

Rudder's Rangers Company History... So Far

There is much history surrounding Rudder's Rangers and its forty plus years of existence. Some is fact, some is exaggeration, and some is mere fiction. The reason why nobody knows for sure everything about Rudder's Rangers is because there has never been a systematic attempt, until now, to capture its rich and vibrant history.

Rudder's Rangers was originally founded in either 1968 or 1970 as the "Texas A&M Ranger Company" by members of company F-2. Its original purpose was to serve as an opposing force (OPFOR) unit for Texas A&M Army ROTC. There are also rumors floating about that it was originally founded as a protest to the Vietnam War but these have not been confirmed.

Over time though, the Texas A&M Ranger Company took on the additional mission of training cadets to attend Ranger School in-between their sophomore and junior years in lieu of the Leader Development and Assessment Course or LDAC. Back then, select cadets (as determined by a national order of merit list) could attend Ranger School and, assuming they passed, would earn the highest score possible at LDAC (a "5" at the time, but later an "E"). Texas A&M Ranger Company cadets were often selected to attend and excelled at Ranger School. Perhaps some of the reason to this was that, prior to leaving for Ranger School, cadets were instructed to sign transfer papers to Texas A&M Prairie View. They were told that, if they failed, not to worry because their transfer papers would be waiting for them once they got back!

However, not all was bliss for the Texas A&M Ranger Company. Legend has it that out on a ruck march one day, a cadet collapsed and died of heat stroke. The corresponding investigation into the incident resulted in the disbanding of the Texas A&M Ranger Company. It is not known when exactly the company was disbanded or when it was reinstated. However, what is known is that it was re-instated under its new name as the Rudder's Rangers Company prior to the fish class of 1981 coming to Texas A&M in the fall of 1977. The reason why this is known is that Colonel Samuel R. Hawes '81, company A-1 and the Rudder's Rangers XO his senior year, participated in Rudder's Rangers all four years of his cadet career.

From the time that Rudder's Rangers was reinstated it continued in its missions of providing OPFOR for Texas A&M Army ROTC and sending cadets to Ranger School. In 1987 though, the Army declared that cadets would no longer be allowed to attend Ranger School, Cadets Eric Lane and Blaine Reeves are believed to be the last members of Rudder's to earn their tabs before the switch. The changes to Ranger School did not deter the Company though. Rudder's maintained its mission as many of its cadets would still be attending Ranger School once they commissioned into the Army.

Moving into the 1990's, we know from a memorandum written to the Professor of Military Science by a Rudder's Rangers Company Commander that Rudder's was a decent sized company consisting of a few dozen "walkers"/ brownshirts and a handful of supporting cadre. The positions in the staff and cadre were the commander (CO), the executive officer (XO), the operations officer (S3), the supply officer (S4), the training officer, and the first sergeant. The Rudder's Rangers Company Command and Staff would recruit program veterans and upperclassman cadets with experience in Rudder's to assist as instructors and observer/controllers (termed "walkers") as needed for training events. Finally, the commander noted in the memo a short history of Ranger Challenge and its relationship with Rudder's Rangers. Both organizations shared advisors and cadet cadre during the 1990's and often times trained together.

Rudder's Rangers cadets did, and still do, make up the majority of the cadets who participate in Ranger Challenge and normally hold dual leadership positions with one being in Ranger Challenge and the other being in Rudder's Rangers.

Throughout the 1990's, Rudder's Rangers Company continued its mission of providing combat-oriented leadership training for all cadets interested. The US Army's *Field Manual (FM) 7-8 Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad Tactics* and the much revered *Ranger Handbook* provided the vehicle for training cadets on small unit leadership in challenging environments. In fact, Rudder Rangers developed its own training handbook in 1995 called the *Rudder's Rangers Training Manual* based on both of these field manuals, but specific to Texas A&M Rudder's Rangers cadets. Though cadets were no longer attending the US Army Ranger School, many of the Rudder's Rangers members went on to attend Ranger and other challenging military schools, such as Airborne, Air Assault, Pathfinder, and Long Range Reconnaissance Leaders Courses as Army officers; many also went on to serve as leaders in Special Operations units. Rudder's Rangers continued to provide a solid foundation in aggressive, competent small unit leadership that would serve its members greatly in their military service and beyond.

