

Flight of the Falcon

RAPTOR

Heavy winds rush across the Academy's athletic fields as the winter sun disappears behind the Front Range. The air is bitter cold, stinging any skin that is not tucked inside a warm pair of gloves or hat. Up above, the White-Phase Gyrfalcon comes around for another pass, her eyes set upon the lure spinning in the cadet's hands. The snow-white raptor charges into the wind, feathers flapping furiously as she fights the air currents. She makes a low pass, speeding by as the lure is pulled away. The falcon gains altitude, circling, her white body a stark contrast to the shadowy mountains which loom above the Academy. She comes around again, charging faster this time. The cadet releases the lure, sending it high into the air. The falcon pulls out of her dive, fans her wings wide to slow down and change course as she swoops up to meet the lure, talons outstretched. In one swift movement she latches onto her prey, and drops to the ground. Another successful training exercise concluded, the bird's handler gathers her up onto his gloved hand and heads back up the hill.

MEWS

C3C Paul McArthur stands in the Falcon Mews at 3:55pm on a Tuesday afternoon. On his arm, a hungry raptor tears bits of meat from the dead quail in McArthur's gloved hand. She raises up and throws her head back to swallow each piece, her feathers ruffling with delight. All around the room, cadets work with the other falcons—taking careful measure to weigh each bird before feeding time—inspecting wings, tails and talons. The animals posses

INSIDE THE ACADEMY'S FALCON PROGRAM

By Lewis Carlyle



Falcons are considered raptors, or birds of prey. They can reach speeds of up to 180mph when they fold their wings into an attack dive. Photo by David R. Armer



a fine balance of toughness and delicacy. They are able to withstand sub-zero temperatures, fly at speeds of over 180mph, catch and kill a variety of birds, rodents and even snakes. Each of the cadets falconers on the team considers it a great privilege to work with such magnificent species.

C1C Calder Goc has always held strong appreciation for animals. She describes the birds not as school mascots, but as colleagues. "I like that all the birds have their own personalities," she begins. "When I joined the program, I was really looking for something to take care of. These birds aren't just mindless drones; each one has his or her own personality. They have good days and bad days just like people."

McArthur agrees on the personality aspect of the falcon program. "My favorite bird right now is probably Ace. His character is actually kind of goofy. He's a lot like a dog. When you come to let him out of his room, he's at the door waiting for you. He's the best flyer we have right now and he just has a really cool attitude." Anyone who has been to an Air Force football game has probably seen Ace in action during the halftime show. Ace launches from the top of the press box and speeds his way down to the center of the field, where his handler awaits with a spinning lure. Much like a dog indeed, Ace normally skims the stadium's crowd between his attack passes on the spinning

lure. The crowds love it, and the birds seems to feed off of their energy.

The falconers have a very extensive travel program during the regular school year. They make appearances at every football game, both home and away. Because of their public lifestyle, the birds have to be constantly acclimated to human presence. Their cadet handlers work with them every day, employing a variety of techniques to keep the animals at peace with their human counterparts. Each bird is only allowed to eat when sitting on the arm of a handler. This is done to ease the vicious independence that each bird is instinctively born with. Connecting with humans through sustenance is an excellent way to establish both trust and rapport. The falcons interact with people every day, making it easy for them to endure large crowds of curious people (all of whom want to reach out and touch the elusive birds of prey). Training the birds to be accepting of humans can be a difficult challenge. They are after all, wild animals. "It makes what we do a lot more personable," says cadet Goc, "because we really have to connect with the birds."

C1C Jeremiah Baxter is one of the senior falconers on the team. He expresses the importance of being able to work not only with animals, but with people as well. "I tried out for the team my freshman year," Baxter begins, "and a couple of

the guys on the team were from my home state; it turned out to definitely be the team for me. I really love working with the birds, and we get to meet a lot of different people when we travel. Being able to work with people is also very important and the team dynamic here is critical. We're always being thrown into new situations on trips across the United States which we may not necessarily be prepared for; being able to work through those challenges has been a huge learning experience for us all."

