Officer Training School

The Air Force finally offered me a position as an officer and meteorologist starting in February 1966 after about nine months of waiting. Although it's unlikely that I would have ever been drafted into the military for the Vietnam War since my draft number was about 250, I wanted to serve my country and needed a few years to figure out what I really wanted to do when I grew up. Meteorology sounded like a good alternative to my degree in physics with which I had become disenchanted. I found the emphasis on quantum mechanics and relativity very unsatisfying. They were based on highly speculative and theoretical views of reality which I didn't feel had any connection with what I could observe around me. In contrast, meteorology would allow me to study the atmosphere which I could see, touch, smell, hear, and taste. I needed the reality of the wind blowing through my hair and the feel of heat and cold. Meteorology is essentially applied classical physics.

First, I had to complete three months of Officer Training School (OTS) at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas and a year of training in meteorology. After moving Jeannette from Rolla to Fairmont City, Illinois to live with her mother while I was in OTS, I checked in to the Air Force processing station in St. Louis. I distinctly remember three things the Air Force recruiter told me: (1) We're sending you by train to San Antonio because we don't trust airplanes, (2) Since you're the only officer trainee among the group of about 20 going on the train, you'll be in charge and will be responsible for their safe arrival, and (3) Get in line with the others over there and get ready to swear allegiance to the United States. I raised my hand, swore allegiance to the US, kissed Jeannette goodbye, boarded the train, and was on my way to Texas within about 30 minutes.

Jeannette started working at Christian Welfare Hospital in East St. Louis where she had been employed before we were married. She served as an RN on a medical/surgery floor for about three months until I returned from OTS that summer. During the time I was in San Antonio she was completely on her own. Jeannette was very independent before this separation. We had only been married about six months and she quickly returned to that mode. It was almost as if we

weren't married. We were both fully occupied and had little time to think about one another. We talked by phone on the weekends and wrote letters to each other but had little time to even miss each other during the week. I was occupied about 18 hours each day with class, physical training, and squadron activities. She worked full time and visited family and friends.

My train arrived in San Antonio about 36 hours later and we were bused to Lackland Air Force Base where we were immediately processed into a formation called the "rainbow squadron" because of our many-colored street clothes. Everyone else on the base was wearing uniforms.

The first order of business was to fill out reams of paper work, get our shots, and run the gauntlet of uniform acquisition. The first of many paperwork snafus occurred on the first day. When I filled in the forms asking for my name I entered "Larry Vardiman". There was a blank for a middle name, but since I didn't have one, I left it blank. The sergeant who checked my form couldn't countenance an empty space. He berated me for leaving the space blank and demanded to know my middle name. When I informed him, I didn't have a middle name he hurled more abuse at me and finally wrote in "NMN" for "No Middle Name". It didn't occur to me that this infraction would haunt me the rest of my military career.

As I proceeded through the clothing line to acquire dress uniforms, fatigues, a raincoat, an overcoat, dress shirts, work shirts, work pants, socks, belts, hats, gloves, ties, and shoes I was constantly assaulted with the question, "What kind of a name is NMN? How do you pronounce that?" At least a dozen times at each clothing station I came to I would have to explain that NMN stands for "no middle name". And the response would invariably be, "Why don't you have a middle name? I never heard of anyone with no middle name! Move on! Get out of here!"

This experience helped me understand why the Vardiman family has three ways of spelling our family name. Apparently, the name started originally as "Vardeman" but was corrupted in government documents by clerks who couldn't read the correct spelling and changed it in various derivative documents. For, example, we have evidence that during the Civil War the name of one of our ancestors originally spelled "Vardeman" was changed to "Vardiman" in his military records. Apparently, the name "Vardaman" had a similar etymology.

To avoid the confusion and the small mindedness of bureaucrats and clerks I added a middle name to my moniker for a few years during graduate school. I liked the name “Dean” and unofficially became known as “Larry Dean Vardiman". Unfortunately, this addition was discovered by my mother who had intentionally named me after a favorite character in a book she had read shortly before I was born. He had no middle name either. My mother was somewhat miffed that I had chosen to modify the name she had chosen for me.

