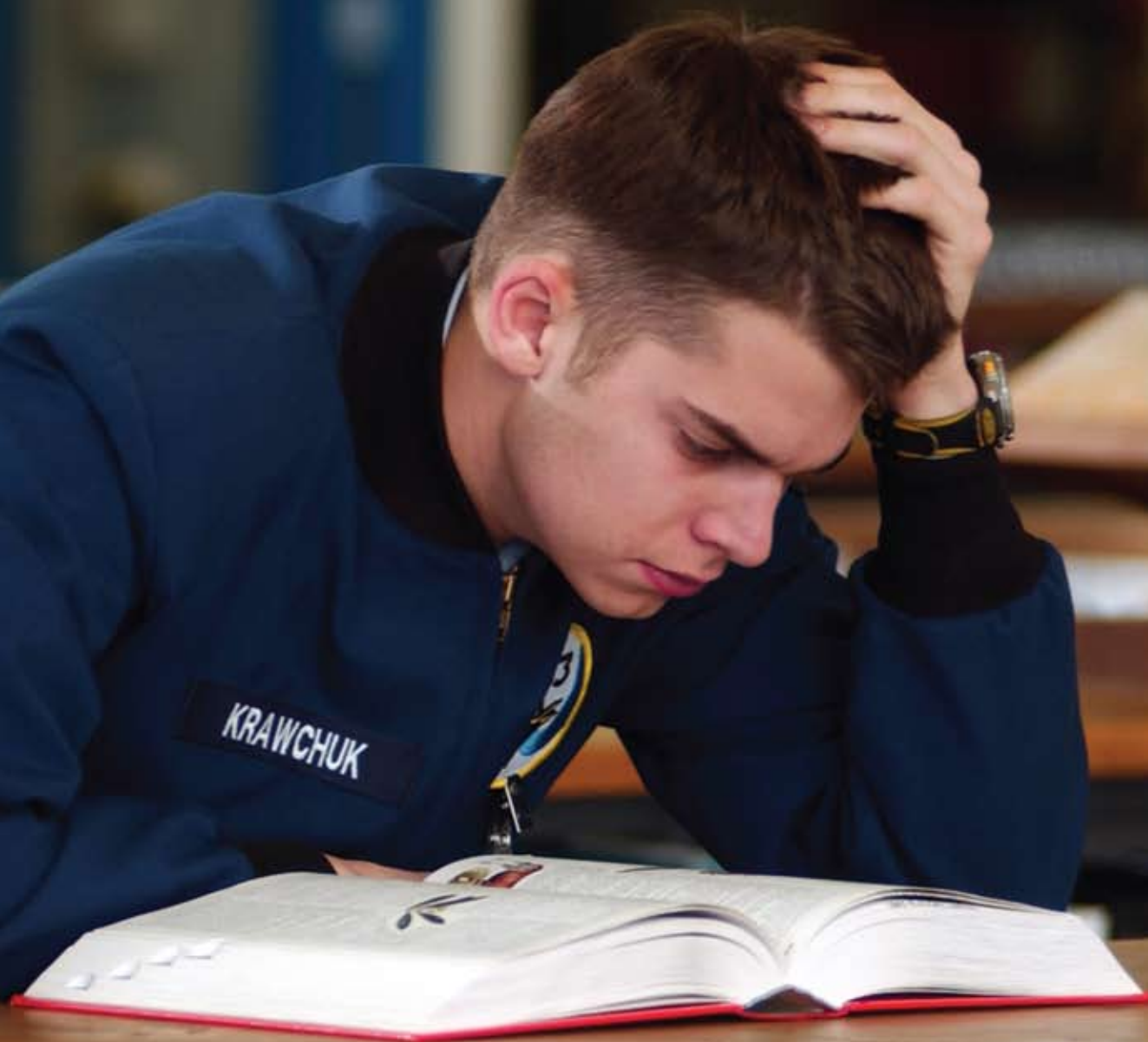


NEVER, EVER GIVE UP

A Story of Educational Perseverance



BY GEN. STEVE LORENZ, '73

In order to succeed at the United States Air Force Academy, cadets *must* excel at academic, athletic and military challenges. One of the toughest lessons all cadets learn during the four years is how to balance their natural strengths—the things they enjoy being good at—with everything else. In essence, this balancing act paves the way for success in service to the nation after graduation. Resting only on our strengths makes us one-dimensional leaders. Our country needs leaders who are able to engage in many dimensions. For me, I learned very quickly that I was going to have to work hardest in the “academic dimension.” It ended up being one of my greatest struggles.

