

Ending basic training too abruptly caused problems. But Lackland-like discipline all through tech school didn't work either. These days, student airmen decompress by phases.

It Isn't Over 'Til It's Over

BY BRUCE D. CALLANDER

AS RECENTLY as seven years ago, an airman's basic military training (BMT) ended with graduation from Lackland AFB, Tex. When airmen reached technical training, there were no more military training instructors (MTIs) breathing down their necks, no more morning formations, no more marching to and from class, and no more soldiering.

In the early 1980s, the Air Force realized that too many airmen were taking the end of BMT as the signal to cut loose. The culture shock of moving from the supercharged discipline at Lackland to the campus-like atmosphere of tech school found many students unable to cope. Disciplinary problems mounted, and classroom work suffered.

In 1981, the joyride ended abruptly. The Air Force launched Project Right Start, which made tech training a continuation of BMT. The same strict rules that had applied at Lackland were enforced throughout the students' stay at tech school.

That didn't work either. "It was overkill," says MSgt. Gary Seep, NCOIC of the Military Training



After basic training, school is still not out. At tech school, there is still academic work and practical application. Above, A1C Damon Wheeler (standing) and AB Daniel Thomas study; at right, students and instructors of the 3755th Student Squadron, Sheppard AFB, Tex., work on an antenna.

—Photos by Paul Kennedy



Branch at Chanute AFB, Ill. "It put all students in the same category throughout their whole time here."

The short dose of additional BMT was fine for students in courses lasting only a few weeks. But most tech school courses last at least two months, and some cover the better part of a year. Keeping students under rigid discipline that long proved counterproductive.

Adjusting by Phases

In 1982, Right Start was replaced with the phased program in use today. Under the new approach, students are kept on a tight rein for their first two weeks. As the airmen progress, the rules are gradually eased so that by the time students of the longer courses are near graduation, they have most of the privileges of permanent party airmen.

In effect, the program at Chanute and other tech training centers amounts to a decompression chamber in which airmen can make a gradual transition from the closely supervised environment of Lackland to an Air Force that expects them to behave largely under self-discipline.

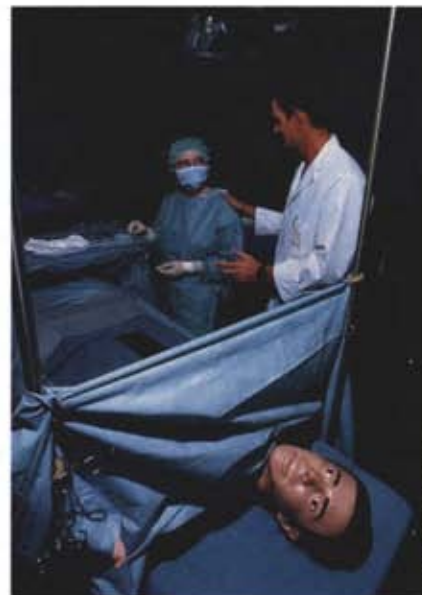
SSgt. Greg Holl is one of Chanute's more than fifty student training advisors (STAs), the tech school's approximate equivalents of Lackland's MTIs. Sergeant Holl outlined the phases of the current military training program.



The primary reason for technical training is to give students the particular skills they will need in their career field. Here Amn. Amy Blasingame (right) learns the procedure for counting white blood cells from her instructor, Sgt. Fred Matos, in the laboratory technician's course at Sheppard.

For their first fifteen days of tech training (Phase I), airmen are confined to the base. They must wear their uniforms whenever they are outside their dormitories and observe curfews and quiet hours. They must march to and from class and cannot drive or ride in private cars, drink alcoholic beverages, or use the open mess.

From the sixteenth day through the thirtieth (Phase II), students are still held to many of the Phase I rules, but are allowed more leeway



The ratio of students to technical training staff at tech school has fallen dramatically. This allows for individual training such as TSGT. Richard Clark (right) gives here to Amn. Cressa Doshorn (in surgical garb) in the surgical technician's course at Sheppard.



The four-phase approach to tech school training has been in place since 1982, and it has proved effective. Rules are gradually eased until the students have nearly the same privileges as permanent party airmen. These troops are marching back to the dorms, a routine that must be followed until they reach Phase IV.



If the program works as it should, tech school graduates reach the field with both the ability to take orders and the maturity and self-discipline to work responsibly when no one is around to give them orders. Here AB Dennis Fournier works on a tail rotor at the helicopter maintenance course at Sheppard.

on weekends. Then, they may go off base, drive cars, use the airmen's open mess, and drink alcohol, although not in the dormitory. They must still wear their uniforms whenever they are outside their dorms.

From the thirty-first day at Chanute until students have a total of six months' active service (Phase III), the more relaxed rules apply, not just on weekends but also during any off-duty hours. Students may wear civilian clothes when off duty, and married airmen may live off base with their spouses.

After six months of active service (Phase IV), students approach the degree of freedom they will enjoy at most bases. They still must stand roll calls and periodic inspections and remain in uniform during duty hours. They no longer have to march to and from classes, though, and they may use their private cars during duty hours. They are excused from all physical conditioning except for a monthly run of a mile and a half.

For Wayward Students

While the stepped-down rules give students progressively more freedom the longer they stay in school, there is a catch for those whose behavior or performance slips. The student squadron commander can set a wayward student back one or more phases—or all the way back to Phase I.

Students who have not reached Phase IV take three physical-conditioning sessions per week, each including a twenty-minute run and five other exercises. The average airman also participates in at least one parade and two retreat ceremonies during the stay at Chanute.

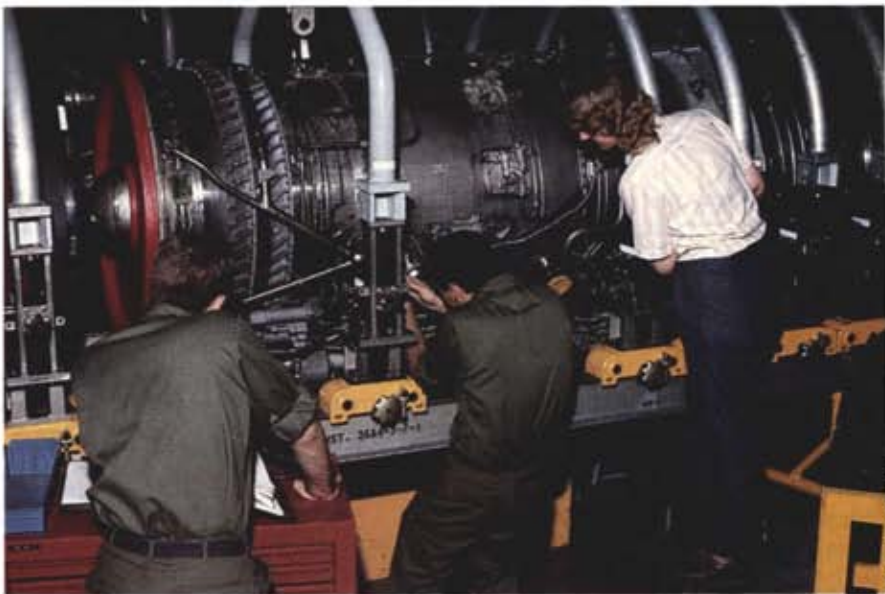
Still, the students' primary reason for being at the base is to learn technical skills, and the bulk of their time is spent in classes. "Keep in mind," says Sergeant Seep, "that the student is outside our control for

six to eight hours a day. We have to pack in supervisory management of that troop after that training time."

Sergeant Seep is pleased that the ratio of students to STAs has fallen to about fifty to one. In past years, it was as high as eighty or 100 to one. Even with the luxury of a smaller ratio, the sergeant says, the kind of close personal supervision a Lackland MTI can exert is impossible at Chanute. "An STA spends about ten percent of his time with ninety percent of the troops, the ones who never do anything wrong," says Sergeant Seep. "We spend ninety percent of our time with ten percent of the troops, the ones who have problems."

The gap is filled, at least partially, by the technical training staff. About eighty percent of Chanute's technical instructors are NCOs. Most civilian instructors are former Air Force members. While their primary mission is to teach in the classroom, instructors also play the role of military supervisors. The STAs provide more formal military training, and the instructors stress the need for on-the-job discipline.

If it all comes together as intended, Sergeant Seep says, tech school graduates should reach the field not just with the ability to take orders, but with the maturity and self-discipline to work responsibly when there is nobody around to give orders. ■



—Photo by Don Smith

Many tech school instructors are ex-Air Force civilians who bring a wealth of experience and know-how to the courses they teach. The instructors stress the need for on-the-job discipline. These students are working on an F100 engine at the "four-level" jet engine repair course at Chanute AFB, Ill.