

Augusta Military Academy

Oral History

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Close Encounters with the Ghost

Several recent references to **Colonel Charles Roller's** old Dodge, The Grey Ghost, really started my mind working and brought back memories of so many long forgotten AMA ventures and adventures (mis-adventures, perhaps).

My first close encounter with the Grey Ghost must have been when I realized that it was not just an old car that the Colonel parked out in front of the big barracks, but a loving, living thing you might see 'herding cattle' in the hills and fields all over Augusta County one day or those late night inspections of the grounds as it carried the 'Ol' jemperman' past the tennis courts, down the road behind the first stoop, in front of Headquarters Company barracks, on to the PX, the (beloved) boiler room (anyone for shoveling coal?) and the gym, while on Monday you would see it in town as he checked on 'his boys' – all give it a very special place in our history!

My rat year, 1949-50, I simply held the car in awe as I did all upperclassmen, faculty and things at Augusta. (Remember the canon report or the number of links in the chain out front?).

My second year the Colonel – why I will never know – decided to allow me to go up to Mt. Sidney for haircuts instead of going to the butcher on post. I always had longer, thicker, sideburns which he hated and told me so on many occasions, but he let me keep them and to make this really sweet (or make me sweat) he gave me the keys to the Ghost.

So, every few weeks a couple of other cadets and I would pile into the car for a drive up US 11 to get our haircuts. (My last year I was a corporal in the US Marine Corps Reserve and Colonel Roller made the Ghost available to me to attend my meetings in Charlottesville -- what a grand man he was!)

There were other times when I'd run an errand or something of the sort for the Academy but the best memory of that wonderful car was a fencing trip to the United States Naval Academy during the winter of 1952 (I think). **Major Hoover** wouldn't go with the team, but he sent his car with **Captain Lucas**. A two-car convoy, the Grey Ghost with the saber team in the lead and the Major's 1949 Ford with the épée and foil teams following.

Now the saber team, the best guys in the corps, wanted to break away from the others and

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especially the “eye” of Captain Lucas -- we were going to D.C.!

Several of us were either from the D.C. area or knew it as only young guys can and we wanted to party! My task? To lose the Captain and the rest of the team in the city – (this was before the interstate, bypasses and the like) – a task we thought would be rather simple and once done we could spend several hours “on the town” before heading on over to Annapolis and the United States Naval Academy.

The drive up the ‘Valley Pike’ and on through the Plains to Washington was uneventful. We even managed to put down the temptations a stop at the General Store on top of the pass at Paris Mountain called for.

Into D.C. we drove and almost as soon as we entered the city we slowly (didn’t want to tip our hand) began to put some distance on Captain Lucas and the Major’s Ford.

Here you will have to forgive my memory for 50 years has erased some of the street names; anyway, we had gone several blocks past the Capitol and were driving up a wide boulevard with a streetcar line down the middle when a gift from heaven seemed to be headed our way in the guise of an about to change traffic light and the growing form of an approaching streetcar.

Timing the light perfectly, I made an easy left turn and felt an inner smile starting to creep over me – over us all, really – as we distanced ourselves from the intersection, the Captain and the rest of the team. We were almost home free! Visions of a lively afternoon in the Nation’s Capital danced in our heads! Ahhhhh, such dreams!

The guys were cheering, I was whooping and the world was wonderful! However, as Mr. Burns once said, “The best laid plans-----!” Then it all came to a hideous end – honor, pity or just a knowing that we had to do the right thing flushed over us and I pulled the Grey Ghost to the curb.

I don’t, to this day, know if it was tenacity or sheer stupidity (don’t ask) on the Captain’s part, but whatever it was caused him to run the yellow light and turn in front of the darned streetcar! Now, however, know ye that whatever Ford Motor Car Company may say one thing their cars will not do is come out on top if they pick a fight with a D.C. Transit streetcar!

Yep, they hit! Not hard enough, thank God, to hurt anyone but hard enough to dent a fender and worse yet, to bring our expedition to an abrupt end. (Here, I suppose, I should offer the saber team’s apologies to the Midshipmen’s saber team, because, even in the couple of bouts we lost,

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they felt our frustrations.) That reminds me of the time the Johns Hopkins fencing team came to Augusta, wearing shorts, “*To whip up on those kids!*” Well, another time, perhaps.

Needless to say for the rest of the trip that doggone Ford acted like it was an extension of the Ghost and stuck so close to us a fly couldn’t have flown between the cars.

Saturday we fenced, that night we went downtown where they thought we were West pointers and when Sunday rolled around we, the Ghost crew, had a mission ahead of us. **Phil Thomas** had made arrangements for a stop at his family’s beautiful farm in Paris and enjoy steaks cut from some of the champion steers they raised. What a fantastic meal that was! Real, thick, juicy, honest-to-goodness steak!!! Now, some 50 years later, I can still taste that great piece of meat, one of the most unforgettable dinners I have ever had!

One more wonderful memory of AMA in general, but in particular, an extremely fond one of the Big Boy’s Ol’ Grey Ghost!

You can view the 1954 RECALL here:

<https://galleries.amaalumni.org/Recalls/Recall-1954/>