

Duty, Honor, Country: ORHS Twin brothers at West Point part 2

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of November 11, 2024)

Benita Albert concludes her Veteran's Day series featuring the Uptgraft twins, Caden and Jamison. Enjoy the rest of the story...

Caden and Jamison Uptgraft, ORHS Class of '22 alumni, left Oak Ridge soon after their Wildcat graduation for R-Day at the United States Military Academy (USMA). The "R" in R-Day stands for Reception, and quite the reception it is!

Candidates report early in the day for in-processing while parents and family members may visit certain areas of West Point, hear remarks from leadership, and view the Oath Ceremony on the Plain (the parade field) at the end of the day. During in-processing, cadets do such as undergo medical exams, accept issued uniforms, receive haircuts, and march in formation onto the Plain to repeat the oath they pledged earlier in the day, but this time in the formal Oath Ceremony before their family members.

The Oath: *"I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign or domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me God."*

I was privileged to relive this experience with Caden and Jamison and their mom, Amy, during a sit-down interview. We met during the twins' three-week visit home this past summer. Recalling R-Day, Amy said, "We parents had 90 seconds to say goodbye after cadet candidates were quickly debriefed. My husband, Jamie, and I were proud to be there, but those last 90 seconds of hugs were tough for me. Perhaps Jamie was less conflicted than me being that he had done this earlier as a member of the USMA Class of '99."

When I queried them about the unusualness of twins being admitted, the guys answered that there were three other sets of twins in their class. They also mentioned a first cousin who is in the class ahead of them. They noted the advantage of having a father who knew the traditions, the challenges, and the expectations they needed to meet in their first year.

Their first six weeks of Cadet Basic Training (CBT), better known to the plebes as "Beast," was followed by a week of Army field experience. Plebe year focuses on learning to be a follower so that you mature as a better leader with time and experience. Jamison said, "During Beast, you feel that you are yelled at for everything. Caden and I were in separate companies during it all, and we were able to see each other only at church services each Sunday. We sat on the back row where we were able to communicate some during the sermon." Caden added, "It was tough physically and mentally, but I knew my brother was going through the same stuff and holding up. I knew that we would make it through."

As if Beast was not enough of a challenge, both Caden and Jamison applied to attend the USMA Air Assault School the summer after finishing their plebe year. The Air Assault Course is mentally demanding with numerous written tests as well as is physically challenging for the daunting tasks to accomplish. Upon graduation from the course, Caden and Jamison certified skills required for use of helicopter assets in such as rappelling and sling load operations. The program, conducted by instructors in the Sabalauski Air Assault School from Fort Campbell, KY, has been described as one of the most physically challenging 10-days in the Army.

Their choice of a West Point sport, Team Handball (THB), was a new athletic adventure for this writer to explore. The club's acronym THB is apropos to its values: Teamwork, Honor, and Brotherhood. The West Point THB Club competes against other colleges and universities at regional and national levels. Founded at West Point in 1976, it is considered one of the premier handball clubs in the United States. As of 2023, the team has won a total of 37 College National Championships including all the past 15 years of competition.

The sport requires two teams of seven players who each pass a ball with their hands with the aim of throwing it into the goal bypassing the goalie (seventh man) of the opponent. A widely played sport in Europe and a Summer Olympics sporting event since 1972, the game is extremely fast paced and physically demanding. It has been described as a combination of soccer (but no ball contact below the knee) and basketball. The twins had never played the sport before

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West Point, but this year they have advanced to the first team, the Black Team, where Caden plays at Right Back or Center Back and Jamison plays Left Wing or Left Back.

On the scholastic side, the USMA first year is a common academic exposure where plebes take the same core courses. During the second semester, they select a major followed by a second-year choice of a three-course engineering program. Both Caden and Jamison chose the Geography and Environmental Engineering Program (GEnE), a choice richly supported by their AP coursework at ORHS. The twins gave credit to several of their ORHS teachers for piquing their interest in and modeling a passion for their Geoscience choice of studies. The USMA GEnE program summarizes their mission as: "Educate, develop, and inspire cadets to think globally and geospatially in applying their understanding of human-environment interactions to develop culturally appropriate, and sustainable solutions." Both young men said that much of their last two years of study will focus on their major and minor coursework.

Before they sat for this interview in mid-June 2024, Caden and Jamison had already completed an upper-level, summer course in the History Dept. The course, entitled "Modern Poland," offered two weeks of in-class study in Polish history followed by two-weeks of on-site study throughout Poland including visitations to World War II concentration camps.

Upon their return to the Academy in late June of this year, Caden engaged in field training. Jamison participated as a cadet leader for new plebes who were in Beast training.

I asked both young men what they envisioned for their futures. Obviously, they are both well-aware of the five-year military obligation they will serve after USMA graduation. Both agreed that anything beyond those first five years seemed far out at this point, and that a clear option they will consider is to continue to serve in some capacity as a career military officer like their dad.

