

FEATURE ARTICLES

Why Physical Training Must Hold a Prominent Place in the Future of Training at the Air Force Academy

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Introduction

In his paper *Accelerate Change or Lose*, Chief of Staff of the Air Force General Charles Q. Brown, Jr. (2020) writes on the importance of change. “Today we operate in a dynamic environment with factors that have us taking various actions to continue the mission... if we don’t change – if we fail to adapt – we risk losing the certainty with which we have defended our national interests for decades” (p. 2). One such thing which will not change is the mission of the U.S. Air Force Academy (USAFA), which is “To educate, train, and inspire men and women to become officers of character motivated to lead the United States Air and Space Forces in service to our Nation.” What has changed, though, is how we train these men and women.

Training has an interesting and polarizing connotation to cadets. Some will deem it the worst thing to ever happen to them, and the same number of people will respond the exact opposite; someone will note that they love their Training Officer (TO) and another can retort that they will forever hate their TO. At least, in

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years past that was what training was. Today, in 2021 training is no longer; rather, it is *upgrades*. In the last year and a half, the Academy's Cadet Wing has been undergoing a drastic change in training, and an even more challenging attempt to change the training culture. Without a doubt the introduction of COVID into the equation has played a role in the less-than-optimal rollout of this different approach to training; yet COVID is but one factor. As the Academy continues toward institutionalizing the changes made in the last 18 months – and looking towards the future as Gen Brown directs – the Cadet Wing would be remiss to not also peer into the past – to review how the institution trained cadets before, and find the value in those methods. This review, I believe, would be both timely and of immense value for all parties involved.

I have had the opportunity to experience this shift in training (both practical and cultural) as a cadet rising through the ranks. A member of the class of (2022), I have experienced 4-degree¹ training before the shift, adapted immensely in how to train as a 3-degree, and now as a 2-degree, I am working to understand and thrive in the current upgrades system of development. The purpose of this article is not to bash this new system, nor is it to blindly praise the ways of old. Rather, it is to provide a view on how training could be accomplished at this institution, and more importantly, to start a conversation for all to join. This task - reviewing and introducing a training system - is daunting, and it is one which has no right answer nor can be accomplished by one person. By the end of this article, I hope to have given the reader a new perspective and hopefully a small appreciation for the experience of a cadet in this ever-changing time of accelerated

change. More importantly, though, I hope that the reader will become passionate enough to respond and join in the dialogue.

The Importance of Training

The purpose of training at USAFA in years past has arguably been twofold: developing fourth-class cadets and providing members of the upper three classes with leadership opportunities. Yet the importance of training expands past this. The training experience which USAFA offers binds all graduates, old and new. It may cause some to say “back when it was hard...”, but all graduates and cadets recognize that having an extensive training experience is a core component of the Academy experience. A USAFA fourth-class cadet will have the honor of experiencing an extremely difficult nine months until Recognition², and then a relatively easier remaining time. The value of this can be debated, but from a fraternity of graduates' perspective, it creates a common bond that separates us from our fellow brothers and sisters at the other service academies and their training systems. Fostering a fraternity is not exclusive to just the graduate community either; it is extremely important within the cadet ranks as well. Encountering and overcoming challenges – forging a bond under fire – has provided many cadets with the most valuable friendships and lessons attainable.

On the topic of Recognition, it is no secret that its value and place in contemporary training is a topic of hot debate. Yet with all of the arguments made, there remains a point which is scarcely discussed: the boost that it provides to *the esprit de corps* among cadets. As a four-degree, it was one of the only times in which all of the upper three-classes came together with such passion. The fraternity of men and women coming together

1 The Air Force Academy employs a four-class development system, with each class representing a different level of experience. Fourth-class cadets are freshmen, third-class sophomores, second-class juniors, and first-class seniors. Informally cadets can be referred to as “4/3/2 degrees” or “firsties” rather than first-class cadets.

