

17. The Coast Guard Academy

By

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I was very unsure what I wanted to be when I returned to Charlestown in the fall of 1959 to live with Aunt Marg and Uncle Tip Grace and begin my junior year at Charlestown High School. What I really liked to do was play trombone, but I had no extensive musical training, so I didn't even consider trying to follow that route to college. From a distance, the military path that my real father had taken looked very secure, especially compared to my step-father's off-and-on construction work. There were no professional role models of doctors or lawyers in our family. A career in science was a possibility, but I hadn't really invested a lot of time thinking about that.

I was interested in the service academies, however, having been influenced by two popular TV shows at the time, *West Point* and *Men of Annapolis*. An older friend from my earlier days in the CHS band, Johnny Graham, graduated from West Point. It was a big deal in Charlestown that one of our own from the project had embarked on the career path that produced so many famous military men. A teacher friend of ours, Mrs. Lonnie Breeding, tried to help me obtain the required congressional appointment to West Point, but was unsuccessful. Another CHS teacher, Harold "Dutch" Reis, was a reserve Coast Guard officer, and he began to coax me to apply for the Coast Guard Academy, the only service academy that does not require a congressional appointment. With the disappointment about West Point, I decided to take the Coast Guard Academy entrance exam, even though I had never been near the ocean. After I was conditionally accepted for the entering cadet class of 1961, I forgot about applying to other colleges or universities, despite being on track to be the valedictorian in our class of 105 seniors who graduated in May 1961.

I next had to pass a comprehensive physical exam that was required to be administered at a military institution. Ironically, mine was scheduled at my birthplace, Ft. Knox, Kentucky, at 7:00 AM one brisk fall morning in 1960. When I arrived at the gate, I showed the guard my papers, and he directed me to a large barracks facility where physical exams were being given that day. There I was told to strip down to my shorts and join a group of soldiers who were getting their final physical exams before being discharged from the service. It was very chilly in that building, especially since several of the windows were open. This was the first complete physical exam in my life, so I didn't know what to expect. After being poked and prodded when I reached the front of several lines, I rounded a corner and saw an enormous black man with a big syringe in his hand. He barked, "Put your arm up here, soldier!" Without tying a cord or rubber band around my upper arm, he began to probe for a vein, which by now had all contracted from the cold and fear. After a few futile attempts by the medical technician, I started seeing black and gray, heard a ringing noise in my ears, and collapsed to the floor. I remember hearing as I was coming to, "What outfit is he in?" and the response, "He's a civilian!" They got me to my feet and told me to walk to a line of men on another wall, where I promptly fainted again. Before long I was taken to the place I should have gone to begin with, the Ireland Army Hospital where I was born. The rest of the day was uneventful, and I passed this final requirement for entry to the Coast Guard Academy summer program that started July 10, 1961.

After a long train ride from Louisville to New London, Connecticut, a taxi driver deposited me in front of an impressive brick building on a campus surrounded by a high fence. A young man was standing by a suitcase outside the gate, and I asked him if that was Hamilton Hall. His response was, "Yes, but I wouldn't go in there if I were you!" I learned that he too was one of the entering class of 1961, but it took him only a few hours of "hell week" to decide that it wasn't for him. When I entered the building, I saw why. Boys in civilian clothes were being yelled at and harangued from all sides. People were running everywhere, and I joined them as soon as I got signed in. When I found my room at the end of a hall on the second floor, I met my roommate, Tom, who was already in uniform, but that of an enlisted Coast Guardsman. He had come to the academy from the ranks of the Coast Guard. The booklet "Physical Examination Instructions and Requirements for Candidates for Appointment to the United States Coast Guard" (CG-147-1, December 1959) stated that the minimum height was 5' 4", and the maximum height, 6' 6". Tom had been spotted by the academy basketball coach and was convinced to try the academy route to a commission. He was a very tall fellow, much taller than my Dad (6' 4"). He was advised to scrunch down as much as possible when the physical exam height measurement was taken.

