

New Nonfiction from MaxieJane Frazier: “A Military Liberal Education”



The scored green vinyl seat inside an Air Force Bluebird bus at the base of the “Bring Me Men” ramp at the U.S. Air Force Academy was slippery under my jeans. On this 1987 June afternoon, I was wearing my acid-washed Levis and the shortest haircut I’d ever had. The Naugahyde stink of the seats with the warm, nervous bodies made my already churning stomach a witch’s brew. In some ways, these nerves felt like they were happening to someone else. I was a distant observer of a movie scene where military recruits were about to enter basic training. I felt my damp hands opening and closing as if forcing my body to move would prove to me that I was still myself.

To my right, I saw the glass and metal dormitory windows of Vandenberg Hall blindly reflecting the sun. A line of tables with boxes set up on the open concrete pad beneath the windows stood between us and cadets fiddling with folders. They were

wearing green fatigue pants and tight white t-shirts with dark blue cuffs, their last names and USAFA screened onto the left-hand side of their chests. The ones near the bus folded their arms and their tight faces under their molded blue berets showed nothing. Not one person on the bus with me said a word under the idling rumble of the diesel engine.

The whoosh of opening doors made me whip my head forward. A muscular demon of spit and sound boarded the bus yelling "Basics, I am Cadet First Class" but I wasn't hearing the details, only coming back into my body and noticing that every muscle there was vibrating. *It's starting.* A smile played around my quivering lips: nerves coming to the surface, that ingrained response to please that would become the bane of my existence. He growled "...if you have any doubts about this, *whatsoever*, do NOT get off this bus." When I stood, gripping my small bag with my pre-purchased and broken-in combat boots and my underclothes, a guy a few rows back from me stayed seated.

Under screams of "Go! Go! Go" we hustled off the bus and over to the tables where other cadets handed us cards on strings to wear around our necks. With a checklist to complete, we snaked off in a single-file line through medical stations, unwittingly signing up for a life-time membership with the Association of Graduates, taking armloads of issued uniforms. We all received haircuts even if our hair was already cut; men were shaved bald and women had to have hair above their collars and less than one-inch thick. I misread that fact as less than an inch *long*, arriving with woefully short hair they still cut. We looped up and down hallways and through rooms that would become familiar in the coming years but were a blur without meaning on this first day.

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Thirteen years after I trailed in my brother's footsteps through a yellow jacket's nest outside our Oregon childhood

home, I followed in his same footsteps to the U.S. Air Force Academy. The movie *Top Gun* was one year old by the time I stepped off the Bluebird bus, but my brother and his freshmen-year roommate visited our home the previous summer just as the movie came out, radiating that same cocky confidence that made the characters in that movie so enviable. I wanted that power, too, so I pursued their confidence all the way to the Air Force Academy. I didn't notice that Kelly McGillis's Charlie in *Top Gun*, was a civilian. That she never flew a plane or wore a uniform or served much purpose beyond being arm candy for Maverick. I just continued to believe that I could do anything my brother could do.

My beginning on this journey into the military was as an annoying little sister. I tried almost everything he did. And if trying the same stunts hurt me, I had to make sure he didn't see me cry. In fact, I just *didn't* cry by the time I was a teenager. I was his groupie, his cult follower, his worshiper. I learned that hiding my weakness was a badge of honor. That skill, at least, was great preparation for the Air Force Academy.

On the day I arrived at that steel and glass fortress for Basic Cadet Training, BCT or Beast, my brother was nowhere around. The large painted footsteps that taught basic cadets to stand in formation might as well have been made in his image. Somehow, I knew that this military college was small and that any failure on my part would be passed on to him. I'm sure I was feeling all of the emotions people around me were feeling: fear, anxiety, inadequacy, probably not in that order. I pushed them down so hard that I can't remember them.

Faking my way through the physical demands of Beast wasn't an option. My bravado was an act, and I wasn't sure about my ability to follow through in reality. Up to this point in my life, I set goals and I achieved them. Straight A's in high school? Bam. A four-year scholarship to Washington State University? Done. And that high school senior spring break,

after visiting Cameron at his college, I decided I would apply there as well. Too late to be accepted to the Air Force Academy immediately after high school graduation, I took the scholarship to Washington State University for a year. When I applied to the Academy, I think I was expecting someone to finally tell me no. But they said yes.

Who leaves a nearly free ride at a state party school for a strict military college with payment in kind for military service when I finished? Apparently this girl.

