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Airman Basic Paige Renee Villers, USAF, courage, honor, a patriot

Airman Villers served her Air Force at only one air base, Lackland AFB in San Antonio. She served most of her tour of duty as a trainee at Basic Military Training. She died shortly after graduation at Lackland. In the interim, she completed the requirements to graduate, she fought at death's door with an uncommon strain of a common virus for week after week, she mustered the awe and respect of some of this world's finest medical technicians, nurses and doctors, and of her training instructors and wing commander. America lost a courageous and dedicated patriot when God took Airman Paige Renee Villers. That such patriots rise up from babies to adults and serve our military is one of the great strengths of this nation.

By Ed Marek, editor

September 7, 2008

Airman Paige Renee Villers died at 12:39 pm, Tuesday, August 7, 2007 at Wilford Hall Medical Center, Lackland AFB, San Antonio, Texas, about 45 minutes after the doctors there removed her from a ventilator. I did not know her story until a few days ago, when I read, "[The meaning of being a first-term Airman.](#)" by Airman Deborah Young, USAF, 366th Fighter Wing Public Affairs, Mountain Home AFB, Idaho.



Her story is a most gripping one. I commend Airman Young's story and one written by Louis A. Arana-Barradas to your attention. Arana-Barradas' story is "[Michelle's yellow rose: deadly virus doesn't end Airman Paige Villers' quest for honor.](#)" published by the *Airman Magazine*.

Villers died shortly after completing USAF Basic Military Training (BMT). She became seriously ill during her training,

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and started to recover. recovering but still very ill, she graduated successfully from BMT at the rank of Airman Basic, and received the Air Force Achievement Medal, unusual for a person who has only been through BMT.

It is here where her story is captivating. It is not often that a BMT trainee at the lowest rank of Airman Basic displays the kind of heroism and reflects the level of duty, honor, country that was demonstrated by Airman Villers.

One from the staff at Wilford Hall commented this way:

"She rallied the way that only a young, strong body can. She was able to graduate from basic military training like so many other newest Airmen. We were so proud of her. Even though it was her achievement, we felt that somehow her honor reflected on us."

I want to give you at least a brief introduction to Air Force BMT. This will help you better appreciate what a fighter this airman was.



Lackland AFB has trained over 7 million recruits since it opened for business in a newly forming Air Force in 1946. USAF BMT inaugurated some of its most far reaching changes in November 2005, when the USAF said it wanted a new kind of airman, "Warrior First." The warrior mind set was to cross every specialty in an Air Force that would become an Air Expeditionary Force. BMT was revised and updated to build this mind set. When Villers attended, BMT was 6.5 weeks. Starting November 2008 it will be 8.5 weeks. Some thirty-five thousand men and women go through USAF BMT every year. They then go on to technical training, and then to their first operational duty assignment.

The Air Force tells a recruit and his or her family right off the bat that the recruit is not going to college or school. Instead, the

recruit is going "a regimented, restrictive, physically demanding, stressful Military training environment." There's no need to get the old man to help upload a SUV with trailer with junk to take to university. Instead, recruits are told one piece of luggage, two complete sets of civilian clothes, shoes will be closed-toe. They are not to bring any pornography, tobacco products of any kind, food, candy, magazines, books, radios, or CD players. They are to bring an account number-bank routing number for automatic deposits of pay, and they must bring medications and prescription eyewear. They are then told to bring a list of "this and thats."

Recruits are urged to arrive at BMT in physical shape. out-of-shape fat-racks will find the slog extraordinarily hard. Prior to arrival, men are urged to run 1.5 miles in no more than 13:15 minutes, be able to do at least 34 push-ups, and 38 sit-ups; women 1.5 miles in no more than 16:01 minutes, 21 push-ups and 38 sit-ups. They are told they should meet these minimum requirements if they expect to meet the graduation standards.



Motivational speaking at USAF BMT. **Photo credit:** TSgt. Ken Williams, USAF

Training begins on arrival. The Air Force issues them a Training Instructor, the TI, to many recruits, the dreaded TI. They get their TI and squadron assignment in arrival. They also get a free haircut on arrival. All recruits will arrive at BMT with their hair in its natural color. They are issued clothing and equipment and a M-16 rifle. They learn how to report, how to care for their dorm, and how to handle and maintain their weapons.

