Museum of Augusta Military Academy News

NEWSLETTER

January - 2025

Chairman’s Message

January 1, 2025

Dear Friends,

I would much prefer to lead this letter with something other than – Wow! Another year just blew by and 2025 is upon us! So, I won’t.

Wow! El 2024 pasó volando y el 2025 yá está aquí! So, there you go!

I hope your end of year Christmas and New Year celebrations were spent with family and friends. We had a very enjoyable Christmas day. As is customary here in Puerto Rico, Christmas day begins with gifts being opened in the late morning and a constant flow of family and friends arriving, eating, drinking and eventually leaving our house, to begin the process again at another home, over and over again. Thus, is the tradition of Christmas in Puerto Rico! Yes, el "dia de Navidad" is taken very seriously on our island. According to people that keep score on this kind of

thing, Puerto Rico has the longest Christmas celebration on the planet! We begin on Thanksgiving, and officially end the festivities on February 2, on “Día de la Candelaria” or the candle mass, a catholic celebration that has morphed into the day people burn their Christmas trees. Trees, which coincidentally were grown in Canada, but that is a different story for another time.

The AMA Alumni Foundation Board of Directors will be holding our first meeting of the year on Saturday morning January 11, 2025 at the Hotel 24 South in Staunton. Normal order of business will be discussed. There will be some in depth discussion about the AMA Memorial covering all progress that has occurred since our September 2024 announcement. As is customary, the meeting will be open to all alumni. Hope to see you there.

Wishing everyone that 2025 brings you happiness, good health, fortune and lots of time to spend it! Or, as we say on my island: Salud, amor y pesetas, y el tiempo para gastarlas!

Cordially,

Douglas W. Pennock
Chairman

AMA Alumni Foundation News

As is customary, Our annual election cycle will commence on mid March 2025 with Director nominations, and election of members commencing April 13. Elections will wrap up at midnight April 28, 2025.
We will publish the complete election timetable along with the list of members that will be asking to be considered for re-election in the February Newsletter.

NOVEMBER MUSEUM VISITORS

Son, Son, Son,
We Miss You,
Come In.

The Challenger family, Erik, Jennifer, and Erik Jr., visited from Tampa on December 1. Erik attended Fishburne Military School from 1986-1989. Erik “E.J.” Jr. is in the 7th grade at Fork Union Military Academy as part of the class of 2030. Erik and Jennifer have taken E.J. to West Point and VMI, to show him what’s possible, and to our museum to give him a sense of the long tradition he’s a part of. E.J. runs track, has played football, and is enthusiastic about working to become a FUMA officer someday.

Stuart Maclin and his guard dog, Jeb Stuart, stopped by on December 13. Stuart attended for 7th and 8th grade from 1966-68. He liked to get in a little trouble occasionally, but his only truly regrettable bit of mischief came from chasing a skunk from the Dean's Castle annex to behind the gym. Stuart had the skunk cornered in a bush. The skunk won. That misjudgment notwithstanding, his grades improved dramatically at AMA, going from failing to honor roll. He's run S.W. Maclin Roofing Company since 1979, and while he's lightened his workload a little in the past couple of years, he has no plans to fully retire. He has 5 children.

After a road trip, Billy Sturgis (1971-73) was on his way back home to Virginia's Eastern Shore when he visited the museum and helped Chris give a tour. Besides his day job, he's a club DJ and local radio institution. He co-hosts *Billy & Tim's Beach Music Show*, airing on WESR 103.3 FM The Shore and **online** every Saturday at 6pm. He and partner Tim Prettyman have been broadcasting weekly for most of the last 43 years.

Augusta Military Academy Alumni Foundation Scholarships

THE DEADLINE HAS BEEN EXTENDED

The NEW "postmark" deadline for receiving the AMA Scholarship applications for this year is April 30th, 2025

Don’t wait, get your applications in the mail early!

