

USAFA Fourth-Class First Semester

In early September 1963 classes started for the Fall Semester of the 1963-1964 academic year at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) near Colorado Springs, CO. Like the rest of the Freshmen (Fourth-Classmen) I was assigned to classes based upon the scores I had received during the placement tests we had taken when we first arrived at the AFA in late June. The academic goal of the AFA was to have everyone graduate at the end of four years with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Engineering, a five year Degree in many colleges. This rigorous academic schedule was only part of each Cadet's life. Military training, military classes, and military life were a part of each Cadet's 24 hour existence. Being Fourth-Classmen (known as Squats, Plebes, or Doolies), we had the most to learn. It was every upper classman's duty to help us out in the learning department. It was also their obligation to see to it that we were sufficiently punished for any lapse of judgment or rules infraction. A sizable chunk of our time was devoted to physical training. As long as we were Cadets we would have regular physical fitness training and testing. Also, every Cadet participated in a team sport. If a cadet was physically talented enough and could keep his grades high enough, he could try out for one or more of the intercollegiate teams. This required a time commitment of two to three hours Monday through Friday plus most of each Saturday. If a Cadet was not participating on an intercollegiate team he would participate in Squadron Intramural athletics. The time commitment for intramurals was two to three hours a day on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Many Cadets, with the ability to be outstanding athletes at most other Universities, dropped out of intercollegiate athletics at the AFA because they did not have enough time for studies.

There was an unwritten, but heavily enforced rule at the academy that all were equal on the athletic fields and that no upper-classman could retaliate against a fourth-classman for any conduct on the athletic fields that could be construed to be within the bounds of the sport they were playing. In other words, if a Squat creamed a First-Classman during a football game, or any other sport, that was life and that was the end of it. Mead Meyers, my room mate, was an excellent football player and a very good student, so he went out for the intercollegiate football team and easily made the freshman team. I, on the other hand, was not big enough for intercollegiate football and had a hunch that the academic side of life was going to be my downfall. I went out for intramural football and made that team. As it turned out I was the only member of the starting eleven players on 18th Squadron's team that had not been on an All State Football Team while in High School. We won just about every game and we did it on the ground. Our plays were student body right or student body left, simple and effective. I was the pulling guard and led most of those plays. Defensive ends or outside linebackers were my meat and I got good at my job. I would hide behind those big linemen as I came down the line and could nail my targets before they were able to find me. It was especially sweet in practice sessions when I would find one of our Squadron tormentors in my sights. A tormentor was an upper-classman who went out of his way to harass the Fourth-Classmen. I left the field on many occasions with a real load of payback under my belt. I was also the kicker for our team and consistently put the ball into the end zone on a kickoff, thereby depriving the other teams of a runback opportunity.

Mead and I appeared to have a great advantage over our classmates in 18th Squadron because of our age (we were as old as most First-Classmen), because we both had prior military service, and because of some rather bizarre incidents that happened near the end of our basic summer training that left a few influential First-Classmen slightly indebted to us. Also, we were assigned a room around the corner from the rest of our Squadron which gave us a lot of freedom of movement and far less supervision than that afforded our classmates. While our classmates were dumped on regularly because of the demands of the Fourth-Class system, we had life fairly easy and even cultivated some good friendships among the upper classmen. Very early, we established and got away with a standing rule that if Third-Classmen or Second-Classmen came to our room, it had better be on friendly terms or we would physically eject them from the room. The Squadron Commanding Officer (SCO) had informed the Squadron First-Classmen (Cadet Officers) that they were not to come to our room unless it was necessary and had been approved by him beforehand. As the school year started, because of the "Hands Off" policy within the Squadron, Mead and I did not have to participate in as many special inspections as our classmates. A special inspection was a 15 minute period just prior to dinner formation where we were yelled at by an Upper-Classman, almost always a First-Classman, during which we were questioned on our Fourth-Class Knowledge, demonstrated our skill at manual of arms with our rifle, and got to demonstrate our physical ability at calisthenics for our errors in knowledge or manual of arms. After a couple of weeks of easy living, my world changed.