Trainees are required to mail home certain USAF provided training information. Calls home are allowed during a brief break in week one, but it will be short, so families are to be told to have the recording machine on. Trainees will have no access to the internet. They cannot receive incoming calls and cannot receive any packages.



War fighter training begins on day one. Weapons training begins on day one. This is serious business.



Flight 603 on 1.5 mile run. Presented by [Waldy at Picasa](#).

Basic training is a mixture of classroom, dormitory maintenance, drill, weapons training, and physical conditioning.



Basic trainees crawl through muddy obstacles as they attempt to navigate the combat tactics course at Warrior Week's training ground, Lackland AFB. **Photo credit:** MSgt. Efrain Gonzales, USAF

Warrior Week in a simulated forward operating air base in a combat zone is conducted during week 5. Physically, women are expected to run 1.5 miles in less than 14 minutes 21 seconds, do 46 sit-ups in two minutes, 27 pushups in two minutes, and successfully complete all obstacle courses.



Successful completion of Warrior Week earns the trainee the Airman's Coin, presented just prior to graduation at the end of week 6. On the front of the coin is an eagle clawing its way out of the coin with the reminders that this Air Force is the world's best, that its business is Aerospace Power, and that men and women receive this coin only when they become an airman. On the reverse, "Hap Arnold" star flanked by a pair of wings recalling the roots grown by the historic Army Air Corps and a reminder that the USAF was officially formed in 1947. Then, perhaps the most important parts of the coin:

"Integrity first. Service before self. Excellence in all we do."



Brigadier General Everett Thomas, Vice-Commander, United States Air Force Warfare Center, Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., administers the oath of enlistment to future airmen currently in the delayed enlisted program, at Sam Boyd Stadium Las Vegas, Nev., March 29, 2008. **Photo credit:** Senior Airman Larry E. Reid Jr., USAF.

Federal law requires each recruit to take the Oath of Enlistment. The Air Force, like the other services, requires this to be done twice. It is my understand that in the USAF, the recruits sign the oath and take it verbally on their assigned departure date to Lackland. It is at this point they have the chance to review their enlistment papers, their physical testing results, and, I believe, have the chance to bail out. Once they take and sign the oath, that's it, off to Lackland they go as Air Force property. They take the oath a second time at graduation, which is when they are sworn into the active-duty Air Force during a special enlistment ceremony attended by family and friends.

Trainee Villers, like every other trainee, took this oath:

"I, Paige Renee Villers, do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God."

This is a huge step for a young person to take. Some might take it lightly. If so, they will soon learn how wrong a decision that was. Most take it very seriously. Airman Villers did to be sure.



[Norton High School](#), "Panthers," Norton, Ohio.

Paige Villers was born on November 3, 1988. I believe in Dallas, Texas. She graduated from Norton High School, Ohio, in June 2005, age 17. Norton is south of Akron. As an aside, I noted a standout phrase from the school's Alma Mater that would serve Villers well at BMT:

"Walking with a stride of honor."

The day after graduation, she told her parents she intended to join the Air Force. The United States was involved in two major regional and one international wars at the time. The international war against terrorism began shortly after September 11, 2001. The war in Afghanistan began in October 2001. The second war in Iraq began in March 2003. Villers knew all that, and so did her family.

Her mother, Michelle, said this:

"She was so headstrong, yet so determined in everything she did. When she set her mind to doing something — that was it — she was doing that no matter what happened ... She was so patriotic."

The family was anxious. In September 2006, Paige and her father, Don went to see the recruiter, Master Sergeant Sam Hensley, an 18-year air transportation veteran. Prior to going, she studied to learn as much about the USAF as she could.

Hensley remembers her well, saying:

"(She) was determined to be in the Air Force ... She made it very clear she wanted to serve her country, something you don't typically see in an 18- or 19-year-old today."



Lackland AFB, San Antonio, Texas. Presented by [Waldy at Picasa](#).

That was that. Normally, recruits do not go to basic training right away. Usually they are afforded preparation time. While she signed up in September 2006, she went to Lackland AFB in San Antonio for basic training in March 2007. Her mother, Michelle, said this:

"She joined the Air Force for honor, family and to finish her education."

