

# Photo Tips For West Point Graduation

Graduation is fast approaching and maybe you decided to buy a digital single –lens reflex camera (SLR) to "capture the moment", or you already have an SLR and want to improve your odds of taking images that are "keepers".

Here are some tips from 2 amateurs who try very hard to wear out their cameras on every trip to West Point. They wanted to share these tips they have learned to improve your photography during this special week. Additionally, professional photographers/parents added their own suggestions and provided professional editing to make this an easy read. Get a big cup of your favorite beverage and start preparing for that magical week!

## **(1) Understand Your Camera**

Read, re-read, and read again the instruction manual - I "laminated" the cover of my owner's manual with clear packing tape and it always goes with me. Digital SLR's have lots of settings and I just tend to forget the how-to-do basics. Read a section and then "practice" what you learned. Decide what you really want to try to do during Grad Week, and know how to do it inside and out. We'll talk more about the technical details later. But please don't buy a camera 1 week before you head to WP and expect miracles. If you need a crash course, there are educational DVD's that can help you improve in less than an hour.

## **(2) Be Observant & Plan Ahead**

Sure, you've been to West Point, but can you remember where the sun rises and sets? The position of the sun determines when and where you need to be to take the best pictures. Of course, the timing of major events will be fixed and you will have to adapt. Example - we moved from our assigned bleacher seats on the most westerly part of The Plain to sit in the grass on the east end of The Plain by the baseball field so that we would not be shooting "into the sun" during a review. Sometimes you don't even have sun as the best photo that I took of my cadet was during the Alumni Review (Tuesday) on a cloudy day and the best photo of Washington Hall with perfectly clear weather on Monday. We used every day of Grad Week to add to our photo collection. WP weather can be fickle, and you have to "make hay when the sun is shining." During the 7 days we were visiting on post, we had 1 perfect day, 1 wet day, and 5 mixed days. Thus, we moved from location to location knowing when there would be sun, shadows, clouds, etc. as we composed our images. Look at some of the Memory Pages for shooting location ideas.

## **(3) Shoot the Un-obvious**

If you want to create and print hardbound photo books (21st century scrapbooks), one important element is a "stock photo" that becomes the semi-transparent background on which you overlay pictures. Well, there are lots of opportunities for taking stock photos, if you think ahead. Taking a picture of Battle Monument? Offset the granite column to the right, to the left, in portrait

mode, in landscape mode - only takes a few seconds, but you end up with lots of options for your photo book. Most people have pictures of the statues of Ike, McArthur, Patton (soon to be re-located) - but how about corners of buildings, the rows of cannons on Trophy Point, the top of the Firstie Club, Fort Clinton, Michie Stadium, a close up of their polished brass buckle on the chest, a saber hilt, the edge of their rank stripes, etc. All are excellent backdrops. One of my favorites is the lone cadet on The Plain before The Corps marches on - I place the cadet in the lower left corner of the image and stretch it across both pages of the book. Again, offset the object in the frame to give yourself flexibility.

#### **(4) Bring Extra Batteries & Memory Cards**

You can't take pictures without them. Most digital cameras require a unique battery, so having 2 (or 3) that you recharge every night in the hotel is essential. Unlike film cameras, power is essential for the whole process, and my image stabilized lens is "hungry".

On any given trip, we would shoot 300-600 images per day. You should know the resolution of your camera and the amount of memory required - so either bring many memory cards or plan to offload them nightly to your laptop (if you bring one) or to a digital wallet. I prefer to keep the images on multiple memory cards (I carried 4 minimum – be careful that you don't reuse them) and on my laptop so that I have "backup" until I get home and can transfer them to yet another couple of hard drives. It's too easy to lose images and these are not the images that you want to lose. If you find that you accidentally erase a memory card, talk to a "geek" as you can recover the images if you have not yet taken new pictures over the old ones. If you don't have an easy way to back up your memory cards, consider going to a photo store and burn DVD's before you travel home.

#### **(5) Shoot What You Want vs. What You Can Get**

Let's face it... to capture the entire Corps of Cadets on The Plain while seated in the bleachers is... tough... while a wide angle lens will capture all of the "scene", the cadets will be a "thin gray line" through the middle of the image. This hasn't stopped me from trying, including using the techniques that I apply for the Army Navy Panorama (to be discussed later). Just realize that it's not going to be easy. Something that is easy, if you have bleacher seating, is to NOT sit directly behind the guidon for your cadet's company. Why? When the Firsties march across The Plain and line up **in front** of the bleachers (hint- you should now understand it's desirable to "be early and to sit high" ), you want to be slightly offset in your section so that you can get a picture of his/her face instead of the back of their head. Watch for photo ops as the review progresses and they re-cover / uncover to honor the flag and their company.