It's impossible to describe adequately the turmoil and emotional stress that cadets are subjected to during hell week at the academy. I probably would have gone the fast exit route of the young man I met at the gate had I not discovered a memo lying in a staircase landing that instructed the upper-class cadets to weed out any "weak sisters" during hell week. That made me determined to get through at least to the swearing-in ceremony at the end of the week. My roommate, Tom, had other plans. He told me a few days later that he had enough of the academy and was going to flunk the physical exam. Not only was Tom far taller than allowed, he also wore glasses. Even with their assistance, he could not see 20/20, as required for all entering cadets. Thus, by the end of hell week, I had sole responsibility for cleaning and maintaining the largest room on our floor.

Admiral Alfred C. Richmond was the commandant of the Coast Guard Academy, a post he held from 1954 to 1962. The swearing-in ceremony was the first opportunity we had to sit for a prolonged period in a relaxed atmosphere. Unfortunately, it was too relaxed for one cadet in my unit, and when we were told by the admiral to stand for the ceremony, he was sound asleep. What happened to him next was my first encounter with serious military discipline. Yes, the young man made a very serious mistake by allowing himself to snooze during a speech by the academy's longest serving commandant. But I couldn't have imagined the treatment he was to receive at the hands of the freshly commissioned ensign assigned to our unit. It was "butts and muzzles" time. The cadet was required to run endlessly from one end of the hall to the other with his M-1 rifle above his head. Each time he reached the end of the hall, he had to swing the rifle 180 degrees over his head many times, bringing first the butt, then the muzzle to the fore. After many repetitions with the rifle held over his head the entire time, the exhausted cadet gasped, "I can't do it any more, Sir." To which the ensign yelled, "You CAN'T??? But you COULD go to sleep during the admiral's speech. BUTTS-MUZZLES! BUTTS-MUZZLES! BUTTS-MUZZLES!" None of us who witnessed this would ever go to sleep during another important event (or so I thought).

In lieu of the oath of allegiance to the United States, incoming Coast Guard cadets took an oath that ended with these words, agreeing that, ". . . I shall be withdrawn from the United States Coast Guard Academy if deficient in conduct, health, or studies." The health clause caught others of my classmates

in addition to my roommate Tom. One young man in our unit, a devout Catholic, constantly reminded us that God had chosen us for this role and that he would help us get through it.

It was generally frowned on to be sick at the academy or have any condition that might excuse you from the more arduous duties. The cadets who found themselves in that situation had to wear an armband with a red cross on it, a sign that they should not be subjected to strenuous exercise. This was referred to in a derogatory manner as the "red badge of courage". My Catholic classmate had the misfortune to develop serious blisters on his heels after marching many hours around the academy grounds in the ill-fitting shoes that he received. His heels became seriously infected, and by the time he reported to sick bay, his vision had been affected by the infection. His eyesight dropped below the required 20/20, and he was dismissed from the academy.

During the swearing-in ceremony we were ordered to look around at the 225 cadets that were in the room at that time. It was then said that only about 100 of us would make it through the 4-year program of studies. I'm sure my Catholic friend expected that God would allow him to be one of the chosen few.

There were other ways the upperclassmen weeded out weak sisters, sometimes by placing them in demeaning situations that were designed to make the targeted cadets give up. One of those incidents occurred in the dining room when a fellow Hoosier cadet from South Bend, who apparently did not have a manly enough appearance for some of the upperclassmen, was made to stand on a chair and chant repeatedly, "Here I am, Sir, Captain America, Sir!"

One thing you quickly learned was never to laugh at a person in your own class. I was nearly caught in that situation when one of my classmates had trouble getting spaghetti into his mouth. Fourth classmen were required to eat 3 square meals a day. This was accomplished by forcing us to sit braced very upright on the outer 3" of our chairs, looking straight ahead at the foreheads of the classmate seated opposite. We were to look directly at our food only when cutting it. It was transported to our mouths in a movement straight up from the plate until the forks were even with our mouths. Then the fork was moved parallel to the table to the mouth, thus ensuring a "square meal".

