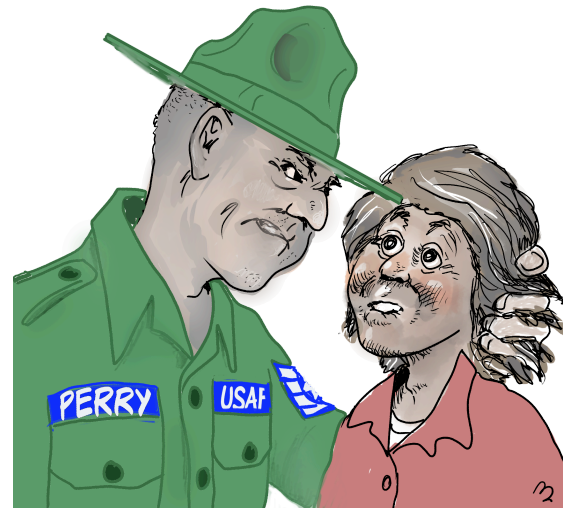


SIR! YES! SIR!

1968. Hot, 5 AM buses from San Antonio Airport delivered us half-asleep recruits to Lackland AFB. Long hairs from New York, Boston and LA, shorter cuts from the South and Midwest. We were met by big men in starched, pressed fatigues yelling, "#&!@%)(!, Line up!" After a quick welcome and introduction to our Training Instructors, we were ordered to yell our names. "Can't hear you little bunnies!"

"Whenever you address a TI, you'll begin with 'SIR!' and finish with 'SIR!' Do you understand?" Our mumbled replies were met with a roar, "@%)#&!(!, WHAT?! You say 'SIR! YES SIR!'" Most got it. But one airman, three positions down, still didn't. "Step forward. What's your name, Airman?" "Popenheimer." Nose to nose, the sergeant bellowed, "'SIR! POPENHEIMER, 'SIR! NOW, STEP BACK.'" Birds resting in nearby trees took flight. I think I smiled? Unwise.

So then it was my turn, nose to nose. "Am I bothering you, Airman?" "SIR! NO SIR!" He grabbed my longish, uncombed hair. "Why not, Airman?" I took a deep thoughtful breath. With three fellow TIs now watching, I replied, "SIR, I worked in a mental hospital. SIR!" He smiled. They all smiled. "Step back, Airman."



That predawn morning in Texas, I discovered the Air Force had a sense of humor, and my next four years had just begun.