One afternoon, I was returning from the academic building when Cadet Frederick D. Gregory, First-Classman, stopped me in the alcove right out front of the Squadron Office and across from the SCO's room, and gave me a tongue lashing for my sloppy demeanor. He evidently had seen me returning from class and had observed me not maintaining proper posture, not using square corners, and not keeping my eyes caged, all sins of great magnitude for Squats. His choice of location for this dressing down said more about his purpose than any words that were spoken. He was putting me on notice that I was going to be his special project, and he was putting the SCO on notice that Gregory was not going to be deterred from this project. The exchange between Gregory and I was not nearly as heated as the eye exchanges between Gregory and some of the other First-Classmen who could not imagine what he was trying to prove. Before dismissing me, Gregory ordered me to report outside his room for special inspection that afternoon. In that first inspection, Gregory played by all the rules and only required me to recite knowledge, or do manual of arms, or do calisthenics, and dismissed me at 15 minutes exactly. However, before he dismissed me he advised that I would be reporting to his room every day until advised to the contrary. The only time I had heard such an order was during Basic Summer when a First-Classman was putting a Squat on notice that he was going to be run out of the Academy. It hadn't always worked then and I was absolutely sure that Cadet Gregory did not have the wherewithal to make it work with me.

A couple of times each month grades were turned into the Dean's Office, in order to track each Cadet's academic progress. At the end of the first reporting period I went on the

Dean's bad list and was placed on academic probation. Unfortunately I would remain on that list almost my entire stay at the AFA. Because I was in deep water academically right from the start I abandoned any attempt at learning the Fourth-Class Knowledge and spent all available time studying for my classes. Because I was not learning the required Fourth-Class Knowledge, it made it easier for Gregory to justify keeping me on special inspections. It seemed like Gregory stepped up the pressure with each special inspection. Soon, he had me wearing my Class A uniform rather than the uniform of the day as it gave him a better chance of finding something wrong with the uniform. When that didn't work we went to the Dress uniform, cumber bun and all. He finally gave up on uniform inspections and went back to uniform of the day, but with rain coat, just to make it more miserable. When he couldn't get the desired effect within the rules, he started making me do two or three things at once (knowledge, manual of arms, or calisthenics) trying to beat me down. Around the first of November he finally told me that he was determined to run me off before Christmas break. He started getting some real criticism from his classmates, but became even more bull headed about his mission. I, being equally bull headed, told Mead that I would not go to the SCO and complain, even though other First-Classmen had told him that they wanted me to do so. Gregory was making a greater spectacle of himself with every inspection, but the stakes involved went way up around the first of December.

Gregory was getting extremely worked up during one special inspection and several of his classmates had started to congregate in the alcove. It was clear from the looks on their faces that they disapproved of what he was doing. He finally ordered me to enter his room, came in after me, slammed the door in his classmate's faces, and commenced to take out his wrath upon me. I must point out that it is absolutely forbidden for anyone to hold an inspection behind closed doors. Other First-Classmen had been thrown out of the academy for that infraction. However, someone had to lodge a complaint to get that ball rolling and through Mead they let me know that I would have to be the one. But I knew I could beat him and had resolved to gut it out until Gregory had a heart attack or hell froze over. I also must point out that even though Gregory had indicated a strong desire to physically strike me and had looked like he was about to do so on occasion, he never had. I didn't know if he was holding back because he would get thrown out of the academy, especially if there was a witness, or if he was unsure of whether I could beat the crap out of him, obviously in self defense. I did not worry too much about whether or not Gregory would actually hit me. He was taller than I and in great physical condition, but we weighed about the same and I may have had more muscle mass. The real clincher though, was the fact that I carried an M-1 rifle to every special inspection. That rifle was a formidable weapon when used properly, even without ammunition, and my confidence level was very high. From then on, as I reported for special inspection, Gregory would order me inside and close the door. One evening Gregory and his roommate got into a very angry argument and almost came to blows before the roommate stormed out. He slammed the door so hard I thought it would shatter. The screaming was especially intense after that. That evening after dinner the SCO came to our room and asked me to put a stop to this madness. If I would go with him to the Air Officer Commanding (AOC), a regular Air Force Officer in command of the Squadron, Gregory would be gone within the hour. I told him that I could not do that. Regardless of Gregory's motives,

and regardless of the fact that many of his classmates would approve of my actions, there would be some who would only remember that I had been the cause of a good cadet being thrown out of the academy. I might end up paying a far greater price than a few uncomfortable special inspections for that action.

