



I Woke Up

Welcome to Post-Cadet Stress Disorder

Having dreams you
are a cadet again?
You are not alone.

Screaming

By Frederick V. Malmstrom, '64

Illustration by Sarah Wright

Have you ever dreamt (i.e. dreamed) you were a cadet again? Sigmund Freud was reputed to have said our dreams are a desire to fulfill our wishes. If that's the case, then 40,000 USAFA graduates have an odd way of expressing their repressed fantasies.

That Nonproblem of Deranged Veterans

The popular press nowadays makes headlines out of a bonafide psychiatric disorder politely called PTSD, or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. We used to call it Combat Fatigue or Shell Shock. In a big leap of faith, the fourth estate loves playing up the thesis that our country is, therefore, heavily populated with secretly deranged veterans who constantly live and relive their most traumatizing combat experiences. Dunno about that, because even though I've dodged my share of missiles and bullets over North Viet-Nam, in my dreams I've never re-experienced those particular entertaining events. Rather, I keep coming back to a regular, goofy dream where I've returned to USAFA as a cadet. Now that's real shell shock.

Some USAFA graduates (especially those from the hard sciences) tell me they never dream about the Alcoa Palace. Their typical non-recollection is, "I have repressed my dreams of USAFA." I don't know where they dragged out that Freudian vocabulary, but if they have truly repressed those dreams—well—we all know what *that* means.¹ Yet, a significant minority of USAFA graduates freely confess they have recurring dreams of returning to USAFA as either a cadet or some hybrid thereof.

And what do we deranged veterans dream about? To bowdlerize (look it up) the record, I have, alas,—found nothing whatever in service academy dream content of a risqué nature. *Au contraire*, here is a sobering quote from notable novelist Lucian Truscott IV, USMA '69, who made this confession:

"I have this recurring dream, sometimes it's a nightmare, in which I'm back at West Point, still a cadet. ... Events swirl in a high speed merry-go-round of anxiety, a spinning place gone out of control ... A thousand demands are made. Nothing can get done on time. If I shine my shoes and clean the room and make sure there name tags on all my T-shirts and don't study, I'll flunk the fluids test tomorrow; but if I study and kiss-off all the other stuff, I'll get written up and lose weekend privileges. Every decision is a dead-end street. Nothing goes right. The whole world is Post Finance, and they've lost my records."

¹ Freud never quite caught onto the mathematical impossibility of proving a negative hypothesis.

WANNA BE A CAREER CADET?

Was Truscott's (1976) sobering account not sobering enough? For an unforgettable read, do take in suspense writer David Ely's (1966) award-winning short story "The Academy." As for those of you who resist the written word, "The Academy" was also presented as a half-hour TV episode on Rod Serling's October 6, 1971 *Night Gallery*. Serling presents a truly eerie premise where cadets check into a military academy but never check out. In my experience, Ely's script trumps anything ever written by Stephen King.

I'll be pitchkettled (look that up, too) if I can account for the origins of these dreams. The 1945 U.S. Public Law 255 extended the entering age to USMA up to 24 for returning veterans. After WWII, there were many former commissioned officers (one as high as the rank of major) who entered both West Point and Annapolis, most of them graduating in the Class of '49 (Puckert, 2006). Both the USAFA Class of '59 and '64 matriculated prior second lieutenants commissioned through aviation cadets. However, I doubt if any of these men secretly aspired to career cadet status. Then, again, maybe Salvador Dali actually did own a melted watch.

DO YOU FIND YOURSELF IN THESE DREAMS?

From anonymous contributors I've collected and transcribed below a selection of their dreams. Please note these are *actual* verbatim and unexpurgated accounts from *actual* USAFA graduates. I mean... how could I confabulate (again, look that one up) confabulations like these? Unlike Lucian Truscott's all-too-humorless nightmares, these dreams begin to top anything in previously published spoof cadet diaries, like Grady's (1943) classic *The Collected Work of Ducrat Pepps* or its worthy descendent, Don Hall's (2004) hilarious journal *More Secret Life of Waldo F. Dumbsquat*. Here we go:

Dream #1. Frequently. It's mostly sports, football especially: It's somehow I'm involved in a combination of different sporting events. I played a variety of varsity sports, both in high school and at the Academy. I find myself down on the field, perhaps wearing a lacrosse outfit while playing soccer. Anyhow, the intramural field is filled with generic players, commandants, AOCs, and a few guys from my high school. I may tackle a general or two, but that doesn't bother me. Otherwise, I have dreams of pigging out at the Mitchell Hall buffet with buddies. I always held the opinion that Mitchell Hall food was great, and it's buttressed by my other opinion, "Free is good."

Dream #2. 1-2 times per year. Here I am as a doolie again. I've forgotten to wear my shirt. It's embarrassing to me. I have my arms folded in front of me (I *hate* that dream), but also nobody seems to notice or even care. [Oscar Wilde said, "... there is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that

is *not* being talked about.”] Then, I will always find myself on the 2nd floor of Fairchild Hall, just before class begins. Naturally, I can’t find my classroom. I know I’m going to be crucified for missing a formation. That’s odd, because I’ve been through mortar attacks in Iraq—which I never dream about—but missing class gives me a sense of pure panic. Keeping track of the time is difficult because PE classes always begin half way through the normal class periods, so it’s always confusing. Because of that recurring dream, to this day I always keep three alarm clocks set around my house.