On this evening, the main course was spaghetti, and the man opposite me succeeded in getting a gob of it onto his fork. On the way to his mouth, an errant strand slipped off the fork and landed on the knot holding his neck scarf together. For some reason, this struck me as funny, and I let out a snort, stifling it as much as I could. Each table had an upperclassman at the end, and fortunately for me, ours was far enough away that he did not hear me.

Eating too fast was discouraged in a unique fashion. The offending cadet was forced to cram many pieces of white bread into his mouth at once and somehow try to gulp it down. The poor fellow I saw getting this treatment had his mouth and cheeks packed with bread and was hopelessly trying to swallow it. He had to wait until the entire corps of cadets left the dining hall before he could extract the wad of bread.

Lying was another cardinal sin, one that I was almost guilty of during one of my assignments. I was part of the color guard that day and joined the other boys assigned that duty only to find that we were one person short. The upperclassman in charge ordered me to fetch another cadet in our unit. I quickly found him and told him to come with me. We rushed down the stairs, but when I exited the building, he was not behind me! It was too late to go back for him, so I joined the others in raising the flag. Our

group leader got 25 demerits for the unit not having the required number of men in the color guard, and I was called in to testify at a hearing. I was asked if I had told Mr. Yorich (not his real name) to join us for the color guard duty, and I had the “Y” in “Yes” on the tip of my tongue, when I realized that all I said to him was “Come with me.” To say “Yes” would have been a lie, and I could have been dismissed from the academy. Instead, I got some demerits of my own.

The physical exercise at the academy was arduous, and I remember one of my classmates, a Pennsylvania Dutch boy named Tom Yentsch, referred to the exercises as “ball-busters”. I went into the academy weighing 160 pounds and left 2 months later at 135.



Gary Wiggins near the end of his time at the academy.

All cadets were expected to be able to swim, but I had never learned. The swimming coach was to judge how adequate our swimming skills were, but I told him immediately that I couldn't swim. He put me over to the side and proceeded to test the skills of the others. In fact, he was looking for cadets to join the swim team, and he was really impressed with Glenn Serotsky, a California boy, who could swim faster on his back than most of the others could on their stomachs. As the boys finished the swim test, they joined me on the sidelines.

While at the pool, we were also to learn how to leap from the deck of a ship. A very tall platform was erected for that purpose. Since we had all re-formed into one group, the swim coach lost track of the fact that I was not able to swim. He rushed the boys one at a time up the ladder and had them jump off in a squat position, straightening their legs just before reaching the water. One unfortunate cadet (I think it was the same one who dropped his spaghetti) got disoriented on the way down and landed flat on his belly when he hit. One by one all did the jump except me, and I was the last one left on that side of the pool. The coach yelled at me to get up there and jump. I climbed the ladder with a lump in my throat and was just on the edge of the platform when one of my classmates reminded him that I couldn't swim. Saved just in time to join the remedial swim class the next day! I did finally learn to swim while at the Coast Guard Academy.

Getting by at the academy after Hell Week was mostly a matter of keeping out of the upperclassmen's way until you heard them call “SWABO!” That often meant they needed something, and it was your job

to find it. Once I was asked to locate a stapler, and I remembered that one of the guys in my unit had one. I quickly borrowed it and impressed the upperclassman with my speed. Other times, the upperclassmen would yell "SWABO" just to quiz you on the many nonsensical things we were required to learn by rote and regurgitate on command when an upperclassman said one of the magic phrases, such as, "How many days to graduation?" or "Where are the headlights on a submarine?". (The answer: In the head). All the answers to these tests could be found in the manual *Running Light* that was given to each cadet.

One of the longer required responses is reproduced below, the answer to "What time is it?".