The journey actually began in the summer of 1960 when I was only nine years old. My father was a captain in the Air Force and stationed at Lowry Air Force Base in Denver, Colorado. One Saturday, he drove my entire family down to Colorado Springs and we visited the Air Force Academy for the very first time. I remember it like it was yesterday because that was the day I fell in love with the Academy. Construction on the Cadet Chapel had yet to begin and Sijan Hall was still years in the future. I remember standing there, under the bright blue mountain sky, and pledging to myself that one day this was the place I would go to school. As a fourth grader, I did not know how I was going to get there, but I knew right then and there that I was going to devote all my energy to becoming a cadet at the most beautiful school I had ever seen.

During the next nine years, through eight moves and eight different schools (including four high schools), I followed my father across the country and around the world. During that entire time, I kept my goal in sight to become a cadet at the Air Force Academy. I joined every high school club. I tried out for every sport I could participate in. I took every course the Academy required. I even ran for every high school office that was available. This was particularly tough because we were moving almost every year. I took the ACTs and then took the SATs—five times! If there was anything that I thought would improve my chances to get into the Academy—I did it!

When it finally came time to get an appointment to the Academy, I immediately applied to Illinois, my home state. My congressman wrote back that even with all my hard work, I was fourth in line for an appointment and that I should try again next year. I was disappointed and somewhat discouraged but vowed not to give up. I talked to the Academy group, which was then in Washington D.C., and they told me that some congressional districts did not have qualified candidates. They recommended

that I should also apply to those districts. My dad was stationed in Washington at the time so I literally started walking the halls of Congress until I came upon the office of Congressman Tim Lee Carter of Kentucky's 5th Congressional District. He had no qualified candidate that year and, after I had a face to face meeting with the congressman, he nominated me to the Academy to be a member of the Class of 1973. I was on top of the world! On June 23, 1969, on a bright shiny day, I reported to the base of the ramp with 1,403 of my new classmates.

Basic Cadet Training was a blur. We ran everywhere, from dawn until dusk. Upperclassmen yelled at us all day long. It seemed we were in constant motion 24 hours a day. However, I was happy. I had achieved my life's goal and was a cadet at the United States Air Force Academy. It had been a challenge to get into the Academy, but I was now a cadet and I thought the hardest part was over. Boy, was I wrong! Little did I know the hard part was just beginning.

It started when we took the battery of aptitude tests that seemed to go on forever. I did well in the social sciences, ended up validating the entire fourth class year of history and my political science scores were well up there. However, in the math and science areas of the core curriculum, I was at the bottom of the heap. My math scores entitled me to be placed in all the “People's” courses. Anything that had a “101” attached to it and was a “bucket” section is where they sent me. I slugged my way through one math and science course after another. I had more extra instruction sessions in physics than actual classroom sessions and still ended up with a “D.” I think they did not give me an “F” because they felt sorry for me.

I survived my fourth class year but the “bucket” sections were getting smaller as many of our classmates resigned or were “academically” asked to leave. Third class academic year began and for the first time, I really understood what challenging academics were. The eleven semester hours of the “People's” Math 201 were pure drudgery. I just barely survived that onslaught, when Computer Science 200 snuck up on me and I met my first academic board with my first big fat “F.” It was quite a humbling experience to stand at attention in front of 13 captains, majors and colonels justifying why I should stay at the Academy. Since I had validated fourth class history and it appeared that my military order of merit was adequate, they voted to keep me for one more semester to see how I would do. I passed Computer Science 200 on my second try and slid into second class summer. It had gotten to the point that I was living semester to semester and looked forward to summer training because I knew I could make it through the military training without too much trouble.

Second class academics began, and I was finally getting into some history and political science courses that were actually enjoyable. In fact, political science classes were so enjoyable that I declared International Affairs as my major. However, two gigantic math and science hurdles remained. A solid year of electrical engineering (EE) and aeronautical engineering stood like the Rocky Mountains between me and graduation. Two other things that were about to affect my future time as a cadet were also out there but, being 19 years old, I did not see them coming. The first was that I was now truly at the bottom of my class in

the math and science areas. All the other cadets who had for two years cushioned my grades at the bottom of the bell curve were gone. The second was that I finally had met a young lady. Yes, now when I needed to be truly focused on studying to make it to the end, I started dating. During the middle of the week when I should have been studying, I now was talking on the telephone. Every weekend, I was faced with the choice of studying for courses I truly disliked or going downtown to date this young lady. Being 19, the choice was, of course, obvious! As the fall semester started slipping by and I prepared for finals and Christmas leave, I had a very uneasy feeling.