The Bluebird bus was hours ago, now. At some point, after we dumped our pile of issued uniforms into our basic squadron dorm rooms and came out dressed in polyester tight shorts and white t-shirts with our last names scrawled in felt pen over the USAFA, I stood at attention studying *CONTRAILS*, the small book of knowledge we had to carry and memorize. An upperclass cadet woman leaned in and asked, "Do you have a brother?"

A smile ghosted my features as I said, "Yes, ma'am," one of seven basic responses I was allowed to give.

"Wipe that smile off your face, Basic," she hissed. "What do you think this is, a tea party?"

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The next morning, the first real morning of Beast, bleary from a lack of sleep, I stumbled out into the brisk Colorado dawn making rows and columns with my peers, my arms locked at my sides, my feet in military-issue running shoes, splayed out duck fashion in my attempt to be at the position of attention. My hair was so short, the chilly, soft breeze didn't lift it. Cadets only two years ahead of us, but every bit adults in our eyes, were yelling instructions. As a group, we learned the basics of marching the afternoon we arrived. I was a member of the award-winning Montesano High School marching band. I wasn't worried about that part.

But almost everything else worried me. My alternately grinning and serious face gave no clear clues to my interior turmoil while my head spun with self-doubt. Could I make it through the physical training? Cameron joined me on a joint run and doing some push ups only a few days before I boarded a flight away from home for this challenge.

“You’re not going to make it,” he said with frank eye contact and raised eyebrows.

Now as I faced the test of the first morning, I could feel the pre-breakfast acid trickling through my stomach. Punch drunk on minimal sleep, terrified someone would see I didn’t belong, I clenched my hands to avoid shaking in the fresh, scentless air.

Even though we kept our eyes “caged” without looking around us, marching band taught me to sense my neighbor’s state of mind by the smallest of body movements. Every last one of us, even the cadet cadre training us, was exhausted by the “oh-dark-thirty” fire alarm that sent us all stumbling out of the dorms and waiting across the street.

Hunched against the night air, the gaggle of brand new recruits looked like hundreds of mental patients in our pale blue Air Force-issued pajamas, velvety dark blue robes, and slippers. Upperclass cadre wore civilian pajamas and did their best to herd us into accountability. I, for one, wondered if the sense-splitting shriek of the fire alarms was the usual wake up call. They took away our watches and, for all we knew, it was time to get up. I knew so little about this training, and what I did know had an air of the ridiculous. We never found out if that first night’s alarm was a prank or a real alert, but we never woke up in Beast that way again. After what felt like an hour, we returned to our rooms to sleep until reveille. I’m sure I wasn’t the only one who waited in bed, plank stiff and staring at the ceiling, ready for the real wake up that would kick off the six grueling weeks of

training.

There were about 120 of us in my Basic Cadet Training Squadron, almost 1400 new freshmen in total spread evenly over ten squadrons. The Basic squadrons were named by letters and each combined four groups of freshmen divided into flights. I didn't realize, at first, that the people in my flight would be in my numbered squadron in the school year.

For morning runs, they sized us shortest to tallest to make sure the people with the shortest legs, mostly women, were setting the pace. I was surrounded by other C Squadron "Cobras" of the third Basic Cadet Squadron when we received the order to "forward march." As we stepped off into the chill air, I wondered for the first time why that order, when the commander shouted it, sounded like, "Forward, HARCH!" In another few steps we heard the call, "Forward at the double time...HARCH!" In that pause before and during the final sharp directive we growled like animals showing our enthusiasm for the physical effort awaiting us.

We scuffed off across the pebbled-concrete Terrazzo, a square which connected the buildings of the campus. If I could have been a falcon, the school mascot, that morning, flying at 10,000 feet, I would have seen the 10 basic cadet squadrons filling one side of the concrete, jogging beside Vandenberg Hall toward a massive ramp burnished with the metal words "Bring me Men" on the back side, just where we were dropped off by Bluebird buses the day before.

So far, our movement was flat or downhill. I could make it.

I learned that the Academy clusters in the foothills of the Rampart Range at an altitude of 7,258 feet above sea level... "far, far above that of West Point or Annapolis" we learned to say. Signs in the sports complex warned rival teams "The Air is Rare." Viewed from the air, USAFA is unique with its sharp angles, shining metal, and glittering glass. The architect

intended a wholly modern space to represent this new military branch.

