

Augusta Military Academy

Oral History

Garry Granger '71
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My years at AMA, Part 2*

Riding in the back seat of my parent's car, driving west on Route 250 in early June of 1966, I was anticipating what my summer would be like away from home. After crossing Afton Mountain behind a long line of bumper to bumper cars, we finally entered the Shenandoah Valley.

The 2½ hour drive from Richmond to the small town of Fort Defiance was the result of my failing the 7th grade (my first year of High School).

Thus, summer school was the answer. Summer school students lived on the first stoop and were denied access to the rest of Big Barracks, BTW- AMA was non-military during the summer. **Savedge, Hoover, Suarez, Dekle, Livick, and Clymore** were the teachers I recall, and of course nurse **Molly Canavet** was also influential. My roommate was **Ron "Scootch" Melcher** (Battalion Commander '71). Scootch took me under his wing as he had attended AMA the previous school year and taught me about the place.

At the end of the summer session we took a 3-4 day bus trip to Gatlinburg, TN and Blowing Rock, NC. I bought my first "starter pistol" at one of the many gift shops we visited. It was also the first alcohol I ever drank. Seven of us were in a hotel elevator and one of the older students (17 years old I'll assume) had a glass of vodka he'd stolen from the hotel bar and forced all of us to take a sip, so we wouldn't tell. Then he and his pal drank the rest. BTW- I had A's & B's that summer and started the 8th grade at Augusta Military Academy in the fall of 1966.

Arriving at the Fall Session at 13 years old (having celebrated my birthday there a few months earlier), I was assigned to "A" Company. After the long first day of moving in, getting uniforms, saying goodbye to my parents, meeting people from all walks of life, it was soon time for Taps. The next morning, neither me nor my other two roommates heard revile and slept straight though it. It wasn't until the "A" Company Commander walked into our room and woke us that we'd realized we were in trouble. Rather than give us an ass chewing, **Captain Mitchell "Mickey" Toms '67**, calmly informed us of formations, bugles to listen for and to lay our clothes out so we can move fast. I'll never forget his leadership and patience and have respected him ever since.

During my five years at AMA I was a Cadet Waiter one year, played football and lacrosse, was in "A" Company my first & second years, "F" Company (better known as "F Troop") my third year, "E" Company my fourth, and "C" Company my senior year during with time I marched with the Roller Rifles and graduated as a 1st Lieutenant (Executive Officer). We won the *Company of the Year* award in 1971.

One of the most notable things that happened to me during my stint at Augusta was fracturing



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two vertebrae in my lower back during the early months of the 69-70 school year. It was during a fall football game against Greenbrier Military Academy, when I threw a cross body block on an opponent during a kick off, and his knee caught me square in the small of my back. I had to be helped off the front field, and was carried via a stretcher to the infirmary where I laid for a few days until my parents drove up from Richmond and insisted I get x-rays. The next day I was taken by ambulance to Kings Daughters Hospital in Staunton where the x-rays determined the fractures. After rehabilitating in the infirmary for some four (4) weeks, I emerged mostly healed, left the infirmary, and took several months strengthening my lower back muscles.

I'll always remember how slowly time passed at AMA. It seemed like the Christmas Break, Spring Break, or the end of the year would never come. We kept calendars marking off the days that seemed to go by so slowly at the time. I can never forget the shenanigans pulled on each other, basically, raids on fellow students or rival companies that were often rousing. The worst was filling Shipplett's plastic shirt bags with anything nasty (Brasso, Windex, cigarette butt infiltrated cola, whatever) and tossing it on a sleeping yet deserving victim ... aaaaahhh the lessons of growing up !!!

I once sent a new cadet to the infirmary to get his Masturbation Papers. He returned saying Ms. Canavet wanted me to report to her immediately. I never went as I knew there was the business end of her hairbrush waiting for me. Sorry Molly!! My bed was short sheeted a time or two, and I shorted as few as well. I once walked into a cadet's room and was drenched when I opened the door, from the water filled trash can, delicately balanced next to the transom .

When the Officer of the Day (OD) was making rounds, we'd occasionally sneak into the empty OD's office with a 45 RPM record by The Animals entitled "We gotta get out of the place" and put it on the turn table. We'd increase the volume as loud as possible, then close the "locked door" and run. It would take 30 - 45 seconds until the OD could get inside and stop the song—just long enough to get the Corps excited about going home.