Finally, compose your pictures with forethought so that trees or flagpoles are not growing out your subject's head. (Or the rear of G. Washington's horse... it could ruin a good photo before the banquet.) Learn how to focus and then re-compose

the image so that the heads of your subjects are about 1/3 of the way from the top of the image. For action shots, try not to zoom too tight – you can always edit the image later to get what you want.

## **(6) Adjust Your Camera**

Get set up before the event begins. Tune out things and focus on being sure that it's right. Maybe you can multi-task better, but I have to really "close down and concentrate" to be sure that all things are ready for the picture... let's go through a few examples with some possible settings, but you have to set according to your camera.

- **Digital Zoom** – if you have digital zoom capability, turn it off and never turn it back on so that you only use your optical zoom. If you understand why, you probably already turned it off. If you don't know why, you will and you won't be happy. Just turn it off now - trust us.
- **ISO Speed** (controls the shutter speed) - perhaps no higher than 400. The newer DSLR's can go much higher with their sophisticated noise reduction routines. The faster you set it, the more noise you will see. Electronic noise in a picture reduces the image quality. However if an event is indoors, you may have to bump the ISO speed up - a noisy image is better than no image at all.
- **Exposure** - Lots of options - on my last trips to WP, I began taking images using manual settings after metering The Plain before any cadet marched on. That's close, but probably still a little overexposed. Another option if using a powerful zoom is to meter on Washington Hall which is closer to "average gray". Now if you are not comfortable using manual mode, then keep the camera in automatic mode. (If you try to do a panorama, you must switch to manual exposures, however). If you do use manual mode, be aware that those puffy white clouds will change your exposure settings if they pass in front of the sun! Also, the image exposure changes from one side of The Plain to the other so keep thinking about your lighting.
- **Automatic Setting** - Finally, when the Review is over- be sure to switch back to an automatic setting if you were using manual mode. EASY to forget.
- **Recording the Image** – I finally learn to always use RAW format and also record high quality JPG at the same time. I find that I can adjust so much more from a RAW image than a JPG and this approach has rescued my bad images many, many times. RAW files are much larger than the largest JPG file, and you will use up memory space quickly so plan accordingly. (Read your manual to understand the sizes). But always shoot with the highest resolution possible from your camera as you can always "resample" your picture later to a lower resolution. You do not want to lose any quality because you might want to enlarge a shot and you used the lower resolution setting.
- **Image Stabilization** - Be sure to turn on your image stabilization / vibration reduction switch. (Why would it ever be off? Typically when placing your camera on a tripod.). We cannot remember if a MONO-pod was allowed in Michie Stadium for graduation, but a tripod would be way too big for the parent seating section. I found that I captured good images with a stabilized

lens without a tripod. Allow the image stabilization / vibration reduction feature to work - I have to press my shutter release for approximately ½ second and the lens will stabilize vibrations. If I press the shutter in one continuous motion, the lens cannot stabilize and the result is often blurry. Take your time.

- **Auto Focus** – Turn on and allow the auto focus to work – same technique as above – press the shutter halfway down for about ½ second and then complete the picture. If you press the shutter down in one smooth motion, you will neither auto focus nor stabilize the vibrations and will consistently get bad images. You can press the shutter down halfway, let the camera stabilize and focus, and then squeeze it the rest of the way when the “time is right”.
- **Shutter Speeds** - Learn how to use shutter speeds and apertures to change your depth of field to either enhance your subjects or to have more of your image in focus.
- **Custom White Balance** - IF and \*only if\* you are comfortable, consider setting a custom white balance. That technique combined with RAW images will allow even more latitude. But be sure to reset the white balance after the event. Do it wrong and/or forget to change it back, and you'll mess up the rest of your images. **Do not try this unless you have experimented at home and know exactly what you are doing.** (You don't have to do this as you can adjust the white balance in your RAW files.) In the excitement of the moment, you could easily make a mistake or forget to reset it. **PLEASE be careful here...**

### (7) Consider Your Flash

Wait - it's sunny, why do I want a flash? To fill in the shadows if you take that picture of your cadet wearing the Tarbucket. Or if you find yourself positioned with the sun behind the subjects (stop and get them to move if it's a posed shot!) Even if you don't have a high-powered separate flash, consider using the small built-in flash to put a sparkle in their eye and light up the shadows. There are automatic modes on cameras where you can "pop up" the flash and it will "fill" automatically.