Like many of the cadet falconers, C3C Cameron Harris agrees that the aspect of travel is a huge perk for the program. "One of the things that drew me to the team was the opportunity to travel. I love to travel and do public relations work. It's a lot of fun getting to meet new people (especially generals). We also get to see the football games from a whole new perspective of what you get from the stands."

Baxter concurs, adding, "Traveling and meeting new people are definitely among my favorite parts of the job. We encounter people from all walks of life across the United States." For some of the cadet falconers, the travel experience extends beyond the United States. C3C Paul McArthur and C2C Michael O'Kelley had the opportunity to attend the Abu Dhabi International Hunting and Equestrian Exhibition in the United Arab Emirates. "For me," McArthur explains, "three of



Above: C3C Paul McArthur prepares to weigh his falcon before feeding. Careful tabs are kept on each bird to monitor their consumption to ensure a healthy weight.

the Academy's twelve falconers were in my squadron. When I talked to them, they encouraged me to come and try out for the program. Travel has been a big plus for me. I got to go to Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates for six days. So far, that was the only travel I've been on with the team, but it was certainly a unique opportunity for me."

TECHNOLOGY IN FLIGHT

Throughout history, humans have become very resourceful in our ability to contain and domesticate animals. We have learned how to corral the entire gamut of terrestrial creatures, from the common dog all the way up to giraffes and elephants. We have even learned how to contain whales and dolphins. Yet birds present a different problem. While a cage may keep a bird from escaping, it does not provide adequate space for extended flight. The question then arises, how does one fly a falcon out on the open range without losing her to the call of freedom?

John VanWinkle is Deputy Chief of Media Relations under the Academy's Public Affairs office. During his tenure at USAFA, he has become a senior mentor to the falcon program. VanWinkle explains that in order to understand why the birds don't just fly off into the wild, you have to go back and revisit their training. From the day they are hatched, the falcons are

conditioned to have a connection to their human counterparts. Every meal is taken while perched on the gloved-hand of a cadet. It is also important to understand that the Academy's falcons are not trained to hunt, and thereby only associate food with their human trainers. In short, the birds cannot survive in the wild, and they have come to enjoy the comforts of their lives in the mews.

Despite all of their conditioning, VanWinkle admits, the call of the wild is sometimes too strong for a falcon to ignore. "One day last summer, Ace, our premiere football game flyer, took a three day sabbatical during one of his training sessions." Fortunately, like any good Air Force program, the falcon team has a contingency for such situations. Each bird is fitted with a radio transceiver which can be triangulated and tracked. Going out to retrieve a bird which has gone on fly-about takes coordination and patience. In the case of Ace, the falconers tracked his signal to find him perched in a tree not far from the mews. "Once you find a falcon," VanWinkle says, "it's just a matter of holding out your hand with food. Once he sees that pheasant, he comes right back."

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

Back at the mews, life goes on as usual. The hungry birds sit atop cadets' arms, tearing happily at their feasts of pheasant.

The holding pens are cleaned and sterilized and each bird is carefully weighed and measured to ensure a healthy life. The cadets inspect feathers and whisper soothing remarks to their winged counterparts. Outside, the winter chill is setting in as the winds billowing down from the Front Range become stronger each day.

C1C Calder Goc eases back in her chair, another full day of classes, formations and lectures behind her. As each of the cadets reveal their thoughts on the falcons they care for, Goc shares a paternal thought about her favorite bird. "That would have to be Cody," she says thoughtfully. "He's 17 years old. In the wild—due to the hardships of every day life—falcons may only live to be eight or nine years old. So Cody's pretty much just the old sweet grandpa who's really nice. Right now, I'm very interested in seeing to it that he has a good quality of life as he carries out the rest of his days."

As the lively birds enjoy their meals, the sun sets on the Academy. Eventually, the cadets make their way back to the dormitories and mews once again becomes quiet. As night falls, the birds settle in against the cold, ruffling feathers and calling to one another through the screened fences of their stalls. Tomorrow will be another day for wings to spread wide and for eyes to stay sharp. Tomorrow will start a new adventure. Tomorrow will bring the next flight of the falcon. ▣