

Augusta Military Academy

Oral History

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The late 1950's and early 1960's were strange times: war with Korea, WW II memories still fresh in the minds of surviving families and Vets, desegregation, with its fears and apprehensions, and a growing nation of young people – the baby boomers.



Now, picture a middle-class family with a daughter in high school and a son graduating from grade school with “not so good grades” and an immature attitude. These “good parents” wanted to ensure a good education for their only son. They investigated a number of schools on the East Coast and decided that a school called The Augusta Military Academy was the place for him. The deal was struck and an application was signed.

In 1960, this short, average student with glasses was off to AMA.

This adventure began with the purchase of a pair of military boots, shoe polish, new toiletries, sheets, pillowcases, a blanket and a footlocker. I still remember the excitement. I was off to an academy with its barracks in front of a beautiful green meadow and a graceful stone building on the top of the hill. I was ready!

In September, we packed up the Chevy and were off. I couldn't wait to get there.

The trip seemed to take forever. As we began to drive up that long driveway leading to the Academy, things changed. I was no longer sure if “we” made the right decision. I became extremely apprehensive and a little fearful.

After all, I had never been away from home for more than a weekend. My parents began to look different to me. I felt closer to them that day than ever before. I knew this school was a mistake. I no longer wanted to be here, but was it too late?

The next thing I remember is being in a large office with a man in a uniform. It was a **Major Livick**. He was an impressive man who must have seen the fear and apprehension in my eyes as he assured my parents they had made a wise choice, that I was a fine candidate who would meet new friends and have exciting times at AMA, that the instructors were among the best, the classes were small and these men would ensure my grades would improve. I would do well.

He also explained that AMA had the right amount of discipline. It had a student honor code,

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which was just the thing to make men out of boys. We would learn responsibility and maintain our integrity.

I was assigned to E Company and was told we would form up each morning, afternoon and evening to march to meals. We would be in parades and practice drills and things would be great.

I must admit that I did feel better. I was, while my parents continued with the registration process, whisked away. I was taken to the barracks, assigned my room and introduced to two of my roommates. I remember this room with two bunk beds and a desk with some sort of wall unit was on the first level of the barracks. It was about mid-way along the back of the barracks.

I was somewhat embarrassed and felt out of place. After all, I was wearing a white shirt and black pants. My roommates, on the other hand, had gray shirts and blue trousers on. Little did I know, but that was the uniform. I later learned they arrived earlier and no longer wore “civilian clothing”.

Next, I was taken to a room with a distinctive “wool” and mothball smell. It was full of uniforms, shirts, pants, Eisenhower Jackets and the most beautiful overcoat with a cape I had ever seen. For some reason I felt this room was located somewhere under the barracks. It had an uncovered light bulb hanging down and it gave the impression of some sort of a dungeon.

It was not dark, but it was not well lighted either. I remember being introduced to **Major Savedge**. He had wavy hair, a uniform shirt on and a yellow tape measure around his neck. He measured my neck, arms, waist and inseams. In a matter of seconds he began to pile a variety of shirts, pants, jackets, caps and hats on the table for me.

I then got my “brass”. How it shone! Those little crossed rifles on a circle of brass, the breastplate and the AMA belt buckle. Little did I know that they could and they would be made to shine even brighter by spending hours rubbing them with stuff called Brasso. (My poor fingers – and that nasty smell).

I then got the pride of the uniform: the hat piece. I still have and cherish it. It is a blue circle with silver letters surrounding an Eagle with a shield. The circle contains silver letters which spell “Augusta Military Academy”. The opened winged eagle holds the blue and white porcelain shield, which says, “founded in 1868”. On the shield is an overlay of the letters AMA. How impressed I was, and still am, as I gaze on it as I type this memory.

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Back to the uniform room. As I looked around, I saw other uniforms. They were not as new looking, in fact, some seemed quite worn and I asked about them. Major Savedge said they were used, that not everyone could afford new and that some cadets, usually the CW's, buy them since they were cheaper.

"CW, I thought, what was that?" I didn't ask, but felt privileged that I wasn't a CW and would need to get used uniforms. How fortunate I was. Between the hat piece and the gray overcoats with red cape, I was truly impressed.

