

## The Inside Scoop on Air Force Conversations

I was a member of Flight B538. A flight is a group that airmen are assigned to upon arrival to basic training. Flight B538 consisted of about 40 diverse females. We were the band flight for our graduating class which was an honor because we played the ceremony songs. These girls and I discovered that there is an interesting selection of vocabulary, various forms of address, and behind-the-scenes joking involved with the process of becoming an airman.

All military branches have their own vocabulary, and as a member of the Air Force I must emphasize that the vocabulary is quite unique. Some words or phrases are “latrine,” “snake pit,” “wingman,” “civvies,” and “standby.” “Latrine” means the restroom, which was used by saying, “Sir/Ma’am trainee Morrison reports as ordered, May I go to the latrine?” Another interesting term is “snake pit.” In the dining facility there was a table specifically for the military instructors, and when the trainees walked by the instructors would yell at them in front of everyone. The wingman concept was important throughout basic training. A “wingman” is basically someone who goes with you everywhere and watches your back while you watch theirs in return. “Civvies” is a golden word, because it means civilian clothes. After spending months in a military uniform the idea of wearing civilian clothes was refreshing. I recall the first time I put on my civilian clothes after training; my clothes fit differently but it felt good to wear what I wanted. Lastly, another word that was used is “standby.” This word is a preparatory command that means hang tight for the next thing that will happen. The military is like a whole other world with its own language, so to speak.

When talking to individuals in the Air Force there are certain forms of address that must be used. For example, we always had to say sir/ma’am because that was a sign of respecting authority. Also, a reporting statement was said with every remark or request, which is along the

lines of “Sir/ma’am trainee (last name) reports as ordered.....” The tone of voice must be loud enough for the instructor to hear otherwise they will yell at you until the statement is louder. Not to mention, we had to stand at the position of attention with our arms at our side when talking to an instructor. As far as interaction with each other, last names were the primary way to get another person’s attention. One thing I found to be interesting is that not all branches appreciate being called sir/ma’am. As an example, my wingman and I were coming back from a smoothie shop in our gym uniform when an Army sergeant approached us and asked, “Is it authorized in the Air Force to drink while walking in uniform?” Looking at each other in confusion my wingman and I responded by saying, “no sir” and as a result the sergeant said, “Don’t call me sir I actually work for a living.” Army sergeants don’t like being addressed as sir/ma’am, because that is for higher ranked individuals such as officers. I have learned that what one branch views as a sign of respect could translate to disrespect for another branch.

The basic training environment doesn't seem like a place for jokes or games, but that doesn't mean that those things never occurred. As I mentioned before, I lived with forty females for two months and since we were forced to tolerate each other there was a camaraderie that developed. As a result of this bond there was periodic joking that happened among many of the girls. For instance, the military instructors had their own way of calling marching commands and one girl in my flight was very good at imitating the instructors. When our military instructor wasn't around she would say “Flight march,” and swing her arms back and forth, which made us all laugh because of how spot on she was. Also, since we were fresh trainees, our marching abilities were far from outstanding. To elaborate, most of us focused on getting the movements so perfect that sometimes we ended up looking ridiculous. I recall laughing with the other girls about how some of our movements mimicked penguins waddling. Another opportunity to joke

and have fun was when we sang jodies during PT. A “jody” is a song or call that functions as a form of expression. An example of a jody is, “Everywhere we go people wanna know who we are, so we tell them, we’re not the Army, the ground poundin’ Army, we are the Air Force, the high flying Air Force.” Ultimately, there was always a time to be serious but it’s important to balance that out with some laughs.

The television industry and media thrive on sharing the moments when soldiers are forced to deal with embarrassing punishments and intense training methods. The rarely depicted reality of basic military training is what happens behind-the-scenes when your wingman needs a shoulder to cry on or a tissue from laughing to the point of crying. I can say from firsthand experience that my most enjoyable moments were being able to laugh with the other girls about the crazy days we all had. The funny experiences enabled us to get through eight weeks of constant yelling, bumping heads, failures as a team, etc. We needed that type of interaction in order to fight the homesick thoughts, fear of the unexpected day ahead, and embrace the courageous choice that we made by joining the military.

The conversation of service members in general seems to reveal a comradery that distinguishes it from other professions. For example, when you disagree with an employee you most likely don’t have to go home with that person; in the military you could be forced to lay in a cot next to that same person. There are no breaks or escapes from a problem, only the constant opportunity to get a job done regardless of any issue that comes up. To elaborate, a girl in my flight named Walker got in trouble for something but blamed another girl. We all knew that Walker was lying and as a punishment our instructor made us do push-ups until she confessed. There wasn’t an escape from the situation, because everyone was forced to deal with Walker’s

attitude on an hourly and daily basis. The interactions helped my group define ourselves by showing how we leaned on one another. *Our identity wasn't "I" it was "we."*

Of course, we all had our own personality and some were more outspoken than others. The assigned leader of the group was our dorm chief and we would be considered the followers. There was a chain that we all had to follow that started with the instructor giving an order to the dorm chief who would relay the message to us. There were some girls that had strong personalities and would make it known that they were there for themselves, not us. These girls had a habit of causing friction in the group. Consequently, the way that some of the girls treated each other led to constant bickering which then resulted in us all getting punished in the end.

Learning to become accustomed to a new life experience can be quite nerve-wracking. We tend to prefer comfort rather than change, which doesn't allow us to grow as a person. Along my journey, I've had adversities to overcome but I believe that those around me contributed to my success. All in all, the conversations that we have throughout life can open the door for meeting new people, sharing, and developing a sense of community that isn't always cherished in society.