

Interview with Brigadier General George V. Fagan, USAF, Ret.

Director, USAF Academy Library, 1956–1969

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Looking Beyond the Library

General Fagan was director of the United States Air Force Academy Library from June 1956 through March 1969. Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on October 4, 1917, he earned bachelor's and master's degrees from Temple University, a master's in library science from the University of Denver, and a doctorate in history from the University of Pennsylvania. He served in Europe during World War II and was recalled to active duty during the Korean War. From 1951 to 1954 he taught history at the Naval Academy, and in 1955 became one of the original members of the Air Force Academy faculty. As director of the Air Force Academy Library, he built a collection of 275,000 volumes and created a special collection of priceless archival materials. After his retirement in 1969, he directed the Colorado College library for fourteen years and later wrote a definitive history of the Air Force Academy.

Q: General Fagan, you have written the definitive history of the early years of the academy, and you also participated in many of the key events from 1955 through 1969. We won't ask you to recite all the research that went into your book, but we would like to record some of your personal memories about your experiences during those formative years.

First Impressions of the Academy

Assignment to the Academy

Q: You reported to the academy in January 1955, when the academy was at its temporary site in Denver and the first cadets wouldn't arrive for another six months. Before coming to the academy you had earned a doctorate in history and had taught at the Naval Academy. Please tell us what you recall about the circumstances of your assignment to the academy: what kind of work you were doing when you learned of your assignment, what your impression was then of the academy, and how your previous experiences in academic life and the military influenced your hopes and expectations when you arrived at the academy.

Fagan: Well, it's an interesting story. I belonged to the Pennsylvania Air National Guard, 111th Bomb Wing, and we got recalled in January 1951 as part of the Korean War. I came on duty as a lieutenant colonel on March 5, 1951, and a couple of days later I got a call from the Pentagon saying that they were reviewing my records. They found I was a

college teacher, and they were going to assign me to West Point, and I would hear more about it.

I said, “Why West Point?” They tried to explain to me the Stearns-Eisenhower Report, saying that from 1949 on, 25 percent of the graduates of West Point and Annapolis had to come to the Air Force, and in return 25 percent of the instructors at West Point and Annapolis had to be Air Force officers. I didn’t hear much more for a long while about the [Air Force] academy until I was teaching—at the Naval Academy instead of West Point.

I got called again in 1953 saying they were going to start the [Air Force] academy at Mitchel Field in New York, and I was going to be assigned there. Of course that one fell through. My tour at the Naval Academy was up in June 1954. The Pentagon personnel people said that the academy was not ready to receive me and I would go as an interim assignment to Air University to be the associate editor of the Air University Press. And so I went there. Then in October 1954 I was called to the Pentagon again, and this time I met for the first time with General Zimmerman, who confirmed that I definitely was going to be the chairperson of the American history department at the academy.

Q: Facilities at Lowry

The academy’s original home was in World War II barracks at Lowry Air Force Base in Denver. What do you recall about those original facilities? Do you remember your first impression? Do you have memories of the

rehabilitation of the buildings, or of how well they served for the academy's first three years?

Fagan: The academy area was known as Lowry Number Two. The main part of Lowry was along Quebec Street, whereas the end of Lowry Two was along Havana Street. That was our end mark. There were probably thirty or forty buildings in that area. Most of them were World War II barracks. Then there was a triangle with three academic buildings that had been used for the tech schools at Lowry. In the middle of those three buildings was a Matador missile, a red Matador missile, which was distinctive. The buildings had been named by the Lowry people. Building 905, which was the headquarters building, was called Patrick Hall after General Mason Patrick. Building 903 was where the library was, on the ground floor, and the social sciences were in the rest of the building. That building was called Polifka Hall. Polifka was an officer associated with training command. Building 901 was where the science people were. That was called South Hall. Those three buildings were pretty good buildings. They were classroom buildings, and they required very little modification.

We set the library up on the ground floor. The equipment we used there was later moved here to the permanent site. Ultimately it became the equipment for the community library, so the government got its money's worth out of that wooden equipment.

But the barracks buildings, of course, had to be completely renovated and modified.

Earlier there had been a report about rheumatic fever. There was a big study at the University of Colorado recommending that there not be any open-bay barracks, but that there be two cadets to a room. So they modified those barracks and made two-man rooms

out of all of them. One interesting thing was that the barracks had furnaces in them, and the furnaces, according to Colorado law, had to use Colorado coal. So politics came in, even in the beginning.

They also modified a couple of buildings, mess halls. One became Mitchell Hall, the cadets' mess hall, and the other one became Arnold Hall. Those were the only two that academy people named, and they were pretty good. They did a good job; they had plenty of money to renovate those buildings, and they spent a lot of time.

They also had a nice parade ground and athletic fields, which were fairly good. Lowry had a lot of open space, so they could do that. Then there was one runway. That was the runway where the dedication ceremony was held. So on the whole I thought the quarters were adequate. Maybe the cadets who lived in them didn't believe that, but the ATO's [Air Training Officers] lived there too, so it would be interesting to hear some of their comments.