Rudder's Rangers training during the 1990's included daily physical training sessions, weekly training "labs" in which cadets studied and practiced small unit tactics (in the classroom, at Spence Park and/or in vicinity of Easterwood Field), and larger scale field training exercises (FTXs), ranging from weekends at Easterwood Field or Camp Swift in Bastrop, Texas, to one to two week training exercises at Fort Hood. Larger exercises would attract about one hundred cadets organized into two to three platoons with three squads each. During this period, training was focused on mastering basic soldiering skills (The Big 5: Shoot, Move, Communicate, First Aid, and Mission Planning) and patrolling (reconnaissance, ambushes, and raids), on top of practical combat oriented physical fitness. Rudder's Rangers Company enjoyed very professional support from its military advisors including MAJ Larkin O'Hern, CPT Stacy Overby, MSG Mike Michelson, SFC Robert Conklin, and SSG Cedric Busby to name a few during this time period. Former Rudder's Rangers and Ranger Challenge cadre who were in their "fifth years" or had time during their new Army careers also advised the Company during much of its training. Last but not least, Dr. Ed Liles, Aggie Class of 1961 played a major role in recruiting and mentoring many of the Rudder's Rangers and Ranger Challenge members throughout the 1990's and beyond.

Dr. Ed Liles was an educator and mentor to so many in the Aggie Ranger Program. Ed's desire was to ensure success and to provide the guidance and direction necessary to get future applicants into Texas A&M and to assist, coach, and mentor them to remain and graduate from this elite institution. It's impossible to put a number on how many students Dr. Liles helped fulfill their dreams in graduating from Texas A & M University. Ed's pursuit to serve others was overwhelming as he focused on how he could not only help the individual be successful but his desire to serve himself in the Military. Ed was never afforded the opportunity based on a handicap, so he cultivated those that were capable of serving this greater purpose beyond themselves. He did that by mentoring and providing guidance to those associated with the Rudder's Ranger Company and Ranger Challenge programs. He started this endeavor after retiring from teaching in San Antonio and moved to College Station in late 1990. He was focused on supporting future military leaders in pursuing their dreams of duty and country and he was most comfortable mentoring those future military officers in achieving their personal ambitions. Ed lived and was comfortable working in the trenches with each young future leader and understood what was required to get that individual to the next level.

Dr. Ed Liles remained steadfast in his untiring efforts to coach and mentor young leaders as a transformational educator, helping cadets realize their individual strengths and overcome their weaknesses to realize their full potential, while also setting the example for drive and motivation. Ed often voiced how proud he was to be accepted as part of the Texas A&M Ranger program and how he was the happiest seeing future leaders successfully navigate life's journey. Ed's passion and effort for Texas A&M, Rudder's Rangers Company, and Ranger Challenge exemplified the Texas A&M Spirit. His inspiration and significance to so many in the Texas A&M Ranger programs was signified in the fact that the Rudder's Rangers Company guidon from 1995 was laid to rest with Ed in San Antonio, Texas on March 30, 2013.

Beyond its small unit leadership training, Rudder's Ranger Company also served as Texas A&M University's unofficial liaison to "The First Lady of Texas A&M," Mrs. Margaret Rudder, wife of General James Earl Rudder who led the 2nd Ranger Battalion up the cliffs of Point de Hoc in Normandy during D-Day in World War II and went on to become the well know President of Texas A&M University. As the Eagle reported on her death in March, 2004, Mrs. Rudder "was a part of the support system for the university and everything she did, 24 hours a day, was built around her love of this university," said Dr. Ray Bowen, a friend of Margaret Rudder's who served as Texas A&M University President from 1994 to 2002. "She was deeply a part of the A&M family" and her institutional knowledge and the way she seemed to know almost everyone on campus was always an asset. Rudder's Rangers Company enjoyed a close relationship with Mrs. Rudder who was always quick with an inspirational story for the young cadets. Mrs. Rudder's close relationship with the World War II Ranger Battalions also greatly benefited Rudder's Rangers cadets who she invited to share time with as a link to historical Rangers. Mrs. Rudder organized an annual "Ranger Rendezvous" weekend in College Station each April and Rudder's Rangers cadets had the privilege of meeting, dining, and socializing with Ranger veterans. Rudder's Rangers cadets also had the opportunity of not only connecting with World War II Rangers through Mrs. Rudder, but were also honored to provide color guard duties for the 50th Anniversary of D-Day at Texas A&M and at General Rudder's grave site in College Station, and for the dedication of the James Earl Rudder statue on campus. Rudder's Rangers members also provided escorts on several occasions for Mrs. Rudder during Military Balls and Rudder commemoration events across Texas. Mrs. Margaret Rudder was an inspiration for Rudder's Rangers Company, not only providing a link to our heritage as Aggies and future Army Rangers, but also providing a loving friend who was always sharing life experiences and wise counsel.

