

# At West Point, Annual Pillow Fight Becomes Weaponized

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By DAVE PHILIPPS

For generations, freshmen cadets at the [United States Military Academy](#) have marked the end of a grueling summer of training with a huge nighttime pillow fight that is billed as a harmless way to blow off steam and build class spirit.

But this year the fight on the West Point, N.Y., campus turned bloody as some cadets swung pillowcases packed with hard objects, thought to be helmets, that split lips, broke at least one bone, dislocated shoulders and knocked cadets unconscious. The brawl at the publicly funded academy, where many of the Army's top leaders are trained, left 30 cadets injured, including 24 with concussions, according to West Point.

In interviews, cadets who asked that their names not be used for fear of repercussions in West Point's strictly controlled culture, said the fight had left one cadet with a broken leg and dislocated shoulders in others. One cadet was knocked unconscious and taken away in an ambulance and had not returned to school, they said. But a spokesman for the academy, Lt. Col. Christopher Kasker, said all cadets had returned to duty.

Though talk about the brawl on Aug. 20 had circulated on social media, West Point did not confirm it to The New York Times until Thursday.

Colonel Kasker said the annual fight is organized by first-year students as a way to build camaraderie after the summer program that prepares them for the rigors of plebe year.

Upperclassmen overseeing freshmen "allowed the spirit activity to occur out of the desire to enhance the spirit of the class," Colonel Kasker said, adding that those upperclassmen took "mitigating measures" to prevent injury, including requiring cadets to wear helmets.

But video shows that many of the cadets did not wear helmets. Cadets said that in at least a few cases helmets became weapons stuffed into pillowcases.

"West Point applauds the cadets' desire to build esprit and regrets the injuries to our cadets," Colonel Kasker said. "We are conducting appropriate investigations into the causes of the injuries."

So far no cadets have been punished, and the academy has no plans to end the annual tradition. Colonel Kasker said commanders were not available for comment on Friday.

Video of the fight posted online showed crowds of cadets, some wearing body armor as well as helmets, surging together in a central quad, their yells echoing off the stone walls of the surrounding barracks.

As the first-year cadets collided into a boil of white pillows, pummeling one another in the fading light, Army-issued glow sticks flew through the air and an impromptu cavalry of riders in laundry carts dashed in, cushions swinging. At one point, a smoke grenade appeared to go off.

Photos posted later on Twitter show plebes, as freshmen are called, with bloody faces and bloody pillows, and at least one person being loaded into an ambulance.

"My plebe was knocked unconscious and immediately began fighting when he came to," an unnamed upperclassman, who was apparently observing from the sidelines, wrote on the social media forum Yik Yak. "I was so proud I could cry."

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As the battle continued, cadets clustered around at least two classmates who had fallen, apparently unable to get up. Others stumbled to a medical area set up beside the fracas.

“4 concussions, 1 broken leg, 2 broken arms, 1 dislocated shoulder, and several broken ribs. That’s one hell of a pillow fight. #USMA19,” [one freshman posted on Twitter](#), echoing many who seemed to see the injuries as a point of pride.

As the scope of injuries became clear, cadets said in interviews, West Point staff members went door to door in the barracks giving quick concussion checks.

In interviews, cadets said they saw the fight as a chance to have fun after seven weeks of basic training in which they were not supposed to speak to one another. It was also a chance to show grit.

“If you don’t come back with a bloody nose,” a male first-year cadet said his upperclassman commander told him, “you didn’t try hard enough.”

West Point pillow fights have existed since at least 1897, according to testimony in a 1901 congressional inquiry on hazing at the school, but there have been no other reports over the decades of injury until recently.

In 2012, a cadet put a lockbox in a pillowcase, injuring others, and in response, the 2013 fight was canceled, cadets said.

Similar violence has occurred at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs during ceremonial warfare traditions in recent years.

During the first winter storm of the year, Air Force freshmen try to throw their cadet leaders into the snow. But in 2012 the snowball fight turned into a brawl, and 27 cadets were treated for concussions, cuts, broken bones and a bite wound.

The Air Force did not punish any cadets at the time, choosing to treat the episode as what a spokesman called “a teachable moment.”

West Point cadets had mixed reactions to the injuries this year. Some saw them as a rite of passage in a school known for being tough; others saw a lack of judgment and restraint.

“At first the body count, people were joking about it,” a female first-year cadet said. “My friends were really excited. And right after, when we learned how many people had gotten hurt, everyone felt totally hard-core. I know it looks weird from the outside, but it really bonds us.”

But when she saw a male cadet being loaded into an ambulance outside her dorm room, she began to have second thoughts.

“If you are an officer, you are supposed to make good decisions and follow the rules. You are supposed to mediate when everyone wants to go out and kill everyone,” she said. “The goal was to have fun, and it ended up some guys just chose to hurt people.”