Sir, I am greatly embarrassed and deeply humiliated that due to unforeseen circumstances over which I have no control, the inner workings and hidden mechanisms of my chronometer are in such great inaccord with the great sidereal motion by which time is generally reckoned that I cannot with any degree of accuracy state the exact time, Sir. But, without fear of being too greatly in error, I will state that it is about ___ minutes ___ seconds ___ ticks after ___ bells.

I used to amaze my children by being able to spout such nonsense, and I admit that I typed this one without referring to the *Running Light* booklet, which I still own. (I then verified it is correct.)

You might also be called upon at any time to tell a joke to an upperclassman who was feeling low. Fortunately, I had a large supply of these. One of my more successful renderings was to re-tell one of Brother Dave Gardner's jokes that involved a tragic accident when a motorcycle with two young people on it hit a slow-moving truck going up a hill in Georgia. I had mastered Brother Dave's inflections and delivery of this routine long before coming to the academy, and it proved to be very useful.

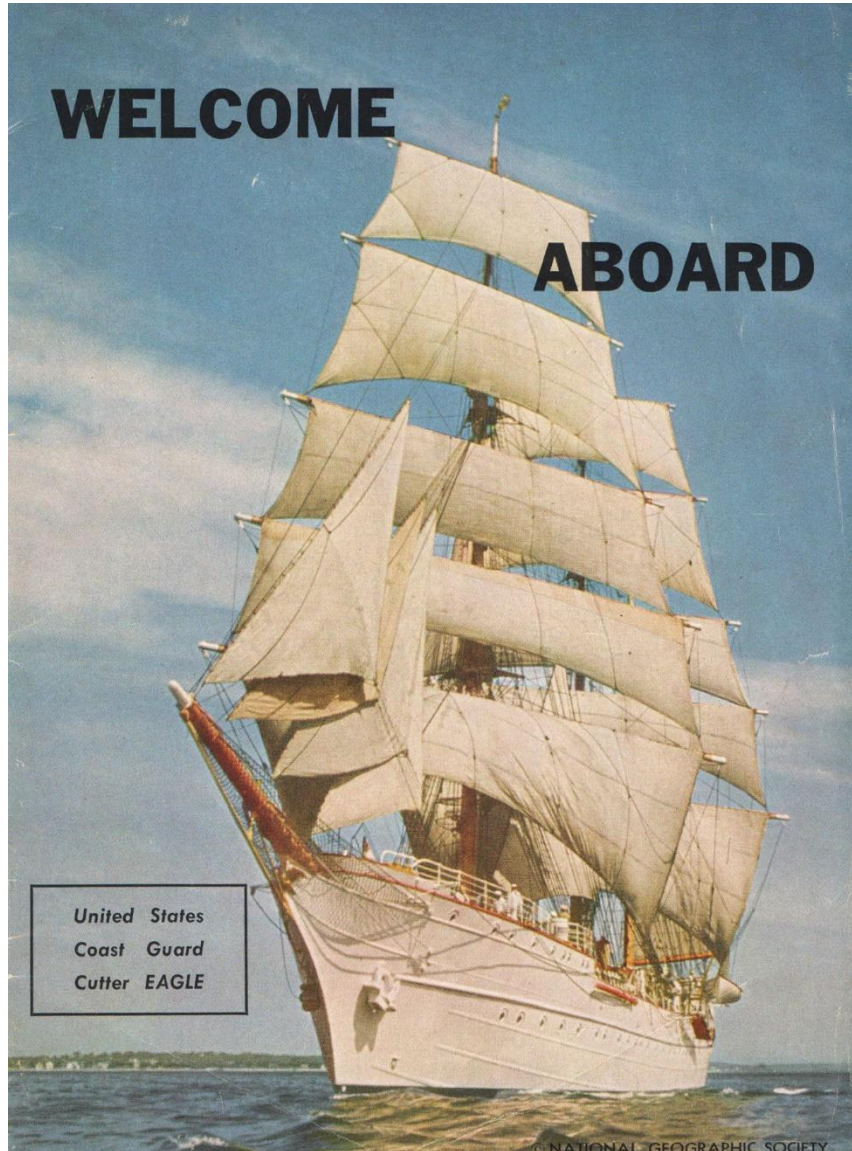
During the 8 weeks of the so-called Swab Summer, it was not all work and no play. Some of the activities were quite enjoyable. Since we were to become sailors, we had to learn to sail. Each of us got instruction and training in handling a dinghy. I failed on my first attempt to dock the dinghy, but I was given another chance and managed to dock it with the swift, last-second maneuver that allowed the sailboat to come in parallel to the dock.

