

Plebe determined to march through West Point rigors

By Carol Azizian
staff writer

MONICA LEE Wyrwas is outnumbered and out-numbered by the majority of her 4,000 college classmates.

Last year, she was discriminated against, harassed and humiliated. Next week, she'll return to the campus for more of the same treatment.

The Southfield resident is not a masochist or a crusader for women's rights.

"She's one of 400 women determined to march through four years of rigorous training at the prestigious West Point Military Academy — traditionally a men's institution for the past two centuries.

"THERE ARE SONS of generations and generations of graduates who don't think women belong there," Wyrwas said. "They don't say anything to you. It's just an attitude they convey."

This subtle snobbery is surpassed only by the more blatant discrimination inherent in the college's caste system.

"A plebe (nickname for freshman) is at the bottom of the pole. He or she is bossed around (by upper classmen) and yelled at.

"It's kind of like getting initiated into a fraternity — except it's a whole year of hell week.

"Sometimes, I felt like Private Benjamin (in the movie starring Goldie Hawn)," she added. "During basic training, we were fatigued, crawled through grime and always were sore."

ALTHOUGH Wyrwas' father, a retired U.S. Army major who graduated from West Point in 1963, forewarned

her about the rigors of army life, she was determined to give it a go.

"I thought it would offer good career and travel opportunities," said the 1982 Southfield High School graduate who hopes to eventually enter medical school.

"But it's really hard, especially when you're a plebe. Plebes must be dressed in appropriate uniforms at all times, keep their rooms spotless, address upper classmen by sir and ma'am, memorize the so-called 'Plebe Bible' (a book of West Point trivia), walk 120 paces per minute everywhere they go, stand at attention before their superiors and maintain a military bearing (straight face).

"IT'S VERY REGIMENTED," Wyrwas said. "Sometimes it seems like they're trying to break your will. But, they just want to weed out people who don't belong there.

"I would be really stubborn and (refuse) to do some of the things they wanted me to do because they were unreasonable.

"Once, I was walking to class and some guy yelled out 'Miss, halt.' I turned around and he told me I was bending my elbows. We're supposed to keep our arms straight when we're walking.

"He told me if I did it again, I'd get a fourth class delinquency report."

Freshmen who are reported for disobeying regulations face a "mini-trial" before their superiors.

"It's like a little Kangaroo Court," Wyrwas explained. "They've already decided what punishment you're going to get before the trial.

"IF THE (VIOLATION) is trivial, you'll get extra duty or a verbal reprimand. If it's more severe, you have to walk the area (campus grounds) for

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—Monica Wyrwas

hours, dressed in full uniform with cross belts and carrying a bayonet and rifle."

Besides learning to follow orders, plebes are encouraged to take on responsibility.

"They figure if you can discipline yourself to do little things (such as pass out mail), you can do bigger things (command an entire platoon).

"As head mail carrier, I was told the (importance) of my job. If you were on a battlefield, they said, you couldn't screw up messages because people's lives would depend on you."

UNLIKE MOST OTHER college students, West Point cadets lead a Spartan life and follow a strict schedule that leaves little time for socializing.

They wake up each morning at 6 a.m., don their uniforms and line up for a brief inspection.

Following breakfast, the cadets stand in formation again before going to classes. Most students take a minimum of seven classes each semester besides participating in sports teams or clubs.

Wyrwas joined the theatre arts guild and triathlon team (running, swimming and pistol shooting) during her first year.

CADETS ARE CALLED to their quarters at 7:30 p.m. each evening. Taps play at 11:30 p.m., sounding the warning that pupils may study for an hour more before turning their lights off at 12:30 a.m.

Dormitory rooms resemble army barracks because of their sparse decoration. But, they're generally larger than rooms at most colleges, Wyrwas said.

"You can't have bean bag chairs and decorate the rooms like a regular college dorm. You're not allowed to have curtains or posters. Only three knick knacks can be placed on the desk and only one plant is allowed in a room."

During weekends, students are free to socialize — but only on campus grounds. They may watch music and theater performances, attend dances and film showings at West Point's student union.

FRESHMEN ARE forbidden to socialize with upper classmen, unless they belong to clubs that include sophomores, juniors and seniors.