This year we are offering:

- **Two (2) $2,000 AMA Legacy Scholarships**
- **One (1) $1,000 McVey – Leonard Scholarship *(Louise McVey Leonard - Robert P. Leonard Memorial Scholarship)**

Below, find links to open and print the criteria letter, which are the official rules and requirements as well as the application for each Scholarship offered

AMA Legacy Scholarship Letter & Applications

Legacy Scholarship Letter

Legacy Scholarship Application

McVey-Leonard Scholarship Letter & Application

Louise McVey Leonard - Robert P. Leonard Memorial Scholarship

McVey Scholarship Letter

McVey Scholarship Application

Scholarship Scoring Rubric

Applicants – Make yourself familiar with the SSR (Scholarship Scoring Rubric), Understand what the judges are looking for and how best to model your application.

Need more information?

Click the link below to go to the AMA Alumni Website, find the Scholarship tab and you'll discover all the necessary details

https://amaalumni.org/scholarships/

Nominations are being sought for the Class of 2025 AMA Sports Hall of Fame (SHOF). You may nominate an individual athlete, coach, team or anyone that you feel contributed in a significant way to AMA sports. Personnel / Team(s) selected will be recognized during Annual Reunion in September 2025.

Please email your nomination to **John Arthur '75** email: john.arthur@cdg-1.com AND Rich VanBreeman, the Museum Curator, email: amacurator@gmail.com. John can be reached at 757-650-6309 for any questions.

All nominations must be received no later than FRIDAY, February 21, 2025.

A monthly pledge from everyone that reads this newsletter means that the future of the Museum will be assured.

SET UP YOUR MONTHLY DONATION HERE

MUSEUM

DOCENT DUTY

THANK YOU!

Visitors in December

59

Museum Volunteers

Brian Miller '67
Billy Sturgis '73

Charlie Pascale '69
(IT Support)

Elizabeth Andrews
Professor Charles S. Roller's Great-great Granddaughter

***B*e a Volunteer Docent for a weekend...**

Purchasing a Paver Brick allows you to recognize anyone you knew while attending AMA

All Paver Bricks are placed in a permanent location along the sidewalk running East of the Museum

Visit the Brick virtual map HERE

Brick Order Form

SHOP HERE

Notice!

The AMA Alumni Foundation would like to clarify that all of the profits of the

merchandise that is sold through our Museum PX store, go exclusively to help offset Museum operation costs.

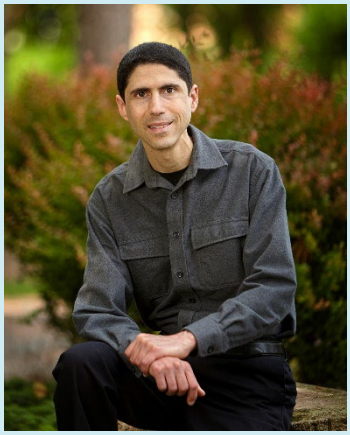
AMA "Knock off" branded merchandise that is sold outside the Museum PX store, an unsanctioned Facebook page or unsanctioned eBay account has no connection or benefit to the AMA Alumni Foundation, Inc. or the AMA Alumni Museum.

17 oz. Mug
Only $14.00 (Plus tax and shipping)