Caden volunteered that he finds the opportunity to eventually become a Foreign Area Officer (FAO) intriguing. FAOs are experts in a specific region's military operations who are given the directive to provide leadership and advisement in partnership with regional government officials and agencies. Caden also indicated an interest in teaching and coaching. Jamison responded that he finds the possibility of working with Planet Earth or National Geographic intriguing future possibilities.

When I asked this amazing two-some to identify their most important role models, I was not surprised at their quick answers, namely, their parents. Their comments concerning their dad began with their pride in his military service and being grateful for his sacrifices in defense of America. Jamison also mentioned his dad's strong encouragement and support of their physical growth and athletic endeavors.

Caden described his mother's courage and her stabilizing effect on family life during his dad's many deployments. Caden said, "She was our rock," and Jamison added, "She helped to develop our emotional maturity." At this point in the interview, I teared up. Yet, I thrilled hearing the sincerely offered praise from two sons who clearly have flourished under the pressures of military dependents' lifestyle and beyond.

Caden and Jamison are past the midpoint in their USMA experience. I asked them to be candid in reflecting on their greatest challenges as a cadet. And candid they were! Caden described it as a mix between college and prison citing the restrictions on leave time and the lonely Saturday nights in the dorm thinking of former friends who were likely out and partying. He said, "The isolation was hard." Jamison jumped in to complain about the weather, the humidity of summer and the winter freeze. He added that the academic load was vexing at times, especially his experience in Russian language classes.

Then I asked them to describe their proudest moments at West Point. Their eyes brightened and their animated answers went on for at least ten times the length of their answers to the challenges noted in the above paragraph. I will start the list of numerous items with Jamison's first observation. He answered, "We have made so many new, great friends, and our friends help us get through hard times."

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We all want to serve, we are goal driven, and we have created close bonds for a lifetime." Caden added, "I am grateful for West Point and that it has all worked out. Honestly, the first two years are hard, but now I see how different I am, that I am confident and able to lead more."

They also expressed joy in completing the rigorous Air Assault School, a challenge that truly tested their mettle. Caden described being a part of the Corps during the Army-Navy football game and participating in the Long Gray Line as "the culmination of pride."

In response to "crazy traditions," they described the SOSH Run as an event not to miss. The Social Sciences Run (SOSH Run) is a race against the deadline for cadets to turn in their Introduction to International Relations required paper. It is considered a rite of passage for third-year cadets. Many cadets race in costumed attire before an audience of cadets and faculty who line the walkway to cheer them on. Cadets who encase their paper in a brown binder have nicknamed the packet the "brown bomber."

Laughing and simultaneously talking as they told what they considered the craziest of traditions, I can only hope I got Caden's and Jamison's version right. They both eagerly weighed in on "the Naked Man" tradition. They began by saying that after the Christmas Banquet, it is an optional tradition to gather outside on the parade grounds to smoke cigars.

Checking on this part of their story, I found a website verifying that at stressful points in the school year or during times of high spirits (such as the Christmas Banquet) one might witness the "Naked Man." Certainly, a perfect time for such an appearance might be an occasion where large numbers of holiday revelers are gathered on the parade field. Caden and Jamison said that at the 2023 Christmas Banquet there was gender equality.

Three streakers appeared in the distance racing across the parade field wearing only running shoes and a smile. The streakers were one man and two women, all of whom 'miraculously' made a safe and anonymous getaway via an awaiting car. If caught, it has been rumored that the consequences could result in an automatic turnback, meaning the offenders would be required to repeat a year of coursework.

My final question was delivered with a front-end apology. I was sure it was something that had been asked of them too often in their life, but I was also curious to see if my impressions of each of them aligned with what I had observed in conversation. I felt there was an ESP between them, and yet I also observed individual personalities and independent thinking. I asked them to summarize how they are alike and how they are different. A summary of their responses follows.

They share a common love of video games, music, sports, and belief systems. They both described themselves as very determined and hard working academically and physically. Caden replied, "I am laid back and extroverted, I let Jamison boss me." Jamison described himself as more introverted and serious. He said, "I am a planner. I like to be in charge." Mom Amy offered concluding remarks after hearing their comments. She said, "Caden makes Jamison lighten up. They are not overly competitive with each other but rather supportive and mutually driven to succeed."

Caden and Jamison are most deserving of our gratitude and respect. They have chosen a path less traveled by a majority of their peers, and they have successfully measured up in a program that requires their tenacity, discipline, and commitment to service. They will graduate West Point and be commissioned as Second Lieutenants alongside fellow members of the Class of 2026.

They will observe the tradition of tossing their white service caps into the sky and then assume active-duty assignments after graduation. They will take the West Point tradition with them as proven young men who understand and assume the United States Military Academy motto: "Duty, Honor, Country."

Author Joseph Campbell wrote, "A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself." My sincere thanks to all veterans for your service and sacrifice. And to Caden and Jamison, thanks for assuming a role in our future national security.

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Thank you, Benita, for a most insightful commentary on two young gentlemen whose chosen careers seem to fit them just right. I am sure we will hear more from each of them as they continue to grow and mature into these careers. Our military is served well by such young people who desire to serve their country.



Caden and Jamison Uptgraft as plebes

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Don't they just look grand...our country is in good hands!