The trainees at BMT are called "trainees." That said, officially they hold the rank of Airman Basic, AB, pay grade E-1, no stripes. In conversation with Lackland's public affairs, I learned they are not called "Airman" until week five of 6.5 weeks. Prior to that, they are called "Trainee." I like that.

Almost immediately, they are to report in this manner (they are told prior to arrival how to do this):

"Sir/Ma'am, Trainee Villers reports as ordered."

Trainee Villers was immediately assigned to a training flight, which belongs to a training squadron. A flight has from 30-60 trainees. Several Training Instructors (TI) are assigned to each flight.

They are issued fatigues at the outset, which will be their uniform for the first several weeks. I believe in week three they are issued their blue uniform and will, when appropriate, wear that. As an aside for those who might not know, this is kind of how the term "GI" evolved, "Government Issue." On a lighter side, I have met gruff sergeants in my day who have informed us that if the Air Force wanted us to have a wife, the Air Force would have issued us one.

When Villers got to wear her blue



uniform for the first time, for her routine portrait as a basic trainee, she called her mother and said this:

"Mom, I got to put on my blues today. I feel so proud, so proud to be in the Air Force — so proud of this country."

It might surprise some, but it is a huge day to get out of those fatigues and into the blues. Huge. You're almost human again.



Michelle recalls that the first few calls home were from a nervous, anxious basic trainee. By the third call, she was a confident, mature basic trainee. Her aunt said this:

"Paige wanted a life of honor."

AB Villers became ill during Warrior Week, arguably the worst time to get sick. First, the rigors of training ramp up exponentially. Second, you are only a couple weeks from graduation when you start. When you finish, you are one week from being there, and you have qualified to receive the Airman's Coin. This is no time to get sick.



Basic trainees are asked to remove their gas masks and report to a readiness instructor while still inside the gas chamber as part of their Warrior Week training. After being exposed to the gas students experience itchy watering eyes, coughing, runny noses and in some extreme cases vomiting. **Photo credit:** Master Sgt. Efrain Gonzalez, USAF

Her mom said she loved Warrior Week, the mud, the tents, the camaraderie. But she didn't feel quite right, so she went to the clinic. She, like most other trainees, was worried about doing so because she was so close to graduation and she had to pass her physical fitness test. Diagnosis, allergies, back to Warrior Week.

She started having problems breathing, but took her physical fitness test anyway, falling short in the running test by just a few seconds. She had been meeting the standards prior to this.



Wilford Hall Medical Center, Lackland AFB, Texas. Presented by [art_plum at webshots.com](http://art_plum_at_webshots.com)

Then she came down with a high fever, was sent to Wilford Hall Medical Center at Lackland AFB, diagnosis mononucleosis. She remained in hospital for three days, and was returned to a medical holding facility. She was determined to run the final physical fitness test with her flight, but her technical instructor (TI), Staff Sergeant Carlos Coronado stopped her, saying physical training was out for the moment. She went to the test anyway, to encourage her friends.

Just a quick pause to introduce you to Wilford Hall. It is the Air Force's largest such facility. It is an acute care facility that handles everything from sick call to surgery. It is certified as a trauma center. The medical center operates the only programs in the Department of Defense for allogenic bone marrow transplantation and the military's only eye bank. The organization operates the Air Force's treatment and evaluation center for HIV. Wilford Hall OB-GYN and neonatology programs are recognized around the world. The Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center (DVBIC) program at Wilford Hall registers all military and dependent patients who have experienced mild, moderate or severe brain injuries. In short, it handles traumatic brain injuries.

I make this introduction to underscore that Trainee Villers was now in the hands of the top drawer. Why the other diagnoses were made at lesser facilities I do not know.

In any event, after being released from Wilford Hall, during the

next week, what was to be her final week, she had to go back to the hospital. Now she had pneumonia and was placed in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU).

Doctors informed her family she was gravely ill. They came to Lackland. The diagnosis then switched to a highly contagious strain of adenovirus, this one #14, new to the US, probably having come from eastern Europe or Russia. In shorthand, "Ad14."