To order items from the PX, call the Museum at
540-248-2007

Beautiful Wendell August Forge metal serving tray

$50.00



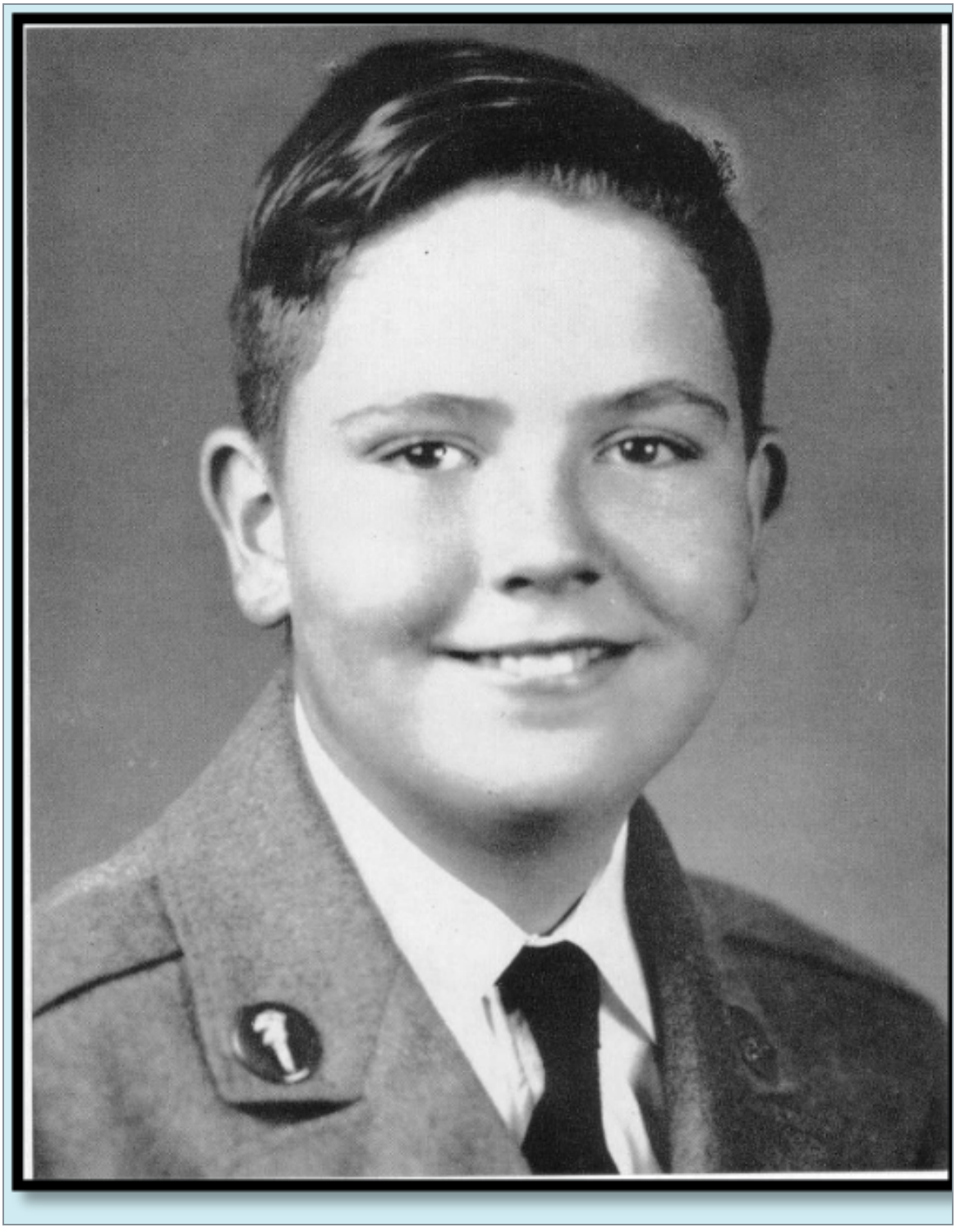
Chris's Corner

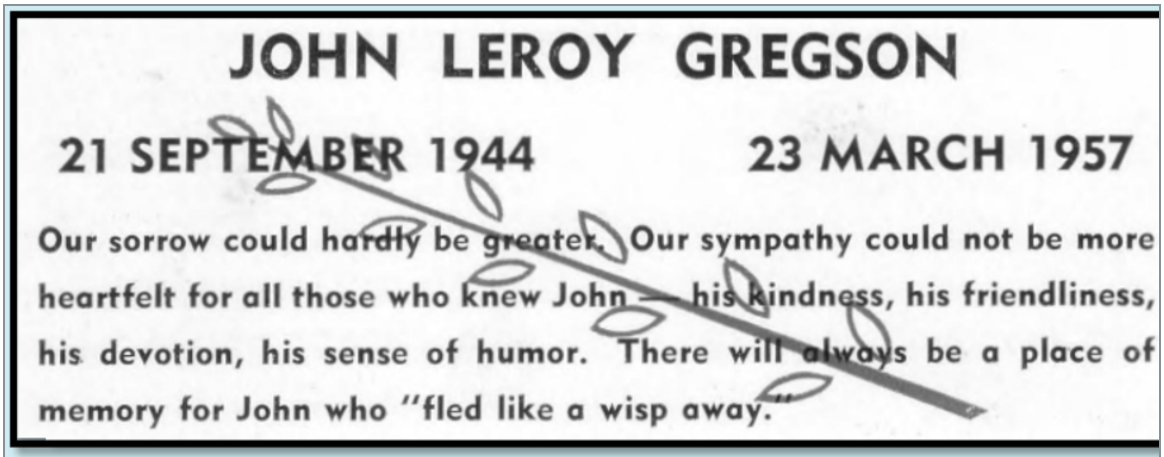
Chris Correa, Museum Historian

January 1, 2025

Page 158
Part Two: Perfect Storm Potential

Last month, I introduced you to the story of cadet John Gregson, who was shot to death in barracks in 1957. Though newspapers around Virginia covered the story, Staunton's *News Leader* buried it on page 9. AMA's *Recall* included only a memorial photograph that had no hint of how this child died.





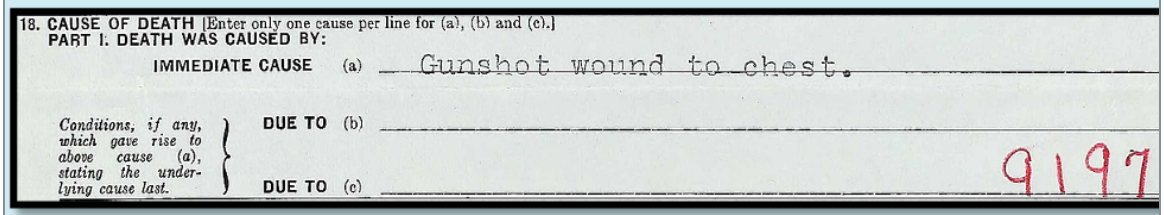
JOHN LEROY GREGSON

21 SEPTEMBER 1944 — 23 MARCH 1957

Our sorrow could hardly be greater. Our sympathy could not be more heartfelt for all those who knew John — his kindness, his friendliness, his devotion, his sense of humor. There will always be a place of memory for John who "fled like a wisp away."

Even an alumnus who was at school that day remembered only seeing extra activity on the south side of barracks but heard nothing else about it during or afterward. I discovered the story only by stumbling on this picture, finding the cause of death written on his transcript, and then searching for newspaper reports.

