Reflection: Air Force ROTC's odd start

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A look through *The Lumberjack*'s microform archive in the Cline Library tells a bizarre story of the genesis of the Air Force ROTC (AFROTC) Detachment on the NAU campus.

As it turns out, NAU's AFROTC program may have started out as a strange error.

During January of 1972, NAU came into the national spotlight for getting an AFROTC program, which was still relatively new. NAU was among the first 10 schools in the nation to get such a program on campus.

However, it was an honor NAU had not dreamed of — or applied for.

The first time then-NAU President J. Lawrence Walkup, who lent his name to the Skydome, heard of the approval was when Senator Paul Fannin called to congratulate him on the program.

The closest Walkup had come to applying for the AFROTC program was receiving a blank application on his desk a week before the announcement. No one ever filled it out.

Both Walkup and the Unites States Air Force (USAF) were baffled by the fact NAU had received an AFROTC program without applying for one.

USAF Colonel Shaugnessy with the Pentagon could not figure out how this had happened.

"I would assume that the university initiated the procedure," Shaugnessy said. "The Air Force does not usually come in with a program and say, 'Here it is.'"

ASNAU immediately issued a statement that there was no evidence for student support of such a program.

After recovering from the surprise, Walkup kicked things into high gear, forming five committees to evaluate student interest. He also called a plebiscite — a direct vote by the student body — on the issue and a meeting of the Arizona Board of Regents(ABOR) to decide what to do.

The student vote was held on March 13, 1972. Students voted overwhelmingly in favor of the program. Of the studentry, 72 percent said NAU should go ahead with the program. The portions broke down slightly differently by gender, with 69.6 percent of male students in favor of the program and 76. percent of the female population supporting it. One of the key selling points was the program was voluntary.

A week later, on March 19, ABOR approved the program.

According to NAU's first AFROTC commander, Colonel S. G. Renner, the late approval gave AFROTC a rough start.

"We had a slow start this year, since we did not know whether the program would be accepted," Col. Renner had said in 1972.

In the first year, 32 NAU students became Air Force cadets.

One of the program's early milestones was the commissioning of the first two female cadets. Vicki Lott and Lucy Durham were freshman-year friends and the first NAU women to join the AFROTC. Lott was an alumna of the Civil Air Patrol, a civilian auxillary to the Air Force, and Durham came from an aviation family. Durham's father had served in the Royal Canadian Air Force as a pilot, and the ex-Canadian cadet had only achieved her

American citizenship the summer before. Her older brother used his newfound American citizenship to join the USAF as a pilot, as well. AFROTC had allowed female cadets since 1969, but these two women were NAU's first cadets in 1973.

Durham, then a freshman anthropology major, was quoted as saying she was "hooked on flying" after a ridealong with her mother, a civilian pilot. "I want to be a woman pilot," Durham said. "I don't care what I fly."

NAU's AFROTC rapidly gained popularity on campus, and Renner characterized the first year positively.

"Faculty and student relationships have been outstanding," Renner said.

The organization continues to prosper on campus today with 135 cadets. Continuing Durham and Lott's legacy, 35 percent of the cadets are female. Additionally, NAU's AFROTC still enjoys a cherished place on campus, according to Lt. Col. Brandon Doan, NAU's current AFROTC commander:

"We get the occasional negative comment from random individuals, but overall the current feeling of the campus towards AFROTC is overwhelmingly positive," Doan said. "Our cadets are proud to wear their AFROTC uniforms to class and other events and are well-received by students and faculty."

Most importantly, cadets said they see the program as a vital means of creating their careers, especially in the area of leadership. One such cadet is junior business administration major Ryan Dufour, who is also a cadet captain.

"The main task given to the upperclassmen in AFROTC is to train and instruct the underclassmen, so this gives me a chance to work on my leadership skills before I commission and begin leading airmen" Dufour said.

Since its bizarre beginning, AFROTC has continued to thrive on the NAU campus. It paved the way for the Army's ROTC program in 1982, as well as decades of turning student cadets into capable officers.

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