Let's spend a moment on this disease. Ad14 was first detected in the 1950s. Of late it is detected rarely. It re-emerged in 2005 in the US and was a bit different from that seen in the 1950s. It has a higher rate of severe illness. Ad14 created some serious problems in Oregon in 2007. It also popped its ugly head at Lackland in February 2007, when Airman Villers was in the final throes of her training. It is rarely a killer. The disease can range from fever and chills all the way to a life threatening illness.

The virus struck throughout Wilford Hall, including those who cared for Villers. It is spread like the common cold. Adenovirus, has been well known in military training environments, and is widely known as "Boot Camp Flu." That said, this strain was not as well known. Of patients tested at Lackland, 268 were positive for adenovirus. Of 118 serotyped patients, 106 (90%) were identified as Ad14. A total of 27 were hospitalized.

In the case of Trainee Villers, now back in hospital, seventy-five percent of her lungs had been struck by the pneumonia. She was placed on a ventilator. The infection got worse, and she was placed on a very specialized ventilator.



Extra corporeal membrane oxygenation machine, the "ECMO." If you look carefully, upper left quadrant, lower right, you can see a baby patient hooked up on a bed. Presented by [Wandering Eyre at flickr](#).

Given her life threatening condition, doctors at Wilford Hall decided to hook her into an extra corporeal membrane oxygenation machine, known as ECMO, normally used for very young children, most frequently babies, on the brink of death with severe lung and heart disorders. Basically its job is to provide both cardiac and respiratory support oxygen to patients whose heart and lungs cannot handle the job.

Wilford Hall was the nation's first medical center to use this new technology. Her primary doctor for this effort was Lt. Colonel Michael Meyers, chief, pediatric critical care medicine at Wilford Hall, shown here as a major testing a heads-up displays. There were risks with the treatment, but doctors estimated it would increase her survival chances from 10 percent to 40 percent. Management of the ECMO circuit is done by a team of ECMO specialists that includes ICU physicians, perfusionists, respiratory therapists and registered nurses that have received training in this specialty.



Now her doctors had to bring in the heavy weights in hospital management. The commander, 59th Medical Wing (MDW), Brigadier General (Dr.) David Young, shown here, was told the resources of the hospital would have to be marshaled and mobilized to get this job done. The boss agreed and teams of nurses and technicians were specially selected to care for Villers.



While I certainly do not know the intricacies of making such a decision, I do know that Wilford Hall is a huge operation. On a typical day, its staff sees 2,658 patients, with 40 admitted and 35 surgeries. It is a Level I trauma center, has 220 beds, and 21 operating rooms. It has global responsibilities for the military as a whole. The wing has 3,340 mobility positions with people deployed worldwide and many readiness teams ready to go on short notice. I simply wish to say that to allocate a lot of resources for one patient is a challenging decision. As a former Air Force officer, I am compelled to highlight here that this was being done for a BMT trainee, an airman basic, the lowest end of the "pecking order" as we would say. These are, of course, medical professionals and military professionals. That

notwithstanding, I get a chill of pride that Trainee Villers right now was a very important person at Wilford Hall.

The risks of infection for the caregivers was so high that all ventilation and air conditioning had to be turned off in her ECMO room. It was May in San Antonio, Texas. Machinery in the room generated heat and humidity. The room would rise to 95 degrees. Teams of caregivers had to be formed to recycle in and out. the manpower commitment rose to about 125.



Trainee Villers, thumbs up, "wired for sound" at Wilford Hall. Presented by ["Michelle's yellow rose: deadly virus doesn't end Airman Paige Villers' quest for honor."](#) published by the *Airman* Magazine.

Villers remained on the ECMO machine for two weeks, and after 36 days she broke out of her coma, incredible given the damage that had been done to her lungs and kidneys. Villers had lost a lot of weight, her muscles had atrophied, she had a tracheotomy.

When she woke up, among the first things she asked was whether she was still in the USAF and whether should could still graduate from basic training.

Brigadier General Farrell Jones, the commander of the 37th Training Wing, shown here, said yes. She had passed all requirements, and had passed the running test regularly prior to becoming sick. That was great news for Trainee Villers, but she also wanted to know if she would get the Airman's Coin. The response again was to the affirmative.