We were getting close to Christmas leave and Gregory was on the verge of losing it on a daily basis. One evening he was especially distraught and was putting me through a most demanding physical routine. He kept getting more and more worked up until he was at a point where he looked like he was about to explode. As I stood at attention with the rifle at port arms he turned suddenly towards me and it appeared that he was actually going to slug me with his fist. In that moment of time a lot of things went through my mind. I felt that he was really, finally going to do it, and I welcomed it. Now I would have the opportunity to use that M-1 as a real weapon and be able to release a couple of months of pent up emotion onto the source of my problem. He stopped in mid swing and remained almost frozen in place with a strange look on his face. Then I realized that I was smiling. He took a few awkward steps backward and crumbled into his chair. He sat there for a few moments hunched over with elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. Then he looked up at me with a blood drained, lifeless face and quietly said that it was over, I was not to come back. Gregory never spoke to me again and I certainly didn't miss having further conversations with him. But, outside of my daily 15 minutes with Cadet Gregory, life went on at the academy and a lot of funny and enjoyable things happened on an almost daily basis.

There was one Second-Classman from 17th Squadron who was a very happy-go-lucky kind of guy with a great sense of humor. He would often grab a bunch of Squats coming out of the dining hall after the evening meal and form up what he called his helicopter squad. He would arrange us in the configuration of a helicopter with the nose, the cabin, the tail boom, and the tail rotor. He always put at least four tall Squats in the middle of the cabin for best results. The four tall guys were to sweep their right arms in unison in a circular pattern over their heads, the tail rotor guy would move his left arm in a circular pattern parallel to his body, and we would all march forward slowly while chanting "Wop, Wop, Wop, Wop, etc." Anything that broke up the routine was good. The best part was rooming with Mead. We had a lot in common, had great respect for each other, and would laugh for hours at the insanity that whirled around us. He also helped me a lot with my studies. As I had never studied in Grade School or High School, I really didn't know how to study effectively or efficiently. Mead had his hands full.

Being invited to eat in a Cadet dining hall is quite an experience for the average person. There is no such thing as a quiet meal. There is always some Upper-Classman yelling at some Squat for some lapse of judgment and there are always Squats sounding off loudly in response to the never ending questions from the tormentors. 18th Squadron was in many ways a very relaxed squadron with little pressure on the Squats about the Fourth-Class system. Upper classmen from other Squadrons that sat at our tables to visit with friends in our squadron had been known to get quite irritated at the lack of respect shown by our Fourth-Classmen. 18th Squadron had the reputation of being first in marching, first in athletics, and last in academics. What did they expect?

Almost all Table Commandants (TC), the ranking First-Classman assigned to the table, went through a little exercise with the Squats very early in that first semester. They would assign some task to each Squat that would require a little ingenuity and a few days to complete. The stipulation was that the Squat would not be allowed to drink coffee with any meals until the task was completed. It took several weeks for my TC to realize that I had never requested to drink coffee and therefore had not been given a task. When he discovered that I in fact did not drink coffee, he said he would have to give this special consideration and find a task worthy of my efforts. He finally announced that he had come up with something for me to complete or I would not be allowed to drink milk. Since he had always had a mad passionate crush on Kim Novak, my assignment was to correspond with Miss Novak, get written approval to drink milk, and to obtain a signed sexy picture dedicated to him. There was no internet in those days and people's addresses weren't easy to come by.