On December 23, 1971, I arrived at McConnell Air Force Base, Kansas on Christmas leave to visit my parents. I told my dad that I was “concerned” about my grades. This turned out to be an understatement. Early on Christmas Eve, he called my academic advisor and asked him to find out what my grades were. My advisor checked and called my dad back immediately. He said I had done well in history and political science and had earned a 2.0 GPA for the semester, but that I had flunked both EE and aeronautical engineering! He also said that the academic board would be meeting to decide my fate the day after Christmas. He told my dad that things did not look good.

Needless to say this was not a very happy Christmas for me and my parents. I spent all day praying that I would be allowed to stay at the Academy to redeem myself and to earn those golden lieutenant bars. The hours passed by so very slowly. On the afternoon of the 26th, my advisor called my dad and said that because of my Military Order of Merit, the academic board had voted to let me stay. However, I would be restricted to the cadet area for six months and would have to take R-Flight (summer school) my first class summer in order to graduate with my class. The Academy board had given me another chance. I was so thankful, but I was about to learn some very valuable lessons during the next six months.

When I got back to the “Zoo,” I found out that 17 of my classmates had flunked out that semester and that I was still at the Academy by the grace of God and the Dean. I also found out that I was assigned six (the maximum number) Weekend Academic Call to Quarters (WACQs). Each “WACQ” was two-and-a-half hours long which meant in addition to all the military duties that occurred each weekend, I also had to be at my desk studying a minimum of 18 hours from Friday night until Sunday evening call to quarters. This was easier said than done, especially during the dark ages. I remember sitting at my desk studying EE (for the second time) and watching my classmates leave the squadron area to go on dates downtown. After about a month of this, my initial euphoria of getting to stay at the Academy passed and I started to get depressed. I began to ask myself “Was all this pain worth it?” I hated EE and aeronautical engineering. I was never going to use these “worthless” classes. I told myself that the core curriculum was a waste of time. I was on the verge of resigning, but a group of people and a piece of precious metal changed my mind.

That group of people included my family, Air Officer Commanding (AOC), professors and classmates who helped and encouraged me during this challenging time. They assisted me in studying for my classes and motivated me when I was down. They all made a real difference in focusing and improving my spirits. However, I will never forget the day my squadron ordered our

class rings. I remember trying on that piece of precious metal for the first time. It was so big, heavy, and beautiful. They gave me an order form with a picture of the ‘73 class crest. I thought it was so magnificent. I took the order form and taped it to the wall in front of my desk. From then on, when I started to feel sorry for myself, I would look at the picture of that beautiful ring and remind myself why I came to the Academy in the first place. I started to count down the days until the ring dance: 100 days, 98, 50, 25 ... and finally the great day arrived. That night when I put the ring on for the first time, I knew all the hard work had been worth it and that the Academy had shaped my life forever.

The semester that I had been “locked” in my room for six months, I achieved my highest grades. That summer “R-Flight” went well, even though I did not get any leave. My Firstie (senior) year was still challenging, but there was nothing that could get in the way of those gold bars. On June 6, 1973, five hundred and sixty-four of my classmates preceded me in getting their diplomas handed to them by Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, with a total of 844 of us getting to walk across the stage. After four long, hard years, I had finally made it and earned an Academy degree and the coveted golden lieutenant bars.

I have had a lot of time over the 36 years since graduation to reflect on how the entire Academy experience affected me and shaped my life. Like everyone else, I have faced personal and professional challenges. But even on the darkest of days, I looked back and remembered the WACQs, EE and aeronautical engineering. If I could make it through the Academy’s academic challenges, then I could make it through anything. Like most graduates, I internalized the Honor Code as a daily “code of conduct.” However, I left the Academy with other major life lessons as well. The first was that you must “never ever, ever, give up.” If you are willing to work hard and stay focused, tenacity and perseverance will help you prevail. The second was that the pursuit of learning through education, even through the dreaded core curriculum, is a major building block for success in life. You see, taking courses is not about the grades, it is about what you learn and how you use that learning in your everyday life. We all must never stop learning and growing. To this day, I am always reading and studying. Finally, achieving any great endeavor is all about teamwork. If it was not for my parents, family, professors, advisors, and classmates who helped me graduate from the Academy, I would not have been able to serve our nation in the world’s greatest Air Force.

As I said at the beginning of this story, one of the toughest lessons to learn at the Academy is to balance one’s natural strengths across the academic, athletic and military dimensions. I used to think my challenges were unique, but as the years have passed, I have observed that many, if not most cadets, had similar challenges in one or more of these three dimensions and our graduates and the nation are all the better for it. ■

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