OTS was a formative experience in my life. I found the twelve weeks spent there one of the most challenging tests of my physical and emotional abilities. I’m glad I went through OTS, but I would never want to do it again. We were to be out of bed by 5:15 a.m. each morning to dress and prepare our rooms for inspection before breakfast. I became so accustomed to waking early each day I volunteered to get up thirty minutes earlier to blow reville on a bugle for the 5:00 a.m. flag-raising ceremony on the base and then blow it in the barracks again at 5:15 a.m.

We lived in a two-floor barracks with a squadron of about 80 men, two in each room. We were required to keep our rooms and closets neat and tidy and our beds taunt enough to bounce a quarter. Our uniforms had to be free of “cables” (dangling threads) and our shoes spit shined. Each weekend all barracks were inspected.

Breakfast was at six a.m. and class at seven. Classes covered the basics of military life and the general knowledge an officer needed to know, such as the organization of the Air Force, its mission and procedures, and the Uniform Military Code of Conduct. We were also taught how to give briefings, how to salute, to call a superior officer “sir”, and what a good officer was <u>not</u> to do. For example, officers are to never hold hands with their wives in public while in uniform, push a baby buggy, or carry an umbrella. I was so conditioned after the first month of OTS that when I called Jeannette on the phone one weekend I called her “sir”.

The rigor of long days of class, boring lectures, long periods of physical training, and lack of sleep often caused many to fall doze in class, particularly when the room temperature would get too warm. Three hundred students met together in one room sitting in old wooden desks with a writing table on one side

and would often fall asleep upright in their seat. Because of extreme fatigue, when someone fell asleep, they would frequently overbalance their desk and crash to the floor before they awoke. The instructors seldom stopped their lecture to acknowledge the crash of falling soldiers and desks but continued their training of "steely-eyed killers".

Five days each week in the afternoon for about three hours we had physical training (PT). This consisted of conditioning exercises of jumping jacks, leg bends, push-ups, sit-ups, and body twists. All three hundred trainees were on the exercise field in formation facing the trainer on a six-foot platform yelling instructions and maintaining cadence. After about thirty minutes of conditioning exercises we would then run a mile around the track and play various competitive football games for about an hour.

At the end of twelve weeks each cadet was expected to be able to complete a six and a half-minute mile. If a cadet could not complete a mile in that time he would not graduate but be sent to basic training for basic training as an enlisted soldier. This incentive guaranteed that almost all OTS cadets graduated.

But, I almost didn't graduate. At the beginning of OTS I weighed about 200 pounds and could only run a ten-minute mile. By six weeks I was down to 185 pounds and could run an eight-minute mile. During the last week of OTS I was down to 170 pounds but couldn't run the six and a half-minute mile until the very last effort on the very last day. I suspect the threat of spending four years as an enlistee was enough to spur me to the extra effort.

Our squadron leader, who was a former enlisted man selected for OTS and knew his way around the system, insisted our squadron work double duty the first weekend. We had no idea what he had in mind, but being new to the Air Force, we followed orders to thoroughly clean the barracks. In addition to the inside of the barracks, he had us cut the grass, and neatly trim the borders around the sidewalks, trees, and shrubs outside the barracks. This extra duty on the first weekend was sufficient for our squadron to win the weekly inspection almost every Saturday. This earned us a half day of leave to go into town if we wanted. The other squadrons never caught on to why we won the competition each week.

Each Saturday morning the entire OTS of about ten squadrons had to pass in review on the parade ground before the officers in charge. Almost every military installation has a parade ground where the troops are reviewed. This traditional exercise is where the troops are reviewed, honors are bestowed, and new assignments are announced. About two hours were taken each Saturday morning to practice lining up, taking roll, and passing in review.

For six weeks the upper classmen who had been promoted from the previous class trained the lower classmen how to conduct the process. The alignment of the cadets was ragged for the first few weeks until everyone finally learned the procedures. By the sixth week when the upper class was commissioned at the ceremony with proud parents and family looking on the precision of marching troops looked professional. But, the next week the process would start all over again and the lines became bedraggled again with lots of confusion.

