out a sigh of relief, called us to attention, and stepped aside. The General came into the room with a look of absolute admiration on his face. There was no lack of praise for us, for the Squadron, for the SCO, and for life at the USAFA. After the General went on his way with his Aide in tow, the SCO came back into the room alone. His gratitude was written all over his face. He congratulated us on accomplishing the impossible and said he would be forever in our debt.

The next few days were punctuated with a lot of chaos. The Second-Class and Third-Class were returning from Field Trips or leave. All the rooms were reallocated by pecking order preference with the Squats at the bottom of the order. Each Squadron was reorganized with new SCO, Squad Leaders, Staff and function designees. The Fourth-Classmen had to learn quickly who in the Second and Third Class were good guys and who were bad guys (who were willing to help and who were inclined to be tormentors). For Mead and I things went rather easily. Our mystery guest during the infamous room inspection turned out to be the new SCO. He assigned us to a room in a cross hall around the corner from the rest of the Squadron. The only Cadets near us were the Group Staff Officers and NCOs and it quickly became clear that they had absolutely no interest in our presence. The two First-Classmen who desecrated the most outstanding Fourth-Class room were never seen at our door again. In fact, they were not allowed to even set foot in our hallway. We were as old as the First-Classmen and because of our previous experience were given an unusual measure of respect by most of the upper classmen. It looked like life for us might turn out okay as we started into the academic year.

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