Mead and I had known a guy at the US Military Academy Prep School that came from Los Angeles and had been in the Mickey Mouse Club. We thought if we could track him down maybe he could come up with an address for Kim Novak. But then another First-Classman from our Squadron who had heard about my assignment saved me a lot of trouble. He gave me the name and address of a friend of his family that knew a lot of Hollywood types. He was sure she could find the address of Miss Novak for me. Sure enough this lady came through with a correspondence address for Miss Novak. I drafted a short epistle explaining my situation and what had been requested, and was stunned in early October 1963 when I received a beautiful hand written note from Miss Novak. She very eloquently authorized me to drink all the milk I would like and she enclosed the dreamiest of dreamy pictures dedicated to my TC. Well, after that I could have anything I wanted at that table. I drafted a short letter of thanks to Miss Novak and assumed that that would be another short, but closed chapter of my life. I was pleasantly surprised a few days later when I got another large envelope from Miss Novak. This one had two pictures in it that were just a tad less dreamy than the earlier one. Since I had two pictures, I sent one to Dad. It wasn't long before I got the picture back from him with a note stating that he didn't think he could keep it. I never did ask if Mom got to see it.

When the year started, I had made an official request up through channels that since there was no LDS Group holding Sunday Services on the Academy grounds, I be allowed to attend Services at an LDS Ward in Colorado Springs. Much to my surprise, my request was approved and I was given a very generous allotment of travel time back and forth for my meetings. The biggest surprise was the added stipulation that because these absences from the Base were for religious purposes, they would not count against the number of authorized passes that Cadets in good standing were authorized each Semester. Being able to go to Church became a blessing without equal, and gave me the opportunity to really clear my head during some of the trying times in that Fourth-Class year. One of the LDS First-Classmen made a most eloquent appeal for Religious Retreat Leave and got all the LDS Cadets days off to attend General Conference October 4-7, 1963 in Salt Lake City. Then to top it all off, we had seats in the front rows of the Tabernacle, in the

section reserved for Military personal in uniform. For some reason, my being able to go on that Religious Retreat Leave really ticked off Cadet Gregory.

As the Fall Semester of 1963 came to a close I was able to do well enough on my final exams to bring enough Ds up to Cs to get my grade point average above the 2.0 mark. It also got me temporarily off the Dean's bad list, at least until the end of the first grading period of the second semester.

On the 14th of December, 1963 the entire Cadet Wing left on Christmas leave. The Air Force even gave each Cadet a round trip airplane ticket to their home of record. It was great to have a couple of weeks away from the Fourth-Class rat race, but even better to spend some time with the folks. Mom had a lot of questions about life at the academy and it was obvious that she was not happy about the way Fourth-Classmen were treated. I decided that I would not bother her with any details about my routine with Cadet Gregory. I had won a personal victory in that contest and it would be better for all concerned, including me, if it remained a closed issue. I got to visit with a few of my old buddies during that leave, but for the first time I sensed that the relationships we had enjoyed in the past were in fact changing. I had become a different person from the Dell Rowley who had graduated from Choteau High School in May 1960. I had goals, I had ideals, and I had a vision of life and a meaning to my life that set me far apart from the person I had once been. I enjoyed seeing and being with my old friends, but I had a different set of standards and some didn't know how to react to that. It wasn't much of a problem though, because on the 4th of January I was back at the AFA with the rest of the Cadets starting a new academic semester.

Addendum regarding Cadet Frederick D. Gregory: In early 2007, The American Legion came out with a video collection called AMERICAN HONOR. The first video in the series was called MEN VERSUS MYTH. It did a great job of explaining the truth about many of the myths that the anti-war crowd, with the backing of the American press, had sold to the American public about the Viet Nam war. Unfortunately our beloved press preached those myths so long and loud that in many circles they are accepted to this day as absolute truths. As I watched that video for the first time, at one point I came straight out of my seat and while pointing at the TV, I said "That's him!!" Shirley looked at me like I had just lost my mind. I had to explain to her that the Fred Gregory (Captain, 48th Air Rescue, 1966-67) who was being interviewed about his service in Viet Nam was the same Cadet Gregory who had made Fourth-Class life a little more interesting. As I watched his interview I realized that I was seeing someone articulate, accomplished, poised, a man of Bravery, a man of Honor. Any sense that I may have been wronged by this man totally drained from my being. I no longer even cared about his motives during that fall of 1963. I was proud that I had had the opportunity to have known this man in person. I was also very relieved that I had not made the grave mistake of taking a complaint to the AOC about Cadet First-Class Gregory that might have ended his military career.

Dell V Rowley

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