2 Recognition is a 60-hour culminating event for fourth-class cadets. With the upper-three classes acting as cadre, the four-degrees face intense challenges designed to test physical and mental fortitude, as well as teamwork and leadership skills.

with one goal in mind; considering how quickly people become enveloped in their own tasks following four-degree year is extremely impressive. This is not exclusive to just the upper classmen either. As a four-degree you learn early that you cannot thrive as a cadet, and subsequently as a military member alone; you need to work together to accomplish goals. Recognition is the culmination of that lesson for cadets. Coupled with the weeks preceding, Recognition means a lot to the four-degree as it is not only the graduation toward becoming an upperclassmen, but it is also for many, the last time that everyone will work together on such a scale. This bonding is something which has arguably been lost in the chaos of a COVID-environment, wherein virtual work and various lockdowns have meant not leaving one's small room or truly interacting with people outside your roommate. This is especially of worry for the class of 2024, who had little to no opportunities for interaction with fellow four-degrees during Basic Cadet Training (BCT) and still continuing throughout their first semester. Due to the difficult decision to have the majority of their classes be virtual, the invaluable in-person classroom experience of meeting others has been lost.

When cadets and graduates are asked the question "Why did you stay at the Academy?" very few do not answer with "the people." It speaks to the incredible bond that is developed among cadets through their training, experiences, and leaning on one another. Yet the esprit de corps seems to be declining in the few years in which I have been a cadet. The introduction of COVID led to half of the Spring 2020 semester being uprooted, removing many invaluable bonding opportunities such as Recognition, Ring Dance³, and

³ Ring Dance is one of the most important events in a cadet's career. Occurring at the end of two-degree year, cadets will receive their class rings and be permitted to begin wearing one. The event also represents a transition toward becoming first-class cadets, as Graduation is the following week.

Graduation. Yet COVID was only one reason for the decline. Among the Cadet Wing, there was a feeling of lost purpose due to the sudden shutdown and uprooting of the training system. In hindsight, the decision to review and revise training was necessary, but it also created new issues. Cadets generally felt that a common bond – a part of their identity – had been stripped due to the change in training. The new system put in place during the Fall 2020 semester has done an adequate job in recreating this bond but there are more things, which extend past the scope of this article, to fully accomplish the task.

A note should be made regarding the word choice of training. When the decision was made to change the title of training to "upgrades many, myself included, laughed at the thought. The purpose behind the name change was to differentiate the methodologies: training can carry with it an unfavorable connotation considering the negative outcomes that have arose in the past (e.g., training violations, people feeling unfairly targeted and unwelcome, etc.). The argument was that the term training is a more apt definition for the "development of a specific skill" while we should be looking to be upgrading or "developing a breadth of skills". A word can mean different things to different people, and it is no different in this instance. The USAFA training which I experienced was never meant to develop certain skills, but instead a way of life. It focused on difficult training, encouraging stressful situations that forced one to push themselves. It taught me respect, developed pride in my heritage as an Airman and Academy cadet, and compelled cooperation with everyone, even those with whom you did not like or did not have anything in common with. It did not matter that it was called training versus other words such as upgrades or development. Instead of worrying about the word choice, the content behind that word is much

more important. This content is the true focus the discussions and forums had.

How Does Warrior Ethos Fit into the Equation?

The term *warrior ethos* has become quite the buzzword, or at least it has been one while I have been a cadet. It is used to describe more physically demanding education classes such as boxing, water survival, and combatives; or training events which involve rucking, land navigation, or challenges perceived as the more Army-like tasks. Yet this does not come close to doing the term justice. While true that these activities require tapping into one's personal warrior ethos, it is equally focused on honor, accountability, and excellence.

The official Academy definition for warrior ethos bridges the gap in understanding: "Warrior ethos is the embodiment of the warrior spirit: tough mindedness, tireless motivation, an unceasing vigilance, a willingness to sacrifice one's life for the country, if necessary, and a commitment to be the world's premier air, space and cyberspace force" (AFI 36-2014, 2019). Physical fitness is one – but arguably the most effective – method to demonstrate the ethos. It is this that should maintain prominence within the training curriculum. While its current place in training should be appreciated, in my opinion it remains ineffective at accomplishing its task for fourth-class cadets. If anything, the training situation forced upperclassmen to tap into the warrior spirit. They navigated through the unknown with a tough mind, tackled problems with tireless motivation, and found a way to make some training valuable to all four classes. These individuals should be applauded for their work.

