

# Augusta Military Academy

## Oral History

by Mowbray Allan  
Faculty Member 1959-61  
March 2, 2003



### Memories of General Charles Somerville Roller, Jr.

I remember that it was at one of General Roller's semi-weekly addresses to the faculty and cadets assembled in the Mess Hall for lunch. If we had been good, we would be given the "At Ease" command before the address and our lunches would be kept warm in the kitchen. But this time a cadet or two had been very bad the night before, making the central square of the barracks (the quadrangle) resound and reverberate with huge firecrackers every two hours or so.

After each explosion, the whole cadet corps had to turn out and stand at attention on the balconies while a room search was conducted. No sooner were we back in bed and asleep than another would go off. How did they get away with it, given that after the second one, at least, sharp eyes would no doubt have been watching? An inside job by those on guard duty? (Maybe now someone can take credit for it?)

So that day the General stalked grimly and heavily up to the microphone with a huge blacksnake whip under one arm. He looked, in his early eighties then, much like another memorable old man of those days, Pope John XXIII, craggy face, large aquiline nose, posture stiff with age, so that he had to shuffle his whole body around to look behind him.

(That nuance of posture seemed to me to sum them both up; always things going on behind their backs they could never quite catch out – in the General's case it might be snickers that the cadet waiters lined up behind him could not suppress, at one of his more outrageous statements.)

Our lunches cooled before our eyes and no "At Ease" was given (of course, it was only the cadets, not we faculty, who had to sit the whole time at rigid attention in these cases). The diatribe must have lasted an hour, at least, and I have long forgotten most of the details. But the gist was this: Next time that happened, he would himself get up in the middle of the night, make his way over to school, root out the culprit, and use that whip.

No doubt it would cost him (General Roller) his life, but at least he would know it was in a good cause. I don't recall any further firecrackers in the night during my time at AMA and no doubt it was that last threat, to the General's own life, rather than the whip, which was meant to be, and was, the effective one.

# Augusta Military Academy

## *Oral History*

Speaking of the thrill of nearly being caught out by the General, that was something we faculty could share with our students, and probably in much the same spirit. Once, **Colonel Duff**, **Captain Paul Andrews**, and I returned late from a night out for relaxation, maybe at our favorite roadhouse at the base of the mountain, over towards Waynesboro, was it?

As often happened, the General had come over to school late to work in his office, and perhaps to meditate on his finally silent school. In the reverberant entranceway, one of us must have laughed or stepped on gravel, for the General heard us and called out, "Who's out there!?" As if with one mind, we broke and ran -- even Colonel Duff, that real Colonel and real soldier, who had stood it all on MacArthur's staff in the Far East. We were giggling all the way. Once in the safety of Paul's room, he and I had a good time complimenting Colonel Duff on his strategic retreat and the remarkable youthfulness of his run for it.

I was at AMA from January 1959 to May 1961, and by then General Roller's eyes and ears were not as sharp as they had been. Once I was called up to the big study hall to see him about something at the end of his College Algebra course, the only course he still "taught," if that is not stretching the word too far, and was partly able to confirm the stories I had heard.

He graded the course by asking the cadets, at the end of each class, how long they had spent on College Algebra. One trick I had heard about was to sit on the College Algebra text for an hour or so while doing other things, so as to be able to say, with some show of truth, "An hour" or "Two hours."

I did indeed hear such answers, and some accompanying smirks seemed to confirm the story. But I did observe directly the other technique: "How long did you spend on College Algebra?" "Four-'r-five minutes." "Good work, Snell, forty-five minutes."

That day I didn't see it, but don't doubt, other stories about the course. General Roller hated cigarettes and especially cigarette butts on the ground: "*I'd rather see a rattlesnake!*" So we smokers there, faculty and students, came to call them rattlesnakes, as in "*Would you like a rattlesnake?*" or "*May I bum one of your rattlesnakes?*"

Well, some days the cadets in College Algebra were said to replace the chalk at the blackboard with a rattlesnake. Also there was a nail at the upper corner of the wood frame of the blackboard, where the General would hang his officer's cap. Some days the students would remove the familiar nail, with results you can imagine, repeated over and over (is it possible he played along with some of these jokes?).

# Augusta Military Academy

## *Oral History*

I am sure everyone remembers the General's Mother's Day talks. "*There is no relationship in the world like that between Mother and son. No matter what else she might have done, your mother will do anything for you, even to sacrificing her own life.*" The whole cadet corps would be reduced to tears. He was a powerful speaker in his way.

The sway of sentiment would lead him to stretch the truth in other ways. His highest value of course was military glory. When expounding on this topic he was wont to say that he was the only man that had fought in every war beginning with the Spanish-American, at least he seemed to be saying that. Well, I have no knowledge of the actual facts, but we had some difficulty, shall we say, in reconciling that claim with history as we knew it.

Well, he was not perfect, but if he had been, he would not have been the General Roller we knew, and who could wish that? So, not just despite his faults, but even because of them, as well as his virtues, one couldn't help feeling affection and admiration for General Roller. It was he above all that gave spice and life to our times at AMA and made each day interesting in some way.

One of the things that I remember most about him – and I suppose that in this respect he would have been ahead of the times – is that in those heydays of macho stoicism, he was the male who would display and express sentiment and emotion without shame. For setting that example, any faults he had can easily be overlooked.

The 1961 RECALL can be viewed here:

<https://galleries.amaalumni.org/Recalls/Recall-1961/>