Moving into the new millennium, Rudder's Rangers grew but seemed to stay between sixty and one-hundred cadets. With the growth came a new task organization. Rudder's Rangers was now split into two platoons with four squads each. Brownshirts rotated out team leader positions and sophomore pin-heads filled the ranks of squad leaders. The Guidon, a sophomore, sometimes held a position as squad leader but not always. Juniors held the positions of platoon sergeant, first sergeant, platoon leader, staff assistant, and principle staffer. Seniors held the positions of commander, executive officer, and also principle staff. As for the organization of the staff, usually all positions S-1 to S-4 (personnel, intelligence / OPFOR, operations, supply) were filled with seniors but could be filled with juniors if there were not enough seniors to go around.

It also seems that, by this time, the training schedule had solidified into PT in the mornings (although in at least one year it was held also in the afternoon) with a class on Monday evenings and a lab on

Tuesday afternoons. The PT schedule was always dictated by the Corps of Cadets latest policy on when PT was held. Some years it was all five days a week in the morning, and others it was only on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. PT's dependency on the Corps is the only constant of the PT schedule throughout the years – with the exception of the weekly ruck march.

As was stated before, Rudder's Rangers maintained its mission of preparing cadets for Ranger school well after cadets were no longer able to attend it. However, in the Fall of 2006 the Rudder's Rangers commander, Seth Urbanek '07, officially changed the mission statement to be to prepare cadets for LDAC. While this may seem like a significant shift in policy, it was in actuality only official recognition of what was actually being practiced. With Ranger School gone as an option for cadets to attend, Rudder's Rangers leadership often focused training efforts on preparing for the first major test of leadership many cadets would experience – LDAC. However, what was a major shift in policy was that, at the end of the 2006-2007 school year, Rudder's Rangers changed its task organization. Originally the brainchild of the then advisor Captain Kalaher and Rudder's CO Seth Urbanek '07, the a new task organization was picked up by the incoming commander Travis Reese '08 that would better prepare cadets for LDAC and, simultaneously, get higher levels of involvement from the seniors in Rudder's.

This new task organization introduced the team leader position as a sophomore level “pinhead” only position, made squad leader a junior level position, and made platoon leader a senior level position. First of all, it was reasoned that by making juniors squad leaders that they would be better prepared for LDAC since they would be getting critical squad leader experience immediately prior to their going to LDAC. Secondly, it was recognized that many sophomore level squad leaders had a hard time moving from only being responsible for themselves to being given total control of between eight and fourteen (often higher than that at the beginning of the year!) brownshirts with almost nobody to assist. These two changes changed the dynamics of Rudder's Rangers squads in that now you had a higher level (Corps of Cadets wise) cadet in charge of the entire squad who could also serve as a close-at-hand mentor for his new sophomore team leaders who now had a more sizeable bite to chew on. And finally, by making seniors platoon leaders instead of juniors, the number of senior cadets in leadership positions was increased from two to four – thus giving highly motivated seniors more opportunities in Rudder's to lead and decreasing the work-load of the commander who, before, had to pay a lot more attention to his younger, more inexperienced, junior platoon leaders.

Moving into the 2007-2008 school year, more changes were made to Rudder's Rangers. “Squad PT,” where squad leaders and their team leaders led each squad in PT with a single staff member or senior cadre member attaching to the squad to ensure workout quality, was introduced. In addition, the weekly ruck march was changed to an individual event with a single pace man in the back going at a fifteen minute pace. Other than that, brownshirts and pins alike were briefed on the route and then released to complete it.

Finally, there was the 2008-2009 school year where a number of changes were made. To begin, platoon leaders were given complete control of their platoons training schedule with only a set of skills to train as their only requirement. Their mission was to train their platoons to the best of their ability with the end states of them being ready to go at both the Winter FTX and Best Ranger Competition. In addition, ruck marches were changed back to company level events but with the caveat that the practice of running was eliminated entirely (although a 14'30" pace was still maintained). Probably the biggest change though was the Rudder's Rangers was officially attached to the Warrior Training Battalion (Texas A&M Army ROTC) with the original idea that it would help develop the seniors on the WTB staff by giving them a hand in the planning process of Rudder's Rangers training events. With this new task

organization came the addition changes of Rudder's Rangers cadets conducting PT as a unit during Army PT on Tuesdays and Thursdays, weekly in-process-review briefs between the Rudder's Rangers Staff and the WTB Staff, combined FTX's where WTB and Rudder's Rangers conducted training simultaneously or supported the others training event, and a host of other smaller changes.

In addition, the Winter FTX location was changed from the traditional Ft. Hood location to Camp Swift. However, the 2009 Winter FTX will always be remembered for the tragedy that befell it. The initial deployment phase of the 2009 Winter FTX called for five black-hawk helicopters to shuttle 164 cadets to Blackwell Drop Zone at Camp swift. In the process the Blackhawk helicopters would have to make multiple trips to and from the campus, with a refueling stop after every second trip. As a safety consideration, each Black- hawk had a designated "flyboy." These flyboys were recently commissioned Second Lieutenants, temporarily assigned to Texas A&M Army ROTC as recruiters and cadre until they moved onto BOLC II, who would stay onboard their designated Blackhawk all day until everyone was deployed to Camp Swift. In the process they were charged with ensuring all safety / discipline of the cadets and distributing K-pots to the cadets before they got onto the helicopter and then collecting them again once they got off for use by the next group.