We also got our first look at the ocean later in the summer when we were taken to the Mystic Seaport Museum in Connecticut.

On Saturdays, we had dancing and etiquette lessons from a refined lady who was hired to instruct us in the art of becoming a gentleman. Never after those sessions would I think of sticking my little pinkie finger out while drinking tea. She also instructed us in various ballroom dance steps, including the waltz, cha-cha, foxtrot, etc. Our dancing partner during these sessions was one of our cadet classmates, so there was no impulse to dance very close. Finally, on the last Saturday of the summer session, the lady invited quite a few local girls to join us. This was our first contact with girls the entire summer. When the music for the first dance started, we went into a clutch with our respective female partners and reverted to the close gyrating moves we had been discouraged from using all those weeks. "No, No, boys!" the instructor yelled, and we were forced to put into practice at a respectable distance from our partners the carefully learned steps she taught us in the preceding weeks.

All Coast Guard Academy cadets are required to take 4 ocean cruises during their training—two long cruises of at least 8 weeks that might go as far away as Europe and two short cruises of 2 weeks each on alternate summers. The first week of my short cruise at the end of the summer was spent on the sailing

ship Eagle and the second week on the cutter Rockaway. The Eagle is a 3-masted ship with masts between 132 and 150 feet high. The masts are so high that the ship cannot pass under the bridge across the Thames River between New London and Groton, Connecticut. Thus, the masts were cut in two and had to be stepped back up by skilled Coast Guardsmen once the ship was anchored in the bay.



We boarded the Eagle and went to sleep that night at anchor in the bay while the masts were being put into place. When we awoke the next morning, we were far out to sea in choppy waters. There were complaints about the captain of the long cruise that summer. He rarely set sail and then only in ideal weather. Some of the 1st-classmen on that trip dubbed him “Captain Tuna,” because they said he was the chicken of the sea. Our captain was determined not to have such a moniker attached to his time in charge of the Eagle. For breakfast that first morning at sea, we were fed one of the greasiest concoctions of pancakes, eggs, bacon, and sausage I have ever eaten. It wasn’t long before all 4th-classmen on board were seasick. Nevertheless, the captain soon ordered us to set sail.

We received rudimentary training on land by climbing on a fake yardarm at the academy. The most important lesson learned was to keep 3 points of contact with the ship at all times when on the masts. I had to go up on the main mast. I tried to figure where I should stand in line to avoid having to be all the way out on the yardarm, but I miscalculated and found myself at the very end. A vivid memory is the wonder of looking out at the ocean from high above the deck of the Eagle. The deep blue of the ocean is an amazing sight from that vantage point, and there were no floating mats of plastic refuse to spoil the sight in those days.

That was my only trip onto the mast, but I did have to pilot the Eagle late one night during the mid-watch (midnight to 4:00 AM). It was a calm night. Toward the end of our shift, the rocking of the ship lulled to sleep both me and my partner, who was gripping the other side of the huge helm. When I abruptly woke up and looked at the compass, I saw we were off course, and I tried to correct it. Unfortunately, we turned the wheel the wrong way, a fact quickly noticed by the upperclassman who was monitoring us from a compass on the deck below. He ran up cursing and ordered me to get the ship back on course quickly. Fully awake now, I did so. I have always marveled that the upperclassman didn't take control of the wheel himself, but gave me the chance to make the correction.