Dream #3. Once a month, I’m always at the “old” Academy in its present Colorado Springs location. The Lowry AFB campus doesn’t fit into this at all. But Sijan Hall doesn’t exist either, and there are, alas, no women here. I’m a cadet again at my present age [68!], but all my fellow cadets are an assemblage of young men. I’m in a state of confusion (is there any other?); I can’t find my squadron. Karl Kitt (our wrestling coach) appears in this dream a lot. To make things worse, it all seems so *logical*, my not leaving, and my constantly returning to USAFA. Perhaps it’s because I can clearly see my cadet ID card expiration date reads INDEFINITE.

Dream #4. Frequently. My hair is cut short, and it’s always the same dream. I’m running across the Terrazzo [Is that thing *still* under repair?] with my “smack pack,” a kind of book duffle bag. That was before we doodies were allowed to carry backpacks. [Note: You shoulda tried it in the days of double-timing with an armload of loose books and no way to anchor that slippery slide rule.] It’s the day of my first class. I’m . . . I’m horrified my instructors will stand us up just like the upperclass summer cadre. It’s horrible—I don’t feel safe. My emotions are always as vivid as if I’m living through the real thing.

Dream #5. About once a year. I’ve been previously commissioned, but I wind up back here at some indefinite rank, perhaps as a cadet again. Panicked, I jump out of bed and then I’m wandering Fairchild Hall—it’s either the 4th or 5th floor, and I’m in my flight suit, trying to find my first period class on the first day of academics. I know it’s not engineering, but it is always one of my weaker subjects. I have no idea what my schedule is, so I’m poking my head into every classroom asking, but all I get is blank stares and funny looks from the occupants. There is a sunny side to this, because I know I’ve been through the program before, and I’m telling myself, “I’m going to do great on 4th class knowledge—and this time I’ll have an answer.”

Dream #6. About 2-3 times per year. This time I get to repeat my entire Academy education. It’s my first day of class as a fourthclassman, again. It’s the Fall schedule, and I walk into the room at the wrong place. My schedule is wrong. The hallway is empty—I have no idea where I’m supposed to be, but I do know *they* (an indefinite *they*) will kill me. I’m in a state of meltdown. I give praises when I wake up.

Dream #7. I have had many versions of it. It is close to graduation and I am trying to get to the Rugby Pitch . . . only to find the match already started or I am not on the team. I always awake upset wondering why I ever quit the team. I know I didn’t ever do that because it was too good a deal).

Dream #8. About once a month. I’m back in jump training. They push me out of the aircraft door, but they’ve handed me nothing but a sleeve board—no parachute. I guess I’m expected to surf my way to the ground.

Dream #9. Every two months or so. I’m prepping for graduation and leaving. I have yet to take a final exam, and it’s always in

my weakest subject, some course I didn’t know I was even signed up for. It’s time stress. I know I’m a cadet back at USAFA, but I’m also trying to get back to Kentucky to support my wife and kids.

Dream #10. Occasionally. I’m at 2 weeks prior to graduation. I have a required English 4XX exam which I screwed up. I’m not prepared, and it’s, naturally, my weakest subject.

Dream #11. Maybe every two years. I’m lost in the academic building, looking for my classroom. I’m on the wrong floor. Sigh.

Dream #12. About every three or four months. It’s always pretty vivid. I’m signed up for classes which I never knew I had ever been signed up for. We’re changing dorm rooms, and no one is here. My roomie has moved. I look in every door. I go into one dorm room, and I step into the Chapel Hills shopping mall. Sure, I’m a captain, but I’m due to redo not four but now *five* years of my previous Academy experiences. My nagging question is: do I graduate as a 2nd lieutenant or a captain?

Dream #13. Every six weeks. OK, it’s unshakable, but I’ve gotten used to it. I’ve been out in the Air Force for many years. I imagine myself as having been decorated with combat-earned fruit salad extending down to my knees. For some reason, I return to the Academy as a 47 year-old cadet for the purposes of a *real* graduation, all so I can finally retire. Does my war record impress those 19 year-old upperclassmen? Don’t be silly. And so I’m still as usual chugging breathless around the Terrazzo, squaring corners and all. Then with only two weeks to go, I come up short, having to take a final exam in something like super-advanced differential equations, a course I didn’t know I’d ever signed up for. Ahhh . . . but the most satisfying conclusion to this dream is, upon my pending *real* graduation, I’m going to get my picture in *The Air Force Times* as the oldest graduate—not as the oldest living graduate, mind you, but as the oldest Zoomie ever to graduate.

SO WHAT’S THE LESSON?

Perhaps you picture yourself here. I can only dream. I can’t say whether these thirteen dreams are either the seed corn for a doctoral dissertation or another *Twilight Zone* series, but I trust there’s a pony (or a mare) in here somewhere. Dream interpretation may be as challenging as finding meaning in Danielle Steel novel. Even so, I’ll bet you a week’s free lodging at Pueblo State Hospital an interpretation would have cost Herr Doktor Freud a blinding headache. ☑

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