I was here! I was really HERE! I had my uniforms. I had my room. I had my roommates. I was an AMA cadet. My homesickness had long since faded and my excitement intensified. I could not wait for my parents to leave. I wanted to be alone, to try on my uniforms and explore the academy. I was truly ready to be on my own. I felt like a man!

I gathered my uniforms, went to my room and quickly changed into a fresh gray shirt with a patch – a patch just like my hat piece. (I never did save a patch, but I still have my hat piece.) I was alone and putting a sheet on my lower bunk when my parents came in. They had signed all papers and were ready to leave. They came to say, "good-bye" and spend a few minutes before taking the four-hour drive back to Baltimore.

This time still remains with me today. It was emotional yet remarkably contained. After all, wasn't I an AMA cadet? I had to stand tough! Inside, my excitement turned to anxiety. I saw my parents differently – they were severing the strings to me. They could no longer protect me. I would be on my own.

At that moment, I wanted to go with them. I also wanted to stay. I wanted to cry. I didn't want to cry. I was an emotional mess. Troubled but excited. I knew I needed to begin my journey, but I also wanted them to stay to give me strength.

I walked with them to the car, each step being more difficult than the last and taking a little longer. Strange how long that walk seemed to take, yet 42 years later, it was not long at all. It was time. They were leaving. Even today, I still feel those feelings. If I close my eyes, I still see the tears in my mother's eyes and the taillights of our car getting smaller until they turned left at the end of the drive and were gone.

I began to weep. I missed them. This was a mistake! I ran with all my strength to the end of the driveway to stop them. If not to stop them, to at least see if I could still see the car. If I could only get their attention, they could come back and take me home. I no longer wanted to be here.

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I didn't want my uniforms; I didn't want my roommates or any new adventures. I wanted my parents to take me home to my room where I was safe and knew everything I needed to know.

Too late. They were gone. I did not want to be here! That is my recollection of the first day at AMA.

As I walked up the drive, I saw other cadets on the playing field, others in front of the barracks and others walking about. As I got to my room I was still sad. No one was there and I finished making my bed when I heard a bugle over the loud speakers. I didn't expect that and ran to the door and heard some one say, "*Dinner, come on!*"

As I looked up and down the stoop, I saw several boys with their arms poked up behind them with their necks pushed down to their chests. "*Looks like a bunch of chickens,*" I thought. "*I wonder why they are doing that. Must be some sort of punishment.*" I said out loud.

"*At least I didn't do anything wrong and don't have to do that,*" said I, as I stepped out of my door. "*HALT!*", someone screamed. As I continued, I heard it again, "*HALT, I said!*" I turned around, there was a very tall cadet who began to yell at me, "*That's right, you! Brace! Pull those arms back! Tuck in that chin in! Cut those corners when you get there! And walk on the outside the stoop.*"

The question, "*What?*", no sooner passed my lips than I realized that I had made the biggest mistake of that day. I will never forget. This cadet, a Lieutenant, grabbed me by the front of my shirt and pulled me to within inches from his face. He proceeded to yell unmercifully at me to, "*...do as you are told! Never question an officer!*"

When I started to speak, he yelled, "*You're on report!*" This "gig", I later learned would net me about an hour of marching time in front of the barracks on Monday when everyone else got to go to Staunton. All this for failing to brace and trying to ask a question. No one had told me about this bracing stuff. I was right. I did not want to be here.

I was assigned to E Company. My parents were gone. I was in trouble. And that, well that was my first memory of AMA. At least the liver for dinner was good and I had plenty. No one at my table liked it. I had the platter in front of me for the entire meal.

With the first meal finished, my first year at AMA became a whirlwind of ups and downs. My next memory surrounds admiration of and acknowledgement of the charismatic appeal of my first roommates: **Rex Miller** and **Nichole Nicholas**. They were friendly and the type of guys I always wanted to be around. Unfortunately, because of my immaturity and personal differences,

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I did not quite fit in with them.

During the year, I meet another cadet in **General Roller's** Algebra I class. We had a lot in common and hit it off right away. The thing that comes to mind is, and is pretty silly; our friendship hinged on us both liking "Reeses Peanut butter Cups" and often sharing them in class. My old roommates wanted to have a fellow by the name of **Doug Brown** move in and it was decided I would move into another room with my new friend. Exactly how this move was made is unclear but the next thing I remember is sharing a room with Ron and another cadet by the name of **Dohler**. My only memory of Dohler is that his parents owned some sort of a cabin resort and he gave me an address of a girl that he knew and we began to write. As the cloud of memory loss fades a bit, I recall sending and getting letters from her with bubble gum and lip prints on the back. I don't know the reason for the chewed gum or why that 'sticks' in my mind but it does.

