

Doolie gets brief respite from Academy life



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Jasper came home for Thanksgiving! We did get to see him on his own turf over Labor Day weekend when we all piled into the Arnebus for the long drive to Colorado Springs, but this was the first time he was allowed to come home since he started basic training back in June.

He had been counting the days, literally, since September. The United States Air Force Academy can be a real pressure cooker, so going home is a well-earned relief.

Anyone who has served in the military knows how tough boot camp is.

At Basic Cadet Training, cadets are jolted awake by reveille every morning at 4:30, and go nonstop until collapsing into their bunks at 9 or 10 p.m.

Thankfully, BCT only lasts about six weeks. However,

unlike most military recruits, cadets get that special "boot camp feeling" for many more months!

Yes, from the time college courses start in August until spring break in March, cadets are still under many "restrictions." During this time, first-year cadets are called "doolies," from the Greek word "doulos," which means "slave."

The purpose of the USAFA is to build leaders, and before you can become a leader you must first learn how to be a follower. They are building some world-class followers at the Academy.

For example, doolies get to experience the wonder and beauty of "eating at attention."

In a carry-over from BCT, doolies must spend most of their meals sitting on the edge of their chairs with perfect posture, staring at an eagle emblem on their plate.

After scooping up food, a doolie must insert the utensil into his mouth, return the utensil to the table, and put his hands on his lap before he can start chewing.

Doolies may only speak when asked a question by an upper-classman.

This may seem like mild tor-

ture, but it's all part of a process to develop the self-discipline of young men and women. Jasper heard the advice given to his older brother, Ben — just do it. Even if something seems crazy or stupid, just play the game and obey.

The Academy has been doing this for 50 years with some pretty good results, so they probably know what they're doing — even if it doesn't seem to make sense right now.

A doolie's typical day starts at 6:25 a.m., when he must be out in the dorm room hall, fully dressed (they are ALWAYS in uniform) and with a perfect room and bed, calling out the number of minutes until the morning formation. At precisely 6:55 a.m., all 4,000 cadets march to breakfast in Mitchell Hall and eat in one cavernous room, in 21 minutes!

Another "highlight" for doolies concerns how they walk across campus. Actually, they can't walk at all — on the terrazzo (the giant patio between all the buildings), doolies must run everywhere, not walk.

Furthermore, they must stay on the lines dividing the huge slabs of granite. And a doolie cannot wear a backpack; he

must carry it in his left hand so he can salute officers with his right hand.

A doolie must give an official greeting to every person he passes by on the terrazzo. He must memorize the name, rank and position of every upper-classman in his squadron (about 100 cadets).

On top of these quirky rules is military training, marching, and knowledge tests. At the Academy, EVERYTHING is ranked! A doolie's military rank depends on memorization of facts and general attitude.

Each cadet is also ranked physically. One test measures aerobic fitness (how fast you can run 1.5 miles) and another measures strength, in the form of jumping, pushups, sit-ups, sprints and pull-ups. (Walking around the dorms, visitors are struck by the sight of pull-up bars in every stairwell — they practice whenever possible!)

Perhaps the most daunting aspect of Academy life is academics. After all, USAFA is a highly-rated four-year college at its core. Jasper is currently enjoying a class load of Calculus 3, Physics, Advanced Chemistry, Engineering 101 and Spanish.

Oh, and one more class that

just started last week: Boxing. With a mix of rigorous academics and required athletics, there aren't many cadets who earn a 4.0 grade point average — far fewer than 1 percent, even in a single semester.

It makes you wonder why anyone would choose such a place. Most amazing to me are the kids who go to USAFA after turning down a full ride at other places, either for sports or academics.

I guess some people really like to challenge themselves in every way.

With all the pressures on them emotionally, militarily, physically and academically, it's no surprise they look forward to coming home for the holidays.

And when they get home, they enjoy simple pleasures like seeing friends and family, watching a movie, and reading a book on a comfy chair.

Judging by the size of the pile of mashed potatoes on his plate last week, I think Jasper might have appreciated "casual eating" the most.

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