With uneven accuracy, many papers carried the news over the next five days. Four papers, though none in the valley, had the story on the day it happened. On the people involved and the sequence of events, Col. Roller ended up being the only source to go into print. The most detailed version of his statement came from the *News Leader* on March 26. (There is a death certificate, which adds authority, but not details.)



18. CAUSE OF DEATH [Enter only one cause per line for (a), (b) and (c).]
PART I. DEATH WAS CAUSED BY:

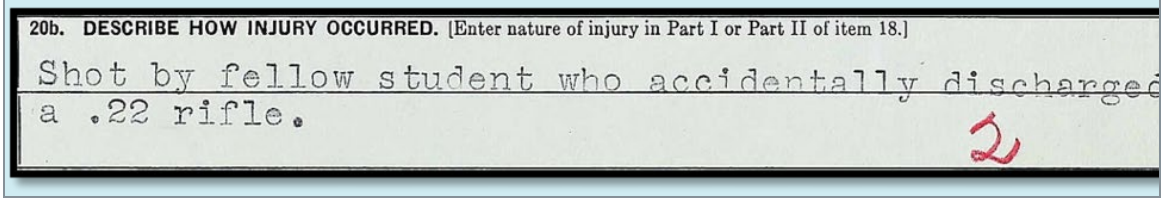
IMMEDIATE CAUSE (a) Gunshot wound to chest.

Conditions, if any, which gave rise to above cause (a), stating the underlying cause last.

DUE TO (b)

DUE TO (c)

9197



20b. DESCRIBE HOW INJURY OCCURRED. [Enter nature of injury in Part I or Part II of item 18.]

Shot by fellow student who accidentally discharged a .22 rifle.

2

Central to his telling is that the rifle belonged to cadet Jerome Lee Griffin. It was kept in the armory, but Roller claimed Jerome had checked it out to take home for spring break. He left it unattended in his room. The shooter found it, and at some point, the rifle fired, killing Gregson. What's not clear is where Roller got his information. (I contacted the Augusta County Sherrif's Department about seeing the original investigation materials. I was told that virtually all such records from before 1980 were destroyed in a basement flood over 20 years ago.)

