

# Augusta Military Academy

## Oral History

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My wife and I moved recently. We downsized and relocated from our lake home in Whitley County, Indiana to the east side of Fort Wayne, about 30 miles away. Since I was recovering from shoulder surgery and prohibited from lifting anything weighing more than a pound and a half, 17-year-old Quintin from across the street agreed to help me pack and transport as much stuff as possible before the professional movers came. That involved lots of trips back and forth in my pickup and – Quintin being quite the talker – many extended conversations.



During one of those trips the topic of AMA came up. I often find myself explaining how I, a California native, wound up in Indiana by way of Virginia. It's a fairly unusual trek, and I've described it many times over the years. Invariably, it's the part about AMA that generates the most interest from whoever my audience happens to be, and so it was with Quintin. In this instance, the more I talked with Quintin, the more apparent it became that life at AMA is getting harder and harder to explain as I get older and my audience younger.

Military schools were fairly common back in the day – there was even one in my hometown in California that, apparently, wasn't far enough away to suit my parents – so when the subject of AMA came up, people had at least a notion of what the experience was like. Now, four decades after AMA and many other military prep schools have permanently shuttered their doors, most people, especially young people, have no idea. Describing my AMA experience to an incredulous Quintin, for example, was like trying to explain life on Mars.

How do you explain spit-shining shoes to a guy who spends most of his free time playing Fortnite? You wrap a cotton rag around your index finger, dip it in water and a generous glob of shoe polish and then, in a circular motion, apply layer after layer of that polish until the cracks of your teeth are clearly visible your reflection. Really? Or what about removing the protective lacquer from your brass belt buckle so you could Brasso it every day and occasionally spend hours rubbing out the inevitable scratches? These are things that make no sense to teenagers today. Of course, as I explained to Quintin, they didn't make a whole lot of sense then either, but they did keep a bunch of otherwise rebellious teenage boys occupied for a lot of hours that might otherwise have been spent in even less productive (and possibly destructive) behavior.

Hours a week in close-order drill, dropping and doing 25 push-ups because some kid with

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more stripes than you ordered you to, walking the line with your chin tucked hard against your sternum – these are things that formed our character, a part of what made us who we are, but they make no sense at all to most people today.

But of everything about AMA that I told to Quintin, it was the part about Col. Hoover that he found the most mystifying. How does one describe Hoover to a young person? Well, for starters, you imitate him – and what AMA alumnus doesn't have his Hoover impression down pat? There's the breathy "Look, my friend," the bad eye, the exaggerated "Aaaasshole," the way he held his chalk like he was flipping off the world, his frequent use of smelling salts and, on rare but memorable occasions, shot puts to awaken sleeping students in his classroom. As my wife and children (and now Quintin) can attest, I, like any other AMA grad, can go on *ad nauseam* about **Col. Hoover**.

Hoover and I had a relationship best described as "complicated." For some reason, I got transferred into his algebra class midway through my freshman year. Math was never my strong suit, so the pairing was something less than ideal. Nevertheless, I spent nearly an hour a day for three and a half years failing to grasp algebra II, geometry, trig and calculus in his often freezing classroom at the far end of Hoover Hall.

But it was my senior year on the soccer field that cemented the impact that Hoover was to have on my life. Why is that, you ask? It's because Hoover drove me absolutely nuts ... and I not only survived the experience but became a better man because of it.

I'll explain.

We were not a great soccer team. In fact, we were awful, maybe the worst high school soccer team ever to take the field. If I ever realize my number one bucket list item and make it onto Jeopardy, my mid-show personal anecdote will be about playing on a high school soccer team that failed to score a goal all season except two for the opposing side. We were that bad.

Was I – the farthest thing possible from a natural athlete – part of the problem? Hoover seemed to think so, if his constant yelling of "*Driscoll, move up. Driscoll, move back. Ah shit!*" is any indication. But to my mind, it was all Hoover's fault. His offensive strategy: "*Boot the ball!*" His defensive strategy: "*Boot the ball!*" And if things ever did seem to be going our way, he would yank half or more of the starting lineup, usually the entire defense, off the field and chew us out as whatever chance we had of winning – or tying – the game slipped away.

I was a pretty reticent teenager and never one to talk back to anyone in a position of authority, but Hoover sent me over the edge. And so, as he raked us over the coals, berating us for our athletic

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and mental inadequacies, I would invariably (and somewhat surprisingly) find myself yelling insults about his coaching style right back at him. This situation would escalate until he kicked me off the team and ordered me to leave the field.

Then, as the team was getting ready for the next game, Hoover would show up in my Band Barracks room and say, “*Look, my friend, we need you out there, see.*” And so the cycle would repeat. Again and again.

Why Hoover though he needed me “out there” is beyond me. After all, he didn’t seem to be enjoying himself any more than I was. He’d ride my tail, I’d get mad. He’d yell, I’d yell. One time, at Albermarle High School, it got so extreme that a spectator called the school to report that a coach was verbally abusing a player named Driscoll, and **Col. Livick** called me into his office to ask me if there had been any inappropriate behavior by Col. Hoover at the game. Since we were required to adhere to the Honor Code and tell the truth at all times, I quite honestly replied that nothing out of the ordinary had occurred.

As I explained to a mystified Quintin, today, nearly 50 years later, I have nothing but love and admiration in my heart for Col. Paul Hoover. I know how much he loved AMA and its cadets. I know, too, that however irrational he could be, he was always fair. I got to see him sputtering mad, and I got to see him at his kindest and most generous. In spite of all the yelling back and forth, I know he liked me. And as maddening as he could be, I liked him too. And I know this as well: more than anyone I can think of, he helped this shy, timid 17-year-old gain some backbone and self-assurance. In short, enduring that miserable soccer season built character. I think, maybe, that was his plan all along.

