

The United States Air Force Academy Doesn't Train Warriors Anymore.

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By L. Todd Wood:

It had been a long time since I had visited my alma mater, the U.S. Air Force Academy, so I decided to bite the bullet and travel to my 30th reunion last October. I must admit I did so with trepidation. I have a love/hate relationship with the place. Although I received a fantastic education and met some lifelong friends, it's a nice place to visit, if you know what I mean.

I will say that I received top-notch military training and discipline when I went through three decades ago. In fact, the discipline that was drilled into me has served me well my entire life, giving me a leg up on my competition: once I start something, I just don't quit, no matter the odds or barriers put in front of me. I credit USAFA for helping me to develop this ability. It is a learned skill acquired from four years of handling the academics and the professional military and athletic training.

During the Vietnam War, many prisoners of war shot down over North Vietnam credited their fourth class year at the Air Force Academy with giving them the fortitude to make it through years of confinement and torture. After all, isn't that the basic skill of a warrior, to win against all odds?

Unfortunately, these skills are no longer being taught at USAFA. I've seen it with my own eyes, and so have my classmates.

I realized something was horribly wrong when I arrived at the bottom of the ramp to the cadet area, which used to say "Bring Me Men" above the tunnel entrance. It was an iconic quote, and we were taught at the time that "men" meant the human race, not necessarily only the male sex of such. "I'll meet you at the bottom of the 'Bring Me Men' ramp" was a routine line to girlfriends, boyfriends, parents, et cetera who came to visit their cadet at the academy. I never heard any animosity against this quote during the four years of my stay at the Blue Zoo.

Imagine my shock when I saw the quote had been changed to some PC gibberish about "Integrity First. Service Before Self. Excellence in All We Do." Ten words! At first, I laughed at the thought of some cadet telling his civilian girlfriend to meet him at the bottom of the "Integrity First. Service Before Self. Excellence in All We Do" ramp. But after a quick laugh, I felt sadness at the loss of tradition and loss of the basic masculinity of warfare being taught at the academy. It was then I knew it was gone. I also felt alarm—if they changed this, what else have they changed? This can't be good for the training of future Air Force warriors.

My next stop, and next horror, was walking around the cadet area with my fellow classmates from the Class of '86 and a few others. The place looked about the same. A monument or static aircraft display was changed here or there, and there was a strange-looking obelisk sticking out of the terrazzo near Arnold Hall, but overall, the place was the same. But there was something very, very wrong.

I couldn't place it, but then it hit me. It was October. The fourth class cadets should not have been "recognized" yet. That meant being accepted in the ranks of the upper class and the associated privileges that come with it. This entailed walking at attention, squaring corners, greeting upperclassmen, and other general military training.

None of this was happening. They were walking at rest, not greeting anyone. Actually, they were ignoring the upperclassmen walking by. I stopped one of them and asked him, "Cadet, are you recognized yet?"

"No, we are not," was his response. He kept walking. There was no "sir" in his response. He obviously knew I was an alumnus and former military officer. The problem was that he simply didn't care. He didn't care because he had been taught not to care. Military bearing was absent. Completely gone. Removed.

And then, the shock continued.

As the time started to get close to the Noon Meal Formation, where the cadets form up and march into Mitchell Hall for lunch, I again realized nothing was happening. Cadets were nonchalantly walking to the huge cafeteria where they are served all at once during the school week for lunch. I subsequently found out the formation had been cancelled due to high winds. I laughed to myself. There wasn't even a breeze. Wow, things really have changed.

Inside the noon meal, all former military decorum and training at the lunch table had been vaporized. There was nothing. The freshman cadets didn't even have the civilian decency to serve their alumni guests first, not to mention any military bearing. They just took the food and ignored everyone else at the table.

It gets worse: after lunch, my colleagues walked into the academic building. Before my eyes, where there used to be formal lecture halls, was a Dunkin' Donuts. My jaw hit the floor and I actually took a picture— I was that amazed. This was no longer a military academy; it was UCLA in uniforms.

We then visited the dorm rooms. We nonchalantly walked into one cadet's room who had the door open, which was the custom. We asked them a few questions. They didn't get up. They didn't greet us formally. They just sat there. These were fourth classmen. I guarantee you that in the past, if an alum had walked into a fourth class room, the residents would be at attention within seconds and the "sirs" would be flying like birds on a high wire.

Finally, before the football game and other class-specific events, we headed to Arnold Hall to listen to a briefing from the Superintendent on what was going on at the academy. Literally, one of the first things we heard was, "Things are not as tough as they used to be." Really? Ya think? was my immediate reaction.

We were presented with an hour-long briefing about how cadets were being trained to be able to "function" within the bureaucracy of the regular Air Force. We heard all about the statistics of the institution—how many awards it had won, where it stood in the rankings against other colleges, how well the sports teams had done, et cetera, et cetera.

Not once did I hear the word warrior. In a flash, I got it. The academy was no longer training cadets to be Air Force warriors. They were no longer training to fight for our country and win wars. They were being trained to function in the bureaucracy. The academy was all about competing with civilian institutions in a variety of ways.

We heard about the new facilities that had been built. We heard all about the new honor chamber to discuss ethics. That happened to be the strange object poking out of the terrazzo.

When the briefing was over, I raised my hand. I had to ask the question. I simply said, “The discipline here no longer exists. Not once did I hear the word ‘warrior’ in your briefing. It seems the mission has changed. Were we no longer about ‘Fly, Fight, and Win?’”

The response I got was laced with derision at my wrong-headed thinking. “We are not here to haze people. They go to the lunch meal to eat, not get trained,” said the Superintendent, who was, by the way, in the first class of females to graduate from the academy. “We have theme rooms to talk about war,” said the commandant of cadets. Yes, he really said that. “We have mock funerals to talk about war.”

Excuse me, but what right do these new leaders of the institution have to throw away decades of training that had worked so splendidly to create warriors like Medal of Honor winner Lance Sijan, who crawled through a rock-filled landscape after being shot down in Vietnam for 46 days with compound fractures throughout his broken body until his bones protruded through his skin, only to escape twice before being killed by the enemy, all the while never giving up any classified information under torture? Do you think he learned that from a theme room? No, he learned that from a full year of military training and discipline, learning attention to detail, how not to quit, how to perform under pressure, day after day after day. That’s where he learned that.

It is obvious the Air Force Academy is no longer training warriors to lead men, or women, into battle. They are no longer into the type of training that created the greatest air force ever known to man. In fact, they are more interested in a military version of safe spaces and trigger warnings, so it seems.

As far as the other academies are concerned, I can’t speak for them. However, I have seen evidence of the same with pictures of black female cadets giving the black power salute, images of female cadets on their cell phone while marching, et cetera, et cetera.

President Obama did a very good job of weakening the institutions that made our military and country great. Military academies are not made to “compete” with other civilian universities. They have a special purpose. I very much hope President-Elect Trump and his appointees can reverse this pathetic trend. Our children’s future depends on it.

L. Todd Wood is an OpsLens contributor, a graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy, flew special operations helicopters supporting SEAL Team 6, Delta Force and others. After leaving the military, he pursued his other passion, finance, spending 18 years on Wall Street trading emerging market debt, and later, writing. The first of his many thrillers is “Currency.” Todd is a national security columnist for The Washington Times and has contributed to Fox Business, Newsmax TV, Moscow Times, the New York Post, the National Review, Zero Hedge, The Jerusalem Post, and others. For more information about L. Todd Wood, visit LToddWood.com