According to one man though, Roller's information is not entirely accurate.

Jerry Griffin is originally from Alexandria, and it's just coincidence that family circumstances long after AMA brought him back to the Shenandoah Valley. Before I knew that, finding him was like travelling to the other side of the street by trudging in the opposite direction around the globe. I poured through public records hoping to find contact information and, more to the point, whether he was still alive. In a forehead-smacking act of late inspiration, I checked our database. He lived in Staunton. Whether our information was current was a coin toss, so I sent an e-mail into the void and hoped for the best. Getting his offer for a meeting was nearly as shocking as finding this story in the first place.

To be clear, never did Jerry show that he was meeting Rich and I with an ax to grind. He just carefully and quietly explained a day that changed his life and let us realize on our own how his account is not what made the papers.

Besides being 13 years old, not 14, the discrepancies begin with how the rifle ended up at the scene. It's true that Cadet Griffin's father had sent him the Remington .22. He used it with his own ammunition for target practice behind the barracks. In between, it was kept in the armory, according to policy. However, on the morning of March 23, 1957, when everyone was leaving for vacation, it wasn't in Jerome's room as the article claims. He didn't have it, and neither did the armory. It hadn't been in the armory for 2 weeks, because he'd kept it in his room since the last time he used it. No one from the armory had come looking for it, so when another cadet asked to borrow it that morning, Jerome was able to hand it over. All these decades later, Jerry can't confirm the name of this third cadet or whether the rifle was loaded when he gave it to him, but he knows the borrower was not the shooter.

Also contrary to the report, it was in the borrower's room that the rifle was left, and there it was found by the shooter. The room is in big barracks, in the southwest corner of the first stoop, a cluster of rooms for junior school cadets who'd been assigned there instead of the junior barracks as usual. The borrower and Jerome were among them, but Jerry says the article is wrong in claiming that the shooting was in his room. He's also certain that it wasn't the shooter's room.

Events moved quickly. Jerome was in his room when the rifle's borrower entered and exclaimed, "Gregson's been shot." When they got to the borrower's room, they saw the gun on the lower bunk and Gregson, as reported, lying on the floor by the radiator and showing no signs of life. The shooter was gone. Jerome couldn't comprehend what had happened. "I couldn't put it together, even though I'd been

told.” The borrower led Jerome over to John and pulled up his shirt, revealing a small hole in the center of his chest. In line with the report, Jerry remembers adults arriving moments later and the shooter coming in as well and soon admitting what had happened. “I remember being totally dazed and walked out of the room in shock. I went back to my room and just couldn’t comprehend the incident.”

Of the rest of that year, Jerry has only two memories. The first was being in Col. Roller’s office listening to him call Clyde and Leona Gregson to tell them their son was dead (a call Roller himself had received about his son in 1938). The other memory was of telling his father, when he arrived to pick him up, that his rifle – his gift to his son – had killed a boy. “I just saw him go into a real sadness that he was somehow a participant in that incident,” but Jerry has no memory of the subject ever again coming up between them. He recalls literally nothing of his remaining 9 weeks at AMA, to the extent that he was surprised to learn that documents show he completed the school year. Afterward, he withdrew from AMA and returned to school at home in Arlington, though for family reasons unrelated to the shooting.

Only the shooter and Gregson are known to have been in the room when the rifle was fired, so there was no witness, but some important details can be worked out.

Most important is that the simplest, most plausible explanation is that John died by accident. “He just walked into the room at the wrong time,” Jerry said. In a way, that’s equally true of the shooter. He enters first and, improbably, finds a Remington pump-action rifle lying out in the open but out of sight of any adults. He doesn’t know it’s loaded, which

Museum Curator Rich van Breemen pointed out is a particularly easy mistake to make on that model. Jerry offered, “I imagine he walked in and saw the gun and, like any other 12- or 13-year-old, would have picked it up and probably pumped the action. Now if you’re holding the trigger at the same time you pump, it will fire.” The shooter may never have known how the gun worked, much less been using it recklessly, but suddenly he’d become a killer without a thought of malice. This is why Jerry looks back on the shooter as the other casualty of that day.

