

My Reflections on Recognition

by Lee Curtis, USAFA Class of 1985

As I look back on what I went through some 32 years ago and think about what my own daughter is about to go through, Recognition training is an enigma wrapped inside of a riddle. It is something that is looked upon with dread, definitely not fun, but is eminently worth it once completed. Paraphrasing Doolie knowledge from way back then, the Purpose of the 4th Class System at the Air Force Academy is to instill knowledge and experience in cadets to make them prepared to be better leaders in the future. I was a bit surprised to hear that this is no longer one of the quotes in Contrails that must be memorized, as it contained a kernel or two of “why” freshmen at the Academy go through what they do. I will try to explain a bit of the why and how of it here.

Why is there Recognition Training (aka “Hell Week” when I went through it)? It is probably a holdover from traditions carried over from West Point when USAFA was formed. In some ways it is no different than the traditions of many fraternities and sororities on most college campuses known as “Rush Week”. The practice is symbolic of proving ones worth and trust to those above them in positions of authority. Once that “rite of passage” is complete, they are accepted into the full body of brother and sisterhood of that organization. As has already been expressed by Z, the traditions of each squadron at the Academy are different, just as the traditions for fraternities/sororities on a college campus are different from each other and between different educational institutions. The exact elements of the tradition are less important than the symbolism of what they stand for. Wearing the Prop and Wings as members of the body of recognized cadets is something all graduates share equally as proudly in their memories.

By now, we have probably all heard stories from our cadets about their experiences and concerns. Somehow, we want to help them get through this. Truth is, the best thing we can all do as parents is simply tell them you are proud of them and that they have what it takes to do this. Recognition training is a graduation exercise of sorts to reinforce the principles that have been taught and learned since arrival back on June 27, 2013. These learned lessons include attention to detail, working together as a team, watching out for your roommate (your wingman) and the rest of your classmates, and working harder than you ever thought possible before. The Academy constantly enables you to learn that whatever limits you thought you had before can be surpassed through hard work, determination, and the will to succeed.

Take comfort in the fact that the upperclassmen who will be conducting the training have all gone through this before. With the guidance of the officers of the Academy staff, they have all taken great care to plan and organize the events that the Class of 2017 will go through in mid-March. This will become part of the rich tapestry that will be the memories of each cadet's experience going forward. Not all memories will be good, but I have found that those memories are some of the most valuable of all. Some of mine were mistakes I made along the way--so that I would not make them again. Others were examples of "less than ideal" leadership I saw that I would vow not to use when I was in positions of authority in the future.

The completion of Recognition training was one of the highlights of my cadet career. Even though I was sore, hoarse, and exhausted, I also felt about 9 feet tall when they pinned the prop and wings on my lapel, symbolizing their approval of me joining their elite "club" of Air Force Academy cadets. Having passed through that portal in time, it refocused my eyes to look forward to becoming an officer in the Air Force, instead of just surviving being a doolie. Looking back, I have surprisingly (or perhaps gracefully) little actual memory of the specific events during my Hell Week. It was a blur of activity that was designed to test me and my classmates to our limits—and it did!

There was an unofficial motto when I went through the Academy, that USAFA's only tradition was change. This was a good-natured backhand to the centuries of tradition that West Point and Annapolis have through their sheer age. I was part of the 27th class to have graduated and only the 6th class with women. Today's doolies (including the daughters of Z and myself) will be part of the 59th class to graduate and will face a very uncertain future as far as what the Air Force and the military will look like. That history of change that has been the Air Force Academy for its entire existence will serve these cadets well as the future begins to take shape. Their Recognition training and the 3+ years to follow will continue to change and evolve to meet the needs and demands of the times. As a grad, I wouldn't want it any other way.

Our fate and future is in good hands with our sons and daughters who have chosen to take up the profession of arms and serve our great nation. They were selected from among the thousands who applied and will do us and themselves proud in the days and years ahead. May God bless them in these final days until Recognition and keep them safe until we can be with them ourselves at Spring Break to see the men and women they have become.