

“Duty, Honor, Country”: ORHS Class of ‘22 Twin Brothers at West Point

(As published in The Oak Ridger’s Historically Speaking column the week of November 4, 2024)

Benita Albert brings us this intriguing story here at Veteran’s Day.

Caden and Jamison Uptgraft began their junior year in mid-August by participating in the 2024 West Point Affirmation Ceremony. The occasion affirmed their commitment to complete the next two years of study and to serve in the U.S. Army and to defend the United States Constitution. The ceremony was held on the night before classes began for the newly minted Second-Class Cadets. They will complete 500 more days of academic studies focused on learning and leadership development followed by a minimum five years of active-duty service.

Twin brothers, Caden and Jamison, are ORHS Class of 2022 graduates whose family arrived in Oak Ridge after their father’s retirement from the U.S. Army in 2019. ORHS was the eighth school they attended in their K-12 educational journey, a not uncommon test of resiliency academically and socially for many military children. However, these brothers knew that ORHS would be their last and final school. Their parents, Amy and Jamie Uptgraft, placed a high priority on finding a rich cultural, educational, and recreational environment where the family of four children could grow and thrive. They chose Oak Ridge.

I first heard of Caden and Jamison when I met the twins’ grandfather, Jim Uptgraft, during a breakfast with mutual friends. Jim counts four United States Military Academy (USMA) appointees in his progeny: his son Jamie (USMA Class of ‘99), his ORHS grandsons Caden and Jamison (USMA Class of ‘26) and an Indiana grandson, EJ Reichert (USMA Class of ‘25). When I heard this, I was gob smacked! I immediately asked Jim if he could connect me to his twin grandsons for a story for Veterans week 2024, a story celebrating two more ORHS grads who have chosen military service. Jim and his wife, Denise, made Oak Ridge their new home after moving here from Indianapolis in 2021. How fortunate Oak Ridge is to welcome even more of the Uptgraft family.

Jamie Uptgraft (the twins’ father) was a four-year letterman on West Point’s Black Knights basketball team who graduated from the Academy in 1999. He spent 21 years in the Army, retiring with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He was an infantry officer who led men and women from the platoon to battalion level. He deployed into combat five times: two to Iraq and three to Afghanistan. His wife Amy said, “He once told us that his most rewarding deployment was in support of Joint Force Katrina in 2005 because he was able to help Americans get to safety.” Jamie currently works for Consolidated Nuclear Security at Y-12 as the Director of Security Transportation. His military interests continue through his volunteer work on the Board of Directors of the Mountain Man Memorial March, as President of the East Tennessee West Point Society, and as a United States Military Academy Field Force Representative.

Amy Uptgraft (the twins’ mother) graduated with a theatre degree from Purdue University and was a working actress in New York City before marrying Jamie at the start of his active military service in 1999. She counted thirteen moves and seventeen different homes as well as the birth of four children during her twenty-one years as a military spouse. In addition to Caden and Jamison, there are two daughters: Peyton, a senior at ORHS and Wynnie an eighth grader at Jefferson Middle School.

Amy has acted, directed, and taught in theatres all over the country. She currently directs the fall play at ORHS and teaches acting workshops for the Masquers theatre program. She is active in support for military spouses, and has been involved in creating the Veteran’s Spouse Project. The Project documents generational military spouse stories through a program called “Stories We Tell,” and the Project also offers online writing and creative arts classes. Amy has written two plays, “I Will Wait” and “in*Between” honoring the role of military spouses. To learn more about the Project visit the website www.veteransspouseproject.org

Amy’s grandfather adds more to the military ‘stories to be told’ and honored in the family. Amy wrote, “The twins’ great-grandfather, Lloyd Ball, was a tanker who invaded the beaches of Normandy on D-Day, and was injured in the line of duty, receiving a Purple Heart. When the war ended, he returned to farming in Indiana. The last trip that he took was to watch his future grandson-in-law, Jamie, graduate from the United States Military Academy in 1999.”