Of course, it could be the definition of reckless to pick up a weapon you don’t know how to use safely, but that’s supposed to be why adults supervise children handling guns. That system broke down when the rifle wasn’t returned to the armory and the armorer didn’t go looking for it, but even if followed, the rules at the time wouldn’t have saved John. Jerry pointed out that, had he returned the rifle to the armory two weeks earlier, he could’ve simply checked it out again that morning when the borrower asked him for it. In that sense, by leaving the room with the rifle on the bed, it was the borrower who missed the last clear chance to avoid it being found by the cadet who became the shooter.

Before questioning why the system failed, it’s worth asking why there was even a system in the first place that allowed children to use personal firearms outside of the rifle range and unattended. This question has replaced another of my wrong assumptions that I stated as fact on tours. I used to tell people that the only students allowed to fire live rounds on campus were the rifle team, and only on the range in the gym basement. I said that, because I’d read and heard nothing to the contrary. I got caught in an absence-of-evidence trap. Even if firing school rifles was

restricted to the basement, there was apparently no such rule on personal rifles.

"What we have," Jerry concluded, "is a perfect storm potential." It began with him being in control of a firearm without direct supervision, "and then I have 8 or 10 fellow friends….Now there's all of these errors multiplied behind the lack of sophistication of this community of 12 [and 13] year olds….And how could that not create a potential of at least injury….'The adults in the room' made bad choices." Rich remembered from his military service that the weapons rules governing the adults in the Air Force were much stricter than those for the children in the academy's barracks. While in practice, the checks and balances for those Air Force rules were lax, "the big difference," he noted, "is I was 19 years old, 20 years old, not 12 years old."

I'm not writing this to demonize the school for its procedures, in part because Jerry doesn't either. He recognizes that the adults gave broad autonomy to the cadets for a reason: "Okay, that's where you learn, so I'm not faulting any of that. I guess the fault is providing something that could be so injurious as a lethal weapon." Still, while he sees the adults of AMA as responsible for what happened, since they were ultimately in charge of minors, it's not the same as holding John's death against them. Nothing in our conversation indicated that Jerry is angry at anyone. This was a preventable accident, but nonetheless an accident. An otherwise beneficial system of raising boys to be responsible adults by giving them agency was overstretched to allow a situation in which the stakes were too high for the adults to remain distant.

In one way, the impact on Jerome should've been no different than on any other student. He wasn't the shooter. He didn't hand the gun to the shooter or leave it to be found. He wasn't a witness. He barely knew John Gregson. "All I remember is that he was soft spoken and easy to be around." As a cadet, Jerome appreciated that John "was one of those soft, easy human beings that just didn't stand out."

What stood out starkly was a grim scene he could barely understand. Jerome was a child who saw one of his peers lying dead on the floor at the school that was his home – except that didn't make sense. He'd been told that John had been shot, but the lifeless body in front of him didn't look shot dead. A .22-caliber bullet leaves a small entrance wound. Also, according to the National Weather Service, the recorded high temperature in Staunton that day was 41 degrees. If John had dressed warmly, it would've been even harder to see anything amiss about his uniform. Jerome had to be taken up to the body and see John's shirt lifted to recognize the hole in his chest. This supports the report's claim about John that "[a]t first it was thought he was just pretending to be hurt."

For a few moments before adults rushed in, Jerome was alone with the borrower and John's body, trying to process what they saw, with no life experience to make this familiar. Nothing from quail hunting with his father or his target practice behind the barracks could've prepared him for seeing a human being with a fatal injury.

Even so, as the adult version of that cadet told me, human beings are "meaning making machines," so what he saw has shaped his perspective ever since. When asked

how his feelings evolved, he said, “it did affect me in terms of highly reactive feelings towards firearms….I've been affected to the point where I won't have anything to do with weaponry. I never hunted after that, never had a gun after that. I never wanted to be around weaponry. I'm not against people who do. I'm not that militant, but it's just not going to be a part of my life.”

It took returning to campus and talking through what happened to gain new clarity about that day. “I am responsible for providing the availability of the gun. It was really hard for me to recognize that component.” Jerry wondered what might’ve been if he’d returned the rifle to the armory two weeks earlier instead of keeping it in his room. Maybe he would’ve decided that checking it out again was too inconvenient. Or, even if he’d still gone to the armory again, the delay might’ve prevented the gun and Gregson from ending up in the room at the same time.