One weekend during OTS our squadron was "volunteered" to appear as *Romans* in a local performance of the opera, *Aida*. The producers of the opera presumably selected us as extras because of our marching ability. We were bused downtown to the San Antonio Opera House and dressed in Roman uniforms with short leather skirts, breastplates, and helmets. We each carried a spear and marched as a squadron of about forty soldiers onto the stage following an elephant.

After about five minutes of dialogue by the actors we marched off again into the wings and were bused back to the base. For this extra duty we received an extra half day of leave. My primary memory of this event was being pinched on the leg by one of the actors. I'm not sure even today whether I was being kidded or someone was making an advance.

After the first 6 weeks of OTS all ten squadrons were given a free weekend pass off base which I used to fly to Dallas and meet Jeannette who had flown down from St. Louis. It was spring in Dallas and the azaleas were in full bloom. Jeannette's sister Darlene and her family lived in Dallas and they took us to church on Sunday and drove us around several parks to see the flowers. Too quickly I had to return to San Antonio to complete another 6 weeks of training.

The week prior to graduation our squadron experienced an "Open Mess". This is a formal dinner held for officers in dress uniform. Each officer was required

to purchase a mess dress uniform just for this occasion. The uniform had a short jacket, a special white shirt with a cummerbund, white pants, and a white hat. A cape and sword were optional. It always reminded me of the neon signs of a waiter in uniform carrying a tray on one hand above his head used by *Steak and Shake* restaurants.

At the dinner speeches and special awards were given. Each graduating officer was also asked to describe his next assignment. I was originally assigned to be a weather forecaster, so I said in my comments that, “My job is to be a weather man who gets to tell pilots where to go". I quickly realized that I had unintentionally spoken a double entendré after the audience broke into laughter. The entire Air Force is organized to support the pilots, and I had taken a jab at the arrogance of some of them. Those around me who were not pilots thought it humorous that someone would attempt to critize a pilot.

I found many years later during my forecasting experience in the reserves that “There are bold pilots and old pilots, but there are no old, bold pilots.” When pilots are young they seldom pay attention to your briefings on the weather they are heading into. They think they are invincible and can fly through almost anything. However, after a few years of flying in bad weather and narrowly escaping some situations within an inch of their lives, they become increasingly fearful of bad weather.

I recall one older reserve pilot who flew an old C-54 four-engine propeller plane from World War II without onboard radar into Francis E. Warren AFB in Cheyenne, Wyoming where I was serving as a reserve weather forecaster. He was so rattled by the thunderstorms he had flown through on the way in that he refused to fly the plane back to his home base until later the following night when the thunderstorms had died down and become weaker. He had experienced too many bad flights and chose not to fly home through thunderstorms without radar.

I met one of my best friends while in OTS. Al McNab and I were both in the same squadron at Lackland AFB and were assigned to the same office at Scott AFB in Illinois later following meteorology training. We had both been physics majors in college before OTS and were selected to work in the research division of the Air Weather Service headquarters rather than serve as regular forecasters.

While in OTS we didn’t really have time to get to know each other because we were always involved in activities day and night. Only on Sundays was there any free time to get more acquainted. Even then I spent most Sunday afternoons resting just to catch up on my sleep. Al’s wife Linda spent the last six weeks of OTS in an apartment near the base so the three of us became slightly acquainted at the Officer’s Club before graduation. Jeannette met Linda briefly when she came to the graduation.

My parents drove Jeannette to San Antonio to attend the commissioning ceremony. Unfortunately, I didn't get to march in the ceremony because of a minor accident at the beach two days prior. The weekend before the final review ceremonies and commissioning, I drove with several friends to Corpus Christi to surf and see the Gulf of Mexico. It was spring, and we needed a little relaxation.

Unfortunately, while surfing on Padre Island I scrapped my foot on a piece of coral and had to have stitches. Infections can occur quickly in scratches exposed to the ocean. My foot was bandaged and treated with anti-biotics.It was sore and I had to walk on crutches for several days. Worse yet, I couldn't march in the final ceremonies and had to receive my commission from the bleachers. Jeannette pinned my second lieutenant bars on after the ceremony while I stood on crutches.