Just prior to 1500 hours on Monday, January 12th, 2009, with 72 cadets already deployed to Camp Swift and the remainder waiting on Duncan field, one of the Blackhawk helicopters slowly lifted up off of Duncan field. The Blackhawk reached an altitude of approximately 100 feet when suddenly the tail-rotor locked-up and froze in place. The helicopter immediately went into a tailspin. Fighting to regain control of the stricken aircraft, 1LT Ellis Taylor saw that he was in a dangerous predicament and could potentially spin into the dozens of cadets arrayed below on the field. As the pilot, 1LT Taylor made the decision to cut the power to the main rotor in order to bring the bird down where it could do the least damage – in the center of Duncan field. As cadets and bystanders fled for their lives, to the safety of a rear-slope near the across the street in front of the Texas A&M President's house, the Blackhawk suddenly dropped from the sky with a spectacular crash smack-dab in the middle of Duncan field. Deadly shrapnel whizzed through the air, flying past cadets faces as they ran for cover and littering debris for hundreds of meters in all directions. One cadet was hit in his camelback by a piece of rotor blade but he was luckily uninjured.

What happened next typified the Aggie Spirit as cadets, cadre, and bystanders, without regard for their own safety as the downed helicopter could have exploded any second, rushed to aid of those still trapped inside of the Blackhawk. Emergency crews were on the scene quickly and by 1530 all the men onboard had been evacuated.

News came later that evening though that, to the horror of all, the "flyboy" for that bird, a December 2008 graduate and commissionee from Company D-1, 2LT Zachary Cook, had died. The remainder of the crew, were seriously injured and in critical condition. However, the tragedy was not over and on Thursday, January 15th, 2009 SGT Charles Mitts succumbed to his wounds. The remainder of the crew survived.

The crash marked the end of the training exercise and cadets were bussed back on the morning of the 13th to rejoin those who never left the campus. Not to let tragedy ruin the entire training event though, the decision was made that it would be best to carry on with the training exercise. On the 14th the Rangers moved out to Brayton to conduct training with Airsoft guns. The training was fast, furious, and valuable, although the victims of the crash were still on everyone's mind.

After the conclusion of the Winter FTX, Rudder's Rangers continued on with its year and experienced great success. Forty new pins joined the ranks of those who have earned the coveted Rudder's Rangers Pin, and a new chain-of-command took over the reins of Rudder's Rangers. What contribution to Rudder's Rangers long and proud history this next chain of command will make has yet to be seen.

The Company took a hit in 2011 when the vision and purpose of Rudder's started to warp. The focus of the pin and BRC was how much of a "meathead" you were, rather than skills and knowledge. Smaller pin classes began to form, and pin protectors started to emerge. The PMS made it a point to cancel BRC in 2013 because of this. As a result, Rudder's had no choice but to adapt. There were two likely routes: Rudder's could follow through with a better structure, or Rudder's could be dissolved like the Aggie Pathfinders. The Commander and First Sergeant at the time, Christopher Kostoff and Zack McClellan quickly adapted and made Rudder's Tactics and Leadership Course (RTLTC). The purpose was to bring back the tactical focus that Rudder's once had.

The following year, Zack McClellan (the 2013-2014 commander) structured the whole year to adapt this new purpose. As a result, sophomore level leadership was able to step into the rolls of platoon leaders and platoon sergeants and easily take command. The brownshirts were able to do the same thing with TL and SL positions. The following year, under the guidance of a new PMS and Rudder's advisor, BRC continued.

This was essentially a new beginning for the Company. With the threat of being dissolved over, selections for leadership became increasingly more stringent. The Rudder's Advisor, MAJ Grant Speakes '04, made sure in ensuring the success of the organization through the emphasis of bringing back older methods that were lost in time and transition. Rudder's was growing back into the premier leadership organization within the Corps. A major point for this was the fact that over 15 people got selected to be outfit first sergeants, commanders, and other key leadership positions to include band drum majors, the deputy corps commander, and the Warrior Training Battalion Commander.

As LDAC became rebranded as Cadet Leaders Course (CLC), the purpose of Rudder's was changed back to its original purpose of preparing Cadets for Ranger School, as CLC was no longer a key factor in accessions as LDAC was. Ranger slots are still currently unavailable for Cadets, however, renewed interest in the future might make it a possibility again. With that, being able to prepare Cadets for Ranger School became the number one priority again.