The massive rectangular space was lined with Terrazzo-pebbled concrete and marble strips with a grass square east of the chapel and between the dorms. From a falcon's height, the old fighter planes punctuating each corner of the grass became tiny models and the corner closest to the dining hall was a hill with the patently unbelievable myth that it covered the bones of the earliest cadets. Between that hill and Fairchild Hall, was the Air Gardens, with hatched terrazzo-style paths slicing the grass. Perfect, architect-model Honey Locust trees representing each graduate who died in the Vietnam War led our eyes to the Eagle and Fledglings statue facing the dining facility, Mitchell Hall, instructing on its brown marble front: "Man's flight through life is sustained by the power of his knowledge."

When I felt the slope of the ramp dropping away under my feet that were slapping in time to our cadre's rhythmic call "Left, left, left-right-left," I heard a tall blond leader wail out the notes in cadence "C-130 rollin' down the strip," and I became part of a machine answering this call and response: "C-130 rollin' down the strip!" My breath was taken away in the enthusiasm of the music of this military jody—the song forming some military complaint that was to take our minds off the running and keep us breathing. As I began gasping in the effort to sing and jog, even downhill, I was swept up in the camaraderie and sheer military-ness of the moment. I was doing it.

"Airborne Daddy gonna take a little trip."

"AIRBORNE DADDY GONNA TAKE A LITTLE TRIP!" our hundred-plus voices already knew that we needed to drown out the other 9 squadrons singing different jodys around us.

Later our required, rote freshman knowledge informed us that

each of the USAFA building names belonged to a man famous in making the Air Force a distinct branch of the military or for his honorable and heroic service. In fact, my basic cadet summer marked the first year a woman showed up in our required memorization, even if there were still no massive structures honoring women's achievement. This 1987 summer, only seven years after the first women graduated, we were supposed to memorize a quote by Amelia Earhart from our small *Contrails* book of information Air Force doolies carried on our person at all times. We memorized the book from cover to cover by the time the year was over. Back then, I didn't bother to learn what Earhart said, already trying to inhabit these guys' values: to devalue women who I was already seeing as "other." I wouldn't find any value in the wisdom that pioneering woman was meant to impart to us. What could a woman teach me?

During that freshman year when a faceless upperclassman yelled, "Give me Earhart's quote," we recited in a high-pitched wail, "Sir, Amelia Earhart's quote is as follows: *I was lost when I wrote this.*" We were ridiculing a groundbreaking aviator's disappearance. I recently rediscovered the intended words, and learned that Earhart, who was also a poet, wrote: "Courage is the price that life exacts for granting peace." Perhaps the eloquent, thoughtful words were too sophisticated for the juveniles meant to know them. If only I had memorized her words, held onto them as a form of rebellion instead of conforming to the older cadets' blind misogyny. I wish I had known who I would become instead of trying to be like everyone else, mostly men.

We trotted down the Bring Me Men ramp and then across the short leg of the road north of Fairchild Hall. Straight and farther down another ramp, we leveled out on the Cadet Parade Field, soon to be named Stillman Field for the male first Commandant of Cadets. In the third of 10 squadrons, I ran in the squishy tracks of the columns in front of me, and they reeked like an overflowing toilet underfoot. Across from the

bleachers, we formed up into position so that all 10 squadrons faced the empty seats. The leaders gave us an order that spaced us out for calisthenics, and we went through the paces of jumping jacks and stretches before finding ourselves prone in the mud doing leg lifts and pushups. So far, so good. I could do all the physical work. I felt my confidence boosted. Later, we learned that the stench was from the non-potable water used to water the grass, cold and leaching through our clothes. The stains never came out of our white t-shirts.

When we finished a series of body-weight exercises, we formed up for the run back up to the Terrazzo. We circled the parade field once and headed up the ramps.

That first morning, I kept right in step, laboring under the absence of oxygen at this altitude but relieved to discover I was up to the task. On other mornings, those short people up front proved that having shorter legs didn't mean they weren't fast. Sometimes sprinkler saturated ground meant the mud sucked at our shoes and hindered our strides. Probably about the second week of training, our leader growled and turned us away from the ramp after the first lap. Soon I didn't always keep up with the formation. I also didn't always drop out, but some mornings I just couldn't get enough air.

Others dropped out of some runs, too, but I had no energy to notice their struggles. My ability to finish with the group, or not finish with them, still seems random to me. Some mornings I could keep up with the formation. Other times I was left gasping with my hands on my knees. Any time I dropped out of a run because I couldn't breathe, I found that, once I caught my breath, I could run at the same pace as the squadron behind them. I could keep running at the squadron's pace until we arrived back at the dorms at the top of the hills. This last trick infuriated the unfortunate cadre member staying back with me who hissed, "If you can run this fast now, Torrens, why can't you make it with your classmates?"

"Sir, I do not know." One of the seven basic responses I was allowed to give. And I was telling the truth.