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'Tough love' time for Air Force trainees Web Posted: 11/06/2008 12:00 CST

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By **Sig Christenson** - Express-News [RSS](#) | [EMAIL](#) | [PRINT](#) | [SAVE](#)

Airman Basic Kyle Mills endured the time-honored tradition of getting a military haircut and his standard-issue clothing Wednesday after arriving at Lackland AFB for the start of basic training.

But if this was routine, it also was historic — and not just because he and his fellow wingmen were starting their military careers only hours after a black man was elected their commander-in-chief.

These airmen are members of the first class in almost 50 years to train for 81/2 weeks. The last time airmen did that was in February 1960, when Dwight D. Eisenhower was president. Since then, basic training has been two weeks shorter.

"We're going to be one of the first classes to go through the longer basic, and every person that I've talked with that's been through the 61/2 weeks say they feel sorry for us," said Mills, 19, of Austin. "I'm actually looking forward to it. I think it will be a good experience for me."

The Air Force's new and improved brand of basic training definitely will be tougher. It will look and feel more like old-fashioned soldiering, with recruits becoming familiar with principles of leadership, basic self-defense and time in the field learning how to defend remote bases and care for the wounded.

There was a time when airmen spent just two days with a rifle — when they were learning to fire it. But now recruits will spend two days at the rifle range instead of just one, and they'll learn to fire both the M-16 and M-9 handgun. Recruits have been getting M-16s in the first week of training since October 2005. They can't fire live rounds but can be broken down and reassembled.

"This is the biggest transformation in the last 50 years in basic military training," said Col. Edward Westermann, commander of Lackland's 737th Training Group. "It is some tough love. But what we do know is that tough love is going to translate into lives saved down range."

A shift in mission is driving the changes. The Air Force operated from large, safe bases well before it became a separate service in 1947. Life was so easy in the Air Force compared to the Army and Marine Corps that some in other services derisively called it the "Chair Force."

But a faster operations tempo and the war on terrorism have caused the service to evolve into a more expeditionary organization this past decade. Being prepared to clear an obstructed airway or stop an arterial bleed can mean — and has meant — the difference between life and death, so the extra two weeks in boot camp mean more time for real-life training.

An Air Force's chief master sergeants review last year prompted the decision to extend the 61/2-week training period. The group decided that recruits needed more time with weapons and field repetition, as well as instilling core values in its fledgling airmen and readying them for war.

Airman Basic Daniel Taylor, 21, of Atlanta, who has a twin brother at Dobbins Air Reserve Base in Georgia, said the training revamp was an Rx for a "lax" Air Force and added, "I want to be a part of that."

One important development is classroom time in things like self-aid and buddy care. Some of that instruction had been done in the field, cutting into time for things like teaching airmen how to handle a mass casualty scene. The recruits also will face the BEAST — Basic Expeditionary Airman Skills and Training, which puts young airmen into simulated combat.

"It enhances your warrior skills from everything from self-aid to buddy care," Westermann, a 46-year-old Temple native,



Delcia Lopez/Express-News

Senior Master Sgt. Dave Staton gets in the face of a recruit Wednesday morning Air Force Base in San Antonio. The recruit is among the first class to have a longer basic training period.

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said of the longer training hours.

Airman Basic Horacio Lopez Jr. said he signed up for 8 1/2 weeks so he could be tested.

"I found the BEAST week extremely interesting," said Lopez, 18, of San Antonio, adding that he was drawn to "the challenge that I'm going to have to put forward to even accomplish it."

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