"We're not even supposed to know each other's first names," Wyrwas said. "We can't build any friendships with upper classmen. But that does build class unity and spirit. We (freshmen) stick together to get through it."

Despite the rigorous training and near-torturous treatment, Wyrwas chose to go back for at least another year because she wants to prove to herself that she can stomach it.

"I'M LOOKING FORWARD to proving that I didn't screw up as much as they said I did."

Besides, the army builds character, right?

"The system makes you learn humility. When someone is constantly saying you're worthless, you learn that you have self-worth and potential.

"It's also good discipline. I've learned to organize myself and set up a timetable.

"I was indecisive before. A lot of times in high school, I would agree with people just so I wouldn't make a scene. Now, I can speak up when I know something's wrong."

WYRWAS EAGERLY AWAITS assuming a leadership role next year. She'll be an assistant squad leader — second in command of a small group of freshmen.

"I've made up my mind about the kind of leader I would like to be — not the Frank Burns (character in M*A*S*H) type who rips people apart because he thinks they have a funny nose.

You learn more from leaders who tell you what your mistakes are and how to correct them."

Take advantage of beautiful freebie

What's free in this busy world?

Here's a hint — it is SUPER BEAUTIFUL, colorful and created by sharing people.

Why, of course, we are talking about Free Friday in the Cranbrook Gardens. There is a large staff of devoted gardeners and Cranbrook staff who proudly invite you to bring a friend and revel in the beauty of the formal gardens which were begun in a bare farmland by George Booth.

In those days there were only five families who had a project of going to this rural area with their children. As Mr. Booth escaped from the publishing business of the Detroit News on weekends he would ask advice about appropriate plants for the rolling ground.

Later the beautiful family home, Cranbrook House, was built. Then it seemed necessary to have a church and schools to accommodate the growing family. Mr. Booth's high standards are



down to earth
Alice Burlingame

reflected on the growth of the grounds and the total Cranbrook Educational Community.

SO, IF you accept this invitation for Free Friday you, too, can stroll the interesting paths created by George Booth and his family and the volunteers who have brought to reality a garden known all over the world for its splendor. The garden will be open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

If any of you are going toward Plymouth, Mass. I think you would enjoy a unit of time in the Plymouth Plantation nearby where they live like the Plymouth Colony did in 1627.

The Indians were very friendly and

taught them so many of the basics in gardening, medicine and cooking.

To be a naturalist in those days was the "in" thing. Those who could afford it on the continent would send botanists to Asia, Africa and America to gather new seeds. Those were pioneer days in medicine, too (they made their own from hearsay and practice).

When the Pilgrims came over on the ships they had waxed linen sacks to hold their vegetable seeds, herbs, cuttings and roots and they wanted flowers for their beauty.

Can't you just imagine them with their few treasures and restless children, in the tiny ships tossing in rough seas?

TEA WAS too expensive to drink so the wine they made was often used. Basil was rubbed on the skin to keep away the biting, venomous insects. They used tansy to preserve corpses. Enough of that, ... but I want to go and see the early life of the Pilgrims.

This is an appropriate time to evaluate your garden area. Do you have a comfortable deck chair and relax from life's tensions? You would find that an evergreen hedge would control the breezes longer in the season and provide privacy.

So look around your garden area and see if you have a possible hideaway which could be developed, just special for you. Study the sun pattern, if sun is your wish. If a place to snooze is your order, select the right light pattern.

Call this retreat your special beauty spot. You can have large pots of flowers to provide accents.

Now that we have portable telephones, more rest can be assured for the weary who think of their garden as a hideaway.

Chorale makes its debut

The Birmingham Bloomfield Community Chorale, under the direction of Bruce Snyder, will give its first concert at 7 p.m. Sunday at the First Methodist Church of Birmingham.

The chorale, made up of 50 local men and women vocalists, was formed

last March through the Community Education Department of the Birmingham Public Schools.

Snyder is director of chorale music at Andover. Tickets are \$2. The program will be a combination of secular and religious music.

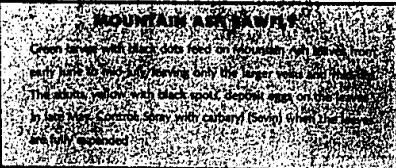
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