Yet, as much anxiety as I'd felt for being at AMA, every time I returned after a break or at the beginning of a school year, it was always terrific seeing old friends and hearing their stories. Even to this day, as I drive along Route 11, and I get to the Water Spout Tree...the same "*tingling in my stomach*" feeling which I experienced as a teenager, reoccurs as I'm about to enter the campus ... bizarre but true.

It can be argued that AMA saved my life. Life in my home in Richmond was challenging for a number of reasons and I can only imagine where I would be today, had I not experienced the support, discipline, structure, camaraderie and sense of self worth from my time there.

Other things I learned at AMA:

- Rank, age and "Old Cadets" have privileges
- Concrete can be polished and buffed
- Stucco walls win every time versus knuckles and elbows

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- Rules were made to be broken
- There is a price to pay when you break the rules
- If you like getting mail, send mail
- When the water in the sinks is 40 F, you can shower extremely quickly
- When leaning across a hot radiator and looking out the Big Barracks window (as your robe slips open), it's highly probably you'll get a blister
- After meeting, working, studying, playing, and living with over 1,000 young men from different states, countries, up-bringing, and economic status, you learn to rapidly judge one's character with pretty fair accuracy
- Respect is something that is earned ... and not attained because of rank or position.
- Excuses - NEVER * Explanations - ONLY WHEN ASKED
- Accomplishing tasks as a team is extremely gratifying and powerful
- Standing up for what you believe in is essential to self-respect
- Your word means everything
- Being on time is a sign of respect

I'll avoid listing the names of the alumni, classmates, faculty and staff whose influence stays with me today, But let it be known their legacy and memory was, and still is, appreciated and remains close to my spirit.

It wasn't until years after walking out of the front gate in 1971, that I realized how fortunate I was to have experienced our beloved academy. I began to understand the commitment and passion our instructors (especially those who resided within the barracks) had for teaching young boys and helping us mature into men of honor and integrity.

With very few exceptions, I've discovered that AMA men found remarkable wives. AMA men possess a skill to be respectful, polite and kind. I've heard these comments from almost every wife of an AMA alumnus. It's pretty remarkable. What we AMA men experienced is special, very special. It's been said that "*you get out of something what you put into it*", that said, I'm tested to acquire the most accurate words to describe how grateful I am to have experienced what AMA had to offer and to have seized the bonds and life-long friendships developed there. It's heartfelt and steadfast.

As years rolled on and AMA closed its doors, I became involved in the Alumni Association (thank you **Lewie Kennett**), serving both the Association and the Foundation. I found the history I learned from numerous alumni about the Academy, the Roller family, and the school's past to be intriguing. Since attending numerous reunions and meeting so many faculty, staff and numerous alumni, (who as young men, slept in the barracks, studied in Deans Castle & Hoover Hall and marched and played on the same fields as me), I've ascertained that all of us alumni experienced the same thing, regardless of which decade you attended.

This January will be 36 years since our Academy closed its doors. Yet, we alumni still meet

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annually to pay tribute to the Founder and his family, recognize outstanding Alumni for their contributions, present awards for Sports achievements and offer scholarships to offspring of A\ alumni. I can't speak for others, but I am extremely proud to be part of this organization. What we've accomplished is remarkable. You could almost say astronomical that we've done all of this without an operating school.

The years of dedicated research "in print" within our **Bayonet** publications, is a written account of our Academy and its alumni. Our Museum holds a plethora of artifacts that tell our rich history and the fact that we show up every year to enjoy fellowship, tell stories, belly laugh and contribute to our Foundation is the epitome of Grace, Honor and Respect to the Legacy of Augusta Military Academy.

What we have is extremely special that few completely understand. Those that do are getting fewer in numbers as the years continue. Yet, if we can gain more involvement from Alumni as well as the Community, to execute a Legacy focused plan, perhaps prayers will be answered and one day there will be a well-funded, permanent museum of our little Academy (with a big history) for all to discover, enjoy, honor and appreciate.

* You can read Garry's first Oral history submission from 2002 here:

<https://amaalumni.org/wp-content/uploads/OralHistory-GarryGranger-71.pdf>