Q: Dedication Ceremony

The dedication of the academy on July 11, 1955, was a historic occasion.

Do you have any favorite anecdotes or observations from that day?

Fagan: Colonel Max Boyd, who was the information officer and had served with General Harmon during the interim period in the Pentagon, said that this was an opportunity for the Air Force to have a great, historic ceremony. We should invite the President and have congressmen, generals, the public, and the press. It was going to be a great ceremony.

Well, they started out with all those plans. The assistant chief of staff, Barrett Taylor, was assigned to prepare the operations order for the ceremony. He did a terrific job. He was a great showman—you've got to interview him. Well, as it turned out, they had to modify the plan.

First of all President Eisenhower, who was General Harmon's classmate in the [West Point] class of 1915, was ill. He had his heart attack, so he could not come to the ceremony. They decided if they couldn't have the President, they would have the speaker be the secretary of the Air Force, Harold Talbott. For the military, the chief of staff, General Nathan Twining, would be the speaker.

Now you had all these plans being made, but no cadets were around, no ATO's. The plans had to be made in a vacuum. So then you say, "Well, how do you bring the cadets on board? How do you get them there that day for the ceremony?" What they finally did was, General Stillman sent out instructions to the cadets along with a uniform. The instructions told the cadets to take their uniform and get it tailored so it would fit. He forgot to say in his instructions that military trousers do not have cuffs. So many of the cadets appeared in trousers with cuffs, and the academy had to marshal a lot of tailors to change them.

The cadets were instructed to be here at 6:00 on the morning of July 11. When the cadets appeared, the uniforms had to be modified. The ATO's arrived before, and they were on the scene at 6:00. They started marshaling the cadets, getting them the close-cropped haircuts. By mid-morning, the ATO's started forming the cadets into units for close-order drill. They had close-order drill for a couple of hours, then took the cadets to lunch and brought them back again. The ceremony was going to be at 4:00 in the afternoon. They

had bleachers all around—there were a couple of thousand people there. Everybody was in line. West Point and Annapolis both had contingents there. They had the band, and everybody was all set. A couple of minutes before 4:00, General Stillman gave the order for the cadets to march on. Here came 300-and-some cadets marching on, almost like they were veterans. It was a magnificent job. Movie people were there—we should have some good shots of the march on. It was a magnificent job. Everybody applauded as the cadets marched on. It was a very memorable day.

One thing that I still feel sorry about is that General Harmon, for some reason, wouldn't let us tape record anything. He said he didn't want anybody to be recorded. Yet that was a golden opportunity. Here was General [Benjamin D.] Foulois, who had been head of the Air Service and was trained to fly by the Wright brothers. General [Frank P.] Lahm, who was trained by the Wright brothers, was there, and General [Thomas D.] Milling—the three earliest people trained in the Air Force, so we lost a golden opportunity there. I still don't understand why. But we were good soldiers. We didn't disobey.

Q: Leadership at Lowry

Four of the senior officers at the academy in 1955 were the superintendent, Lieutenant General Hubert R. Harmon; the dean of faculty, Brigadier General Don Z. Zimmerman; the commandant, Brigadier General Robert M. Stillman; and the director of athletics,

Colonel Robert V. Whitlow. Could you give us a thumbnail description from your memories of each of those key people?

Fagan: General Harmon was an unusual man. He was a little man, but he had lots of energy, lots of pep, a lot of imagination. And he had great vision. He saw, I think, through his own career—his father was a West Point graduate, his brothers and he were all West Point graduates—so they were a military family. He saw in his own career what could be possible for cadets. It wasn't just necessary to have some book learning because when he was in Washington, one of his assignments was as an aide to the President. So he was involved in presidential activities. And of course this was the way he met his wife. His wife, Rosa Mae Kendrick, was the daughter of the senator from Wyoming. So he met his wife there. But the idea of being a young officer involved with the President and the White House always impressed him. Later, toward the end of his career when he was a lieutenant general, he was a representative to the United Nations. So he saw diplomacy was very important, and that's how he thought of cadets. I heard him say many times, "We're not training second lieutenants, we're training second lieutenants who are potential generals." I think he sincerely believed that. Some of the people around him didn't believe that, but he did. It's tragic that he became ill so suddenly and died so quickly that he couldn't see the first couple of years of the academy. I think the academy would have been a lot different.