Those what-ifs were hard to face, and it took all these years for Jerry to comprehend how he instinctively adapted. From the moment he heard the news at age 13, the initial shock propped up a life-long confusion about the actual chain of events. “And in confusion, I wasn’t responsible for anything, so that was my working system, and it was really magnified in this event. That was the game I played….”

Recounting the details back on the grounds where they occurred helped him put that confusion behind him. “[I]n this space, I discovered something about my own game that I navigated through most of my life in terms of creating a narrative at that age where I wasn’t as

responsible as I see myself now – not responsible as a guilt. Just that I was a participant in a perfect storm."

By seeing a lapse of adult oversight plus a string of tragic coincidences as the reasons John died, Jerry isn't shifting blame toward or away from anyone. He's decided that "…no one's guilty of anything other than being human."

* * * * *

I began this project to tell John Gregson's story and correct the record, but his life and death touched many others. Their stories also deserve to be told, but Jerry is the only one known to be alive. The borrower's identity is unknown. The shooter's whereabouts are unknown. The last of John's immediate family died in 2023, so we'll probably never know any more about him. Jerry is our last direct connection to the event, our only opportunity to know the consequences when good systems fail.

I want you to know virtually every detail of that failure, but not to indict the school. I only want AMA's historical record to be complete, and that's only possible if it includes this tragedy, how it happened, and whom it affected. An incomplete history is to some degree an incorrect one, and flawed narratives lead to flawed conclusions. The correct conclusions – or the more correct ones – don't need to be indictments, just deeper insights and more useful lessons.

Even if one sees it as no more than a dramatic true story, with nothing urgent to teach, I still have my own motivation to tell it. Like the cadets who died young before and after him, John was denied the several decades most of us get to make a mark. He had just 12 years to create in

others a lasting impression of who he was and what he did, so this is my small effort to preserve his brief legacy.

The next step is to learn what we can from what happened afterward. How did the school respond? What were its options? How can we interpret the evidence? That's what I'll cover in February.

Thanks for reading.

Doug Pennock's Viewpoint

January 1, 2025

Greetings everyone,

Every new year takes us one year further out from the closing of our old school and at the same time, brings us one year closer to the day that the last two surviving cadets will drink a toast to the end of an important chapter in all of our lives.

In the meantime, we will continue to aggressively and enthusiastically pursue the saving of our history, we will continue operating our museum and gathering together every year in Staunton. We will continue reaching out to our fellow AMA brethren with a clear and transparent message

of all of the going's on of our small but meaningful organization.

And perhaps, in a few short years, we will have a memorial within yelling distance of the AMA campus which will stand as a testament to remind everyone that the Augusta Boys were here!

This year on Christmas eve, I wrote a short poem based on the old family favorite, "The night before Christmas". It may have taken me five minutes to write, but I was quite surprised at how much positive feedback I received from the handful of people that read it on the AMA Museum Facebook page. I shared the poem with my family on Christmas day, and to a person, they were all moved by the message.

I will end my letter to you today with that poem and I hope you feel the love.

'Twas the night before Christmas and the barracks were bare.
Not a creature was stirring, like no one could care.
Yet over the Blue Ridge, they began to arrive.
One thousand Cadets marching in stride.
They gathered on campus and sang with great cheer.
Our school may be closed but our hearts are still here!

Doug out

The Museum Newsletter is written and prepared by Doug Pennock
and edited by Trudy Pennock and Marc Aronson '68

MISSION STATEMENT "To preserve the traditions of the Augusta Military Academy and to honor the memory of the life and times of its alumni, faculty, staff, and supporting families through permanent and temporary exhibits and diligent conservation the museum's collections of artifacts, archives and photographs."

The AMA MUSEUM is operated by the AMA Alumni Foundation, which is a 501(c)3, non-profit organization. The museum is manned by a paid staff. Former cadets volunteer their time and talent most every month. Funding for the museum is totally dependent on tax-exempt financial gifts and donations made by the alumni, former faculty, and friends of Augusta Military Academy, as well as the community and visitors to the museum.

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