My second week at sea was spent on the cutter Rockaway. An upperclassman made a navigational error one foggy night that might have led to a major catastrophe. I was working in the unbelievably hot engine room when bells started ringing like crazy, first signaling stop, then full speed astern, then full speed ahead, then again stop. The cadet in charge of the engine room sent me topside to see what was going on. I learned that the cadet navigator was plotting our course by radar relative to what he thought was an island on the radar screen. Suddenly, the "island" turned and started heading right toward us. It was the SS United States, the largest ocean liner built in the US and the fastest to cross the Atlantic, according to Wikipedia. A collision was avoided, and we didn't have to be rescued by real Coast Guardsmen.

On the Rockaway I had a lot of time to think about what I was doing there, and I decided one day while polishing my shoes on the deck that I would resign from the academy. Before telling the story of my own resignation, I'll describe another cadet who was having second thoughts about being there, one who took a much more dramatic approach to getting out. He was a Florida boy named Jerry Whit Hardin. Jerry was lying in a bottom bunk one morning when the captain of the Rockaway walked through the area. We all snapped to attention, but Jerry didn't even stir. Fortunately for him, the captain didn't notice, but I chided Jerry about his disrespect after the captain left our area. Jerry's response was to ask where the captain was from. One of the guys said he thought he was from New England. To that, Jerry said, "I thought so. Shit floats and therefore Yankees are tops!"

Cadet Who Disappeared Apprehended in Florida

A Coast Guard Academy cadet who has been missing for a week was apprehended early today at Florida's Key West International Airport, where, authorities said, he intended to fly to Cuba in a stolen plane.

The missing cadet, Jerry Whit Harden, 18, of Titusville, Fla., was arrested as he was siphoning gas from other planes into a single-engine craft, authorities said.

They added he had his shirt and raincoat on the seat of the plane, and told them he wanted to fly to Cuba and enroll at the University of Havana.

The Sheriff's Department, Key West, said Hardin had been the object of a search in southern Florida since yesterday morning when the wreckage of another single-engine craft had been found on a beach near the Naval Air Station at Boca Chica, Fla., seven miles north of Key West.

Hit by Gale

Police said Hardin had stolen the plane earlier yesterday morning from Miami's Tamiami Airport, but had to ditch it in the midst of 45-50 mile an hour winds.

Earlier, police said, Hardin buzzed the Key West Airport, but flew off in the stolen plane when a team of sheriffs' cars rushed to the scene and waited for him to land.

Lt. Rene A. Raiole of the Sheriff's Department told this story of Hardin's capture:

"At 2:30 a.m. today, a U. S. Weather Bureau employe at Key West Airport saw someone prowling around parked aircraft. He reported this to the sheriff's department, and we sent some cars out.

"Deputy Robert M. Felton apprehended this man, who identified himself as Hardin. At first, he refused to say he had stolen the plane at Miami, but a check of fingerprints on the plane disclosed they were his. He then admitted taking the plane."

"He told us he was AWOL from the Coast Guard in New London, and said he stole the plane

because he wanted to go to Cuba and enroll at the University of Havana."

Charges Pending

Raiole said Hardin is now at the County Jail, Key West, with several charges pending. He said Hardin will first answer to any charges pressed against him by Key West authorities, then will probably be turned over to Miami authorities on the stolen plane count.

"Then I imagine the Coast Guard wants him too," Raiole said.

But Capt. William B. Ellis of the Academy said today Hardin will probably be dropped from

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Missing Cadet Apprehended In Florida

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the Academy. He added Hardin's family notified him today that their son had been found.

Hardin had been the object of a nation-wide search since he disappeared after "lights out" at 11 p.m. last Saturday. He had reported to the Academy July 7 with the new fourth class.

Key West authorities said the plane which Hardin stole was an Aeronca Model, and that it ground looped, or landed on its top, on the beach. They said the high winds from Hurricane Carla forced the plane down.