General Zimmerman—the first time I met him was in October 1954. He looked like a general; in fact he looked like a movie version of a general, tall, over six feet, beautiful white hair, a nice stance, and he seemed very articulate. But when he became the dean,

and I attended some meetings with him on the curriculum, he seemed so fuzzy. He didn't have answers, he didn't know, he was puzzled about the core curriculum. That was one of the big watchwords we were using in those days—get this core curriculum underway. He had some doubts as to what was there. And I think other people had doubts as to whether he was the right leader. Remember, all these people had been assembled with high hopes for starting a new institution, and they wanted everything to be perfect. They wanted perfection, and here their boss wasn't perfect. And that was a real shock. General Harmon learned pretty soon that he had a mistake there, but he was too much of a gentleman to do anything about it. So the Pentagon actually had to relieve General Zimmerman. It was tragic that they had to do that before the first year was up. That hurt the whole faculty. He looked like a general, but he wasn't a dean.

General Stillman was an interesting man. Half of the time I was at the Naval Academy, I was the acting Air Force senior officer. Every month I had to go report to General Stillman, who was the personnel officer, on what was happening at the [Naval] academy—which midshipmen we had spoken to and which midshipmen had spoken to us about wanting to join the Air Force. He wanted to know so he could pass that word on to General [Laurence S.] Kuter, who was the DCS/P [deputy chief of staff, personnel].

General Kuter each year would come to the [Naval] academy and talk to the midshipmen about joining the Air Force. But in the meantime, we were sort of subversives who were trying to recruit Air Force people.

The Navy had insisted that to be a line officer, you had to have twenty-twenty vision. So only the Naval Academy graduates who were going into the construction corps or the supply corps or something like that would be commissioned—the rest would not be

commissioned. So we found a golden opportunity. We started to recruit all the ones who had twenty-fifty vision, and so forth, as having potential for the Air Force. Many of them did come to the Air Force, so we got more than our 25 percent. The last year I was at the Naval Academy they decided that was a mistake; they wouldn't let us have any more.

General Stillman was sort of a gruff, rough and ready kind of guy, a man's man. He had been a football player. He grew up in Pueblo. He attended Colorado College for two years. He played football at Colorado College, and then he went to West Point. And of course he played football at West Point under Red Blaik. He was on Red Blaik's team. When he graduated, he became one of Red Blaik's assistants. So he was pretty well involved in football. He later went on to become a pilot and was a commander of a group in World War II. On a mission over Europe he got shot down, and he wound up in Stalag Luft 3 with General [Albert P.] Clark. They became good friends.

So I knew General Stillman because I used to have to report to him. His ideas about the cadets were far different from General Harmon's. His idea was to replicate West Point, to put the fourth-class system in effect, which he did with slight modifications. In general it has endured all these years in one way or another, though not as extreme as it was in the beginning.

I have an interesting story about General Stillman, who didn't become a general until after the academy started. He had been a general selectee, and then he got his star. After I went to the library, we were always having boards and commissions coming and examining us. So we had a library board, a national library board with a librarian from the University of Chicago, and from Princeton, and from Johns Hopkins, and so forth. It was a high-powered library board. They interviewed the superintendent, commandant,

and dean. Moose Stillman came before them and told them, “During the four years I spent at West Point, I never set foot in the library. Look what happened to me.”

Bob Whitlow was a very aggressive, energetic kind of guy. He was always going to be first. Do everything, get everything first. He was an interesting guy, too, because he had contacts. He was a great golfer. He would play golf, for example, when Eisenhower came to Denver. Whitlow was assigned to play golf with him. He played golf with the secretary of the Air Force. He played golf with everybody around, so he was well known. He also was a football player at West Point who had worked with Red Blaik. He wanted to be a duplicate of Red Blaik in many ways. He was very aggressive, and my feeling is that he started off by trying to recruit outstanding football players. That was his whole purpose, and he got the academy involved with various season lineups with schools that were far beyond our reach.

He couldn't wait until we played the first football game. The first big football game was played in the University of Denver football stadium, which has disappeared now. There was a packed house with all kinds of reporters and everybody there. For freshmen, that was unthinkable, but that's the way he started out. Of course he finally managed to send a team to the Cotton Bowl, which people were amazed at. But that's the kind of driving guy he was. You could see why he shook a lot of people's feathers.

There's another person I would talk about. The assistant commandant of cadets was Ben Cassidy. Ben was a good balance to Moose Stillman. He was a very kind, understanding guy. I think the cadets could reason with him better than they could with Stillman. Ben Cassidy is still around—you might want to interview him. He's out in Hawaii. Another

person was Colonel Hank Hogan. They were two assistants to the commandant and were very active in the early days. The early cadets will remember them very well.

Another one that came with Whitlow was Frank Merritt. Frank Merritt was his assistant, and Merritt later became the athletic director himself. Frank was sort of in between. He was a good guy. People liked Frank. He wasn't aggressive like Bob Whitlow.

They were real personalities. We really haven't come to the dean yet, but you could see the basis of conflict, of what later becomes called the "terrazzo gap," was there early. There wasn't a terrazzo yet, but the gap was there, the potential. When you get all these powerful personalities, there's going to be conflict. And there was a lot of conflict. Now it probably didn't seep down to the cadets, but there was certainly conflict on the staff, and conflict on the faculty. It was very evident.