Upperclassmen remain but one half of the equation, though. Across the Cadet Wing, a perceived consensus has arisen that accountability and teamwork at the

fourth-class level is at a low point. Typically, this is a point made for all new classes, with upperclassmen declaring "Class of XXXX is the worst class to come through here or they have it so easy." Arguably, though, this year has been different. A lack of attention to detail, a lack of accountability, a lack of teamwork, a lack of care for a select few—all these points and more came to the forefront of discussions with fellow cadets. Upperclassmen are not themselves free from the blame. Care for the rules and accountability have been of great issue over the last couple of years for a multitude of reasons. Yet there remains the cause which upperclassmen dedicate themselves to when training, which is to make the next class better. If a regression occurs among the new class, there must be an issue present.

That issue is that the warrior ethos is not focused on enough in the Cadet Wing. Coursework, teams and clubs, and personal time quickly becomes the focus during the academic year. Elements of the warrior spirit do have to be embodying for these tasks, but cadets do not think of them in that manner. Perhaps this requires cadets to gain that perspective. Or, warrior ethos needs to once again be one of - if not the top - concerns for training. There is a perceived correlation for some in the Cadet Wing between a lack of difficult physical training sessions and the lack of accountability; whether causation is present has yet to be determined. However, this should invite study by all parties, rather than shying away from the topic.

Personally, much was gained from the physical training sessions wherein I had to tap into the warrior spirit to accomplish my tasks. One of the most valuable experiences in my life was from this. During BCT, I was too slow and did not meet a time hack. As a result, I had to watch as my classmates performed physical training (PT) to make up for my mistake. The purpose was not

hazing, but to demonstrate that personal mistakes will cause consequences for others, not necessarily just oneself. This negative attention toward my classmates caused me to embody the warrior spirit, ensuring that I was performing at 100% while keeping myself and others accountable. Experiences like these and others such as “earning back” locks for locked drawers left open, are no longer present, and, in my opinion, the Cadet Wing is being hurt as a result.

The Way Forward

I do not mean to be only doom and gloom, as there is much hope for the future of training at the Air Force Academy. The foundation laid in the fall 2020 semester will prove invaluable for the future of this institution. Speaking with upperclassmen revealed that some found value in the new upgrades system. Accomplishing one of the Commandant’s primary goals, there were no training violations egregious enough to reach the group or her level. But there remains a lot of work to be done. This past semester as a Group Upgrades Non-Commissioned Officer In Charge (NCOIC)⁴ I had the opportunity to work closely with the Academy Military Training Instructors (AMTIs)⁵. In one meeting with fourth-class cadets, a question was posed regarding our thoughts on how the 2020 BCT was conducted. The AMTI responded that he and his fellow MTIs entered BCT expecting to have to instruct the cadet cadre

to reduce the intensity of the physical fitness placed on the basic cadets. Yet they found that for the great majority of cadre there was much hesitation to utilize physical fitness; having served as the Obstacle Course Superintendent, I concurred. The general consensus was that physical fitness as a tool in the cadre’s toolbox was highly situational and overall not effective (i.e., 90 seconds of work, then at least 30 minutes to an hour of rest). This manner of cadre being theoretically bound to an extreme set of rules was overall not sustainable,

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and hurt the physical development of the class of 2024⁶. Further, there was a general fear over receiving disciplinary action for a perceived training violation, even if one had not occurred. To this end, a continuing development of trust between cadets and permanent party (remembering that it is a two-way street) regarding physical training must be a priority.

Conclusion

Not only this, based on the previous discussion I would like to offer several points.

⁴ A junior level position, the Group Upgrades NCOIC (along with the Officer) oversees the training progress of the 10 squadrons in their group. The role also involves working closely with both Wing-level cadet leadership and Group-level Officers and Senior Non-Commissioned Officers (SNCOs).

⁵ Military Training Instructors (MTIs) are enlisted personnel who develop and teach the next generation of enlisted airmen through Basic Military Training at Lackland AFB. AMTIs denotes those MTIs who are stationed at the Air Force Academy. Their purpose is to make recommendations to the Training Division and provide their unique perspective as professional trainers to cadets.

⁶ Exiting BCT the class had achieved the highest average Aerobic Fitness Test (AFT) scores ever and the lowest average Physical Fitness Test (PFT) scores in history. While impressive, during the Academic Year the PFT accounts for 50% of the Physical Education Average and the AFT 15%.

Start thinking of different “purposes” for training.

For instance, one of the major complaints of the manner in which training was performed two years ago was that it was “preparation for the 20th century fight” and that it’s incorrect to not provide a “why.” What this argues, though, is that in preparing for the 21st century fight we can assume that the “fog of war” has suddenly disappeared, or that all of the information will be known prior to a decision—a reality which we all know is impossible. Instead, fourth-class cadets should be able to experience training sessions with no knowledge of its purpose. During the debriefing, it should then be explained to the four-degrees that the purpose of the session was to execute tasks without a known purpose nor perfect information. As a personal anecdote, last semester I moved rooms five times between coming back for the summer and moving between the hotels and the Academy. In one such move, my squadron mates and I had 36 hours’ notice. At the time we had lived in the area which quickly became filled by residents of Q&I⁷. It was a matter of when, not if, we would have to move again.

Sharing this anecdote is important as I fell back on the training I received during 4-degree year to be better prepared. Just as I had two years prior, I was working in an environment of uncertainty and sometimes struggle. Having experienced it before, I was able to make the mental shift to thrive in the midst of the dynamic times. By not giving 4-degrees this opportunity, to essentially grant them perfect information from the beginning, it robs them of this important learning opportunity. Further, it inspires them when in leadership positions to provide more information when possible, empathizing with others when going through a time of uncertainty. There is

⁷ Quarantine and Isolation. The location within the Sijan Tower dormitory where COVID positive, symptomatic and contact traced cadets are moved for monitoring and to stop the spread of COVID-19.

a time and a place for everything, including tough physical training sessions. With proper planning and oversight shared with the appropriate individuals (e.g., Air Officer Commanding-AOC/Academy Military Trainer-AMT, senior squadron cadet leadership, cadet points of contact for the training session), these sessions should absolutely be permitted to occur. A concern will arise regarding whether training violations would happen, and in a developmental training environment, they likely could. But these should be treated as learning moments for all involved, and more intrusive rules from higher levels should not be introduced. This provides upperclassmen leadership opportunities and lessons that they otherwise would not have received.

Stop refusing to change. This message is for myself and my fellow cadets. While we may have been apprehensive at first with the new direction that training has taken, this does not excuse our responsibility to adapt to the new system. As one 2019 USAFA graduate told my basic training flight, “Change is good. Transition is hard.” We need to find the valuable within the system and focus on that. After graduation we will be joining an institution that is much harder to change, and much more stuck in its ways. Focusing on the good will mean that we can make the shift from an unmotivated acceptance of the new system to a motivated one. This does not mean blind acceptance of the status quo nor of all changes. The appropriate amount of frustration can demonstrate the importance of something, but the key is finding the appropriate amount. We need to come to a better understanding that once concerns have been voiced and heard, it is our responsibility to make the best of the situation at hand.

Continue to push for a 4-class training system.

While the phrase has become a buzzword and a source of discontent, it remains a great idea in concept. What needs work, in this author’s opinion, is the execution.

This requires genuine buy-in from upper classmen, and influencing that a 4-class system is important and beneficial. There are skills and lessons that need to be taught at an early point in one's time in uniform, and others that will be best utilized and understood in subsequent years. As much as I did not enjoy it, learning how to deal with a bureaucracy has been extremely beneficial and has shaped my understanding of how to effectively approach change within an organization.

“Accelerate Change or Lose.” All U.S. Airmen and Guardians recognize the importance of those four words. It represents posturing toward the future fight, and moving past the battles that have dominated the geopolitical landscape for the last 20 years. For the Air Force Academy, though, too rapid and drastic of a change risks losing a crucial element of the cadet experience. We risk losing out on the challenges which physical fitness-based training presents, the bonds forged, and the stories born. A balanced approach, recognizing the future yet honoring the past, is the best manner toward building a training system that accomplishes all which is important to the cadet, the graduate community, and the services that await us after graduation.

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References

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