This first year moved very rapidly. From reveille, formations, marching to meals, classes, study, drill practice, the huge snow fall and movies in the big room.

The movies were always a treat and remember when the cartoon came on and the credits rolled, everyone in the room yelled out, "Fletcher" when the name rolled down. I don't know the reason except we had a **Fletcher** who was some sort of CO and everyone would laugh and yell as the name rolled down.

The next highlight was mass on Sunday. All the catholic boys (affectionately known as "mackerel snappers") got to ride into Staunton for mass while everyone else marched to the Stone Church for services. I remember some sneaking off and avoiding mass and meeting girls. I never had the guts or a girl to visit to do that. Mondays were enough for me in Stanton.

My next flash is getting terribly dizzy in church and a Lieutenant by the name of **Popavitch** taking me outside before I passed out. I remember thinking how kind he was to assist me. Holding me up and staying with me as I put my head between my legs to get the blood to flow back into my head. I still remember seeing everything getting black as the sparkling star like flashes closed in around my eye. From there all I remember is being told I would be all right and my hoping the voice was right.

This first year's blur continues with unsuccessful attempts at sports. Tried fencing, lacrosse and swimming. I definitely was not the athletic type and did not make the grade. My one highlight was that I did get my picture taken with the fencing team. I did stick that out. Never won a match but kept practicing and trying. As I remember, I was never in a match, just practice. I

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guess I was the reliable one that would be used to practice with. In any case, it was fun and my picture is still in the yearbook,

As the blur continues, I recall meeting some of the Spanish boys and was quite taken by one of them. He could play a guitar very fast and I loved listening to his records of Hispanic music. I also remember going out back of the barracks to watch two of the Spanish boys fight. I will never forget the small crowd that gathered and the sound of fists hitting faces. Can't remember who won, just that I was glad I was not one of the fighters. They were relentless in their punching and swinging on one another. As teeth got bloody, my stomach tied in knots. It remained that way for several days after. Each time I thought how I would have fared out, my stomach would tie into another knot. It was then that I began to change my sarcastic mannerisms to ensure I would not end up getting beat up.

As the first year blurs on I also recall:

~ getting many a demerit and having to miss the ride into Staunton to march tours in front of the big barracks;

~ growing apart from the friendship of my new room mates;

~ more tours of marching for my failing inspections;

~ missing more Mondays in Staunton;

~ meeting and being befriended a cadet by the name of **Gerry Reph** with HQ company.

~ His suggestion to contact **Captain Psedudo**[sp?] to work off tours in the mess hall instead of marching off the tours each Monday.

~ being asked to fill in for CW's when they were off to an athletic event or sick in the infirmary.

I remember the camaraderie of the CW's and becoming a regular fill in for them. They were quite forgiving of my faults. A number of them actually thought I was funny and invited me to spend time with them. My affiliation E Company dwindled and I knew that I wanted to be a CW next year.

As the year drew to a close, my grades remained average but I was learning better people skills under the tutelage of Captain Pseudo[sp?] and the CW's.

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My next memory is taking the bus to Baltimore for a break and stopping along the way. As memory serves, someone had the bright idea to get a dozen eggs. After a few cars were hit with the eggs, a State Trooper stopped the bus. Everyone hid their eggs and after a stern admonishment we were allowed to continue. I will never forget that incident and the State Troopers stern demeanor. I don't know exact what the outcome was but don't think anyone "ratted out" or got in trouble.

The year drew to a close and we packed up for home. My parents picked me up. Once home, I had to take a bus in "full uniform" to have lunch with my mother who was at work in downtown Baltimore. I will never forget all the stares on the city bus when I got on. Swore I would never do that again.

So ends the first year at Augusta. Having missed a year with my hometown friends, I was less accepted and could not wait to return to AMA as a CW.

Thomas Douglas – September 1960 to June 1962

The 1962 RECALL can be viewed here:
<https://galleries.amaalumni.org/Recalls/Recall-1962/>