The sheriff's department said they had been looking for the pilot of the wrecked plane since the plane crashed, at 5:30 a.m. yesterday. They said Hardin took off with the craft from Miami about 1 a.m. yesterday, and then buzzed Key West Airport about 5:15 a.m.

Authorities said Hardin touched down briefly and then took off from the Naval Station before he buzzed Key West Airport.

There are many other stories I could write about my time at the academy, but for now, I will just recount the last time I saw Jerry. When we arrived back at the academy from the short cruise, it was chaos again as all the upperclassmen who had been on vacation returned to the academy at the same time. Their gear was stowed in trunks in an attic of Hamilton Hall while they were away, and the swabs had to cart them back to their rooms. All swabs except Jerry, that is. He had landed the job of checking off each trunk on a clip board as it was carted away. Next morning at formation, we heard this: "Anyone knowing the whereabouts of a Mr. Hardin, 4th class, step forward at this time." Jerry had gone AWOL. He eventually stole an airplane with the intent of flying to Cuba, as the newspaper story above relates. Note the line in the newspaper article where Captain Ellis said Jerry would probably be dropped from the academy. Since you could be dropped for sneezing in the wrong place, it was a pretty safe bet that Jerry's time at the academy was over.

I never had such newsworthy plans for leaving the academy, but my eventual departure did involve some deception. When the people at the academy heard that I wanted to leave, they tried to dissuade me. Our math professor talked to me about joining the math club, and another person tried to get me interested in the drum and bugle corps. But that was to no avail. My mind was made up, and I called home to tell Mom. As soon as the academy officials were convinced that I really wanted to leave, they moved me out of Hamilton Hall into the area occupied by the enlisted men who were stationed at the academy.

I waited one day, then two days, and nothing happened. I finally went to see the lieutenant with whom I had spoken earlier and asked about the delay. He told me that as soon as they received the letter from my parents saying it was ok for me to leave, I could be on my way. I was thunderstruck and told the officer that they didn't know they had to write a letter.

As luck would have it, I got a letter from my mother that day, one that was written before I called her to say that I was leaving the academy. There was a fair amount of space between the body of text on the second page of the letter and the area where Mom signed it. The thought hit me. What if that letter contained at least an acknowledgement that Mom and Everett were aware I was leaving the academy? I practiced mimicking Mom's handwriting and added a sentence at the end that clearly indicated they were not only aware of, but approved of my decision, something along the lines of "We know it was a hard decision to quit the academy, son, but we support you."

With the modified letter in hand, I returned to the lieutenant's office. He was surprised to see me again, but I told him about getting the letter and that it showed that my parents were at least aware of my decision. He asked to see it, and I feigned hesitation, saying it was a personal letter that mostly contained news of the family. He said, "I understand, Mr. Wiggins, but maybe there is something there that we can use." "*There damned well better be,*" I thought, "*since I wrote it that way!*" He read through the entire letter, said it would be sufficient, and I was on the next train to Louisville. I received an honorable discharge from the academy, but if they had found out about this deception, that certainly would not have been the case.

Unlike the other service academies, there was no requirement for a man who quit or was dismissed from the Coast Guard Academy to immediately enter that branch of the service, so I was "free". Nevertheless, I carried around for years a great deal of guilt and misgivings about quitting the Coast Guard Academy, even entertaining thoughts about trying to get back in right up to my 22nd birthday, the

oldest a young man can be admitted to the academy. It was quite a few years after that before I got my head together enough to get on with the rest of my life.

Back in Charlestown, I finally got up enough courage to see Dutch Reis and talk with him about quitting. However, I would not go see my girlfriend, whose family had moved to the neighboring town of Sellersburg during my senior year. One day there was a knock at the door, and there stood her mother. She said, "I know a young lady who would very much like to see you." It was good to hear that she was ok with me resuming a relationship with her daughter!

The most recent version of this chapter (2/15/2023) can be found at:
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