### (8) Consider the Weather

For 2008, we needed raincoats for graduation - it happens. Carry a large plastic trash bag to stuff your gear inside, and I carried my "camera raincoat" that I used for graduation. Water can be unkind to a DSLR. On the other hand, I had sun flares in one critical image that someone had to rescue for me, which convinced me to purchase lens hoods. Get the one designed for your lens(es).

### (9) What Lens(es) to Use ?

Many of the entry DSLR's have an image sensor smaller than a standard 35 mm camera, which results in a "magnification factor". This actually helps you with telephoto shots. From the reserved seats, I was able to capture good facial features with a 300mm lens at graduation - it won't replace the wonderful Academy Photo graduation picture, but I was quite pleased. I also used my wide-

angle lens to capture the whole perspective of the stadium. For my camera, with a 1.6x multiplier factor, my favorite lens was a 28-135mm (or for film enthusiasts, it's the equivalent of a 45-216mm zoom). Attaching my 70-300mm lens gave me a film equivalent of 480mm on the high end - very effective thanks to the good light, and the image stabilization feature.

## **(10) "Point & Shoot" Digital Camera Tips**

- a) Keep it simple. Leave your camera on automatic. Concentrate on the scene and not the camera. Let the camera's brain work for you.
- b) Try to take 3 photos of each scene, 1 wide, 1 medium and 1 close up.
- c) Don't center everything. Dead center is boring. Divide the frame in thirds and place your point of interest in one of those thirds, not the middle. For example, if it is a person you are photographing, their eyes need to be in the top third of the frame, not the middle.
- d) Get closer. Take 3 giant steps closer. Most people try to get everything in the frame. But your best shots, the keepers, will almost always be the ones where you zoomed in, or you moved closer. Trust me on this one. Closer is better and it is hard to get too close.
- e) Take lots of photos. You can't take too many. Take extra batteries, take an extra memory cards. Change the batteries before the day's shooting starts. And check to make sure the memory card is not already full of photos. Start fresh. Check your camera settings before the action starts.
- f) Practice. With digital cameras there is no excuse not to practice. It's cheap and you can see your results immediately. Have fun. Experiment. Study and copy great photographers. Notice magazine pictures that catch your eye and try and figure out what the photographer did.
- g) Did you turn off your digital zoom as we recommended earlier?
- h) If your cadet doesn't already have a camera, buy them one now. One that we picked out for our cadet is drop/shock resistant and water resistant. It was a good idea since he destroyed the first 2 cameras while at West Point. You can't take all the pictures. Make them share what they take.

These tips are not all inclusive, but should improve the odds of getting better keepsakes during your trip to West Point. And don't get so bogged down in the picture taking - enjoy the graduation week, take lots of images, and have a great time!

## **(11) Advanced Section and Parental Thoughts**

**Want to attempt to take a panorama? Here are a few tips to consider:**

- a) Set your exposure manually because the colors will change as you sweep across the field. Minimum shutter speed is 1/focal length of the lens but it should not be an issue on a daytime shot, anyway. I adjust the exposure to balance between the extreme right and extreme left of the area that I want to capture. Usually, it's no more than +/- one stop and you can adjust later with your editing program.

- b) Ensure you have set your zoom for the right focal length for all areas of the panorama -err on the wider side.
- c) Overlap each image 15-25% - find an object on the edge of the frame and keep track of where it is as you sweep to the next frame.
- d) Try to hold the camera level as you sweep.
- e) Move the centerline of the lens to remain over a pivot point (hard to do without a tripod) but just keep it steady and level and try it.
- f) Try different "stitching" programs to put them all together. Some work better than others.
- g) Adjust the stitching errors using an editing program. I can usually stitch and edit the Army Panoramas in about 8-12 hours but a simple panorama like the Firstie Review should take less than an hour.

**Should you try to capture the hat toss? Thoughts from 2 parents:**

Then there's the hat toss debate – put the camera down and just enjoy watching the moment vs. viewing it through the view finder. Perhaps something in between: have the camera ready, fire a quick burst, then stop and just watch/enjoy. While there are amazing incredible shots for a zoom lens when the class begins the mass hugging after the hat toss, it is sad to miss it "live" because of camera glued to face.