The family planned to sub in her brother to receive the coin, but Trainee Villers would have no part of that. She wanted to be there, and the entire staff rallied to her request. At the staff's own initiative, she was prepared her for the ceremony. This preparation required she sit in a wheel chair for an hour each day to strengthen her muscles. The day prior to graduation, the nurses threw her a "pajama party, gave her a sponge bath, washed her hair, fixed her hair, applied makeup, painted her nails, dressed her in a physical training (PT) uniform vice a regular uniform, and cheered her on. Wilford Hall used one of its critical care air transportation teams to escort her to graduation. This particular team had just returned from Iraq.



As an honor guard stands by, Brig. Gen. Darrell D. Jones, 37th Training Wing commander, presents Airman Paige Villers her Airman's Coin during a special graduation ceremony. Airman Villers' father, Don, said he was proud to wheel his daughter to her basic training graduation. Presented by "[Michelle's yellow rose: deadly virus doesn't end Airman Paige Villers' quest for honor.](#)" published by the *Airman* Magazine.

Trainee Villers could not graduate with her class, because of her hospitalization. But she did graduate on June 22, 2007, in a special ceremony following the graduation for the hundreds of airmen scheduled for that day. Her brother wheeled her on to the parade ground.

Trainee Paige Renee Villers took the oath to defend the Constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic and received the Airman's Coin. She was now Airman Villers, fully a member of the ranks of the greatest Air Force in the world.

I want to make four comments on the above photo. First, after being through hell, Airman Villers was there. That's courage, honor, an indescribable sense of duty. It doesn't get any better

than that. Second, General Jones is there, bent down, talking to her about her Airman's Coin. One can only imagine what was going through her mind. Third, more important than the general is the presence of an honor guard, especially for her. I can see the rank of only one of those airman, the man on the far left, a staff sergeant, pay grade E-5. I will add that the men in that honor guard are all TIs, those dreaded TIs who provide "motivational talks" to trainees every day. Most important, that honor guard of her TIs is standing behind Airman Villers and is at a full brace. The camaraderie in the US military is an emotion that reaches far beyond my command of the English language to describe. For those who have not experienced it, you have missed a great passage in life.

Finally, note a medal has been pinned on her right shoulder. That is the Airman's Achievement Medal. It is most unusual for a basic trainee to receive this at graduation.

The Air Force Achievement Medal is awarded to members of the Armed Forces of the United States (and to foreign military personnel) below the grade of colonel who, while serving in any capacity with the Air Force distinguish themselves by outstanding achievement or meritorious service.

The heraldic thunderbolt signifies striking power through the medium of aerospace. The nebular border represents clouds and the firmament. There are eleven "clouds," which are the sum of 4 and 7, the digits of the year the Air force was established.

Airman Villers was still sick. Her immune system was weak and worn out from the fight.

Some 32 days later, she encountered a relapse. In all probability, there was some residue virus left in her system or another virus struck. Her immune system could not respond like it should. Now her brain cells were under attack as well. ICU teams did everything they could. The doctors estimated a 10 percent chance for survival. The family could not give approval to remove her from the ventilator, but put up no objection. The doctors made the decision, and removed her. She breathed on her own for 45 minutes longer, and died.

Col. Meyers said this:



“She fought to live to the very end.”

Sergeant Coronado, her TI, escorted Airman Villers home. Her recruiter, MSgt. Hensley went to the airport when Airman Villers came home, to meet her. He said it was his duty:

"That's the way the Air Force does business — we take care of our own. And Paige was definitely one of us."



Corey, Michelle and Don Villers hold the American flag they received from an Air Force honor guard at the funeral for Airman Paige Villers. Mrs. Villers wanted to bury her daughter at the Ohio Western Reserve National Cemetery because it was close to their Norton, Ohio, home. Presented by "[Michelle's yellow rose: deadly virus doesn't end Airman Paige Villers' quest for honor,](#)" published by the *Airman* Magazine.

Airman Villers was buried at the Ohio Western Reserve National Cemetery. She received full military honors. Wright-Patterson AFB sent an honor guard to her funeral. Seven airman fired three volleys as a salute. A full squad of Air Force recruiters attended as a unit. Her TI presented the American flag from her coffin to her family.

Our country lost a courageous and dedicated patriot when God took Airman Paige Renee Villers. That such patriots rise up from babies to adults and serve our military is one of the great strengths of this nation.