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I asked Caden and Jamison to share their diverse educational experiences in seven different schools from grades K-9. Those schools ranged across the country from New York to Kansas to Tennessee to Colorado to Alaska and finally Georgia. Shared sentiments included: “It seemed we always had to prove ourselves at each new school and to make new friends, but it helped to know that we always had each other.” Seventh and eighth grades in Anchorage, Alaska received a top vote. Caden commented, “I loved the sheer beauty of the place. We were always outside playing and not wanting to come in during the long hours of daylight.” Ever the risk takers, they loved snowboarding, that is, until Jamison broke both arms pursuing the sport. Salmon fishing rated high as a new and exciting pastime. They made friends in Alaska with whom they keep in touch still, including two friends who are now at West Point.

Their first impressions of ORHS were that it was much larger than their previous Columbus, GA school, that the basketball arena was awesome, and feeling excited that this would be their school for the next three years of high school. They marveled at the vast course offerings and the diversity of the school population. They brought athletic skills that placed them on the Wildcat basketball team, Jamison as a shooting guard and Caden as a power forward, where they lettered all three years. Caden also played third base and center field positions on the ORHS baseball team.

Both pursued rigorous academic schedules including Advanced Placement coursework in U.S. History, Statistics, Environmental Science, and Human Geography. They expressed praise for their ORHS teachers who they felt were strong influences in their future choice of majors at West Point. They both served as Wildcat mentors to underclassmen, and they achieved membership in the National Honor Society. Caden worked for two summers at the Clinch River Environmental Studies Organization. They both held part time jobs in the community.

Their school records and leadership were worthy of admission to any university, but their final choices came down to the University of Miami and West Point, vastly different options. They insist their final decision was made independent of each other. Jamison said, “We had five days after the West Point offer was extended to decide.” Caden said that one of his considerations was the impact on his parents if they had two college tuitions to pay simultaneously, but he also said, “We both knew we wanted to serve. We deeply admired our dad’s commitment and service.” Jamison added, “It would eat me up if I turned it down.” Once final decisions were made, neither was surprised, and perhaps both were relieved to know that they would once again be taking on a new, challenging adventure together at West Point.

The admissions standards for the Academy are extremely high. They accept only 12% of all applicants, and the first seven weeks of grueling “Beast Barracks” averages a 5-10% dropout rate. West Point ranks third in top public liberal arts colleges on the 2023-24 Best College Rankings. They require stellar high school academic records and evidence of strong leadership skills in their candidates. They require every cadet to participate in at least one competitive sport and to pass the Army Combat Fitness Test twice each year.

I asked them to give advice to future Wildcats who might want to consider a service academy beyond ORHS.

Jamison: “You should go for it. Many 18-year-olds don’t even consider this choice, though they are many levels above requirements and could place. If you are thinking about it, I would say it is a best option for future success. West Point will mold you into a leader.”

Caden: “Try a little bit of everything in school: sports, activities, academics. Look for leadership opportunities at school and in the community. Develop public speaking skills.”

And finally, in sober reflection on their comments, Caden advised: “Be aware that wake-up call comes at 5 a.m. And know that you will be yelled at frequently.” His comments were delivered with sincerity, and also an impish smile. Caden added, “I am grateful for our West Point opportunity and the fact that it has worked out for the two of us.”

The United States Military Academy graduates more than 900 new officers annually which represents roughly 20% of new lieutenants required by the Army. (Fact Sheet, USMA) Caden and Jamison have completed most of their core requirements and are now focusing on higher level coursework in their majors while also developing and assuming

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greater leadership responsibilities. More on their experiences at West Point will be featured in the second installment of this story.

Thanks, Benita, Readers, look for the rest of the story next.



Caden and Jamison Uptgraft at age 6

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Caden and Jamison playing Oak Ridge High School basketball