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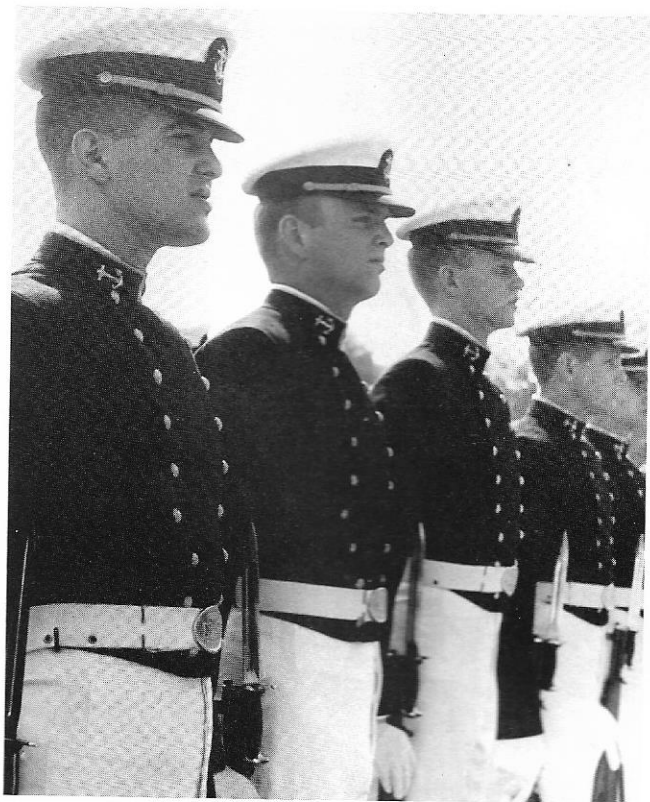


OFFICER ASSIGNMENT — A FIVE YEAR PROTECTION

THE GROWTH OF MIDSHIPMEN

— OR —

Is the Naval Academy Really Working?



By T. R. McNATT '73

The following article is an attempt to succinctly define and analyze some of the existing problems at the United States Naval Academy. It is being written with a single reference—four years of experience at the Academy and the terrifically complex range of views, policies, and attitudes this experience has included. Specific problems and conditions which exist here will be examined but their specific nature will then be altered by relating common characteristics of these situations and finally by describing the evident philosophy governing the 'experience' a young man who has become a midshipman undergoes at the Naval Academy.

To any alert observer who is closely involved with midshipmen one of the most startling characteristics of the typical midshipman is his outspoken dislike of his duties. The high point of almost any mid's day would be the cancellation of a class, discovery of a legitimate excuse for missing drill practice or P-rade or a chance to be excused from any other evolution or commitment. This being able to 'miss' something could be the most important part of this young man's day. The question now arises—why did our observer think this quality to be startling? The reason is obvious; the typical midshipman, before he came to the Naval Academy, was very highly motivated in many aspects

of life. He was the achiever in academics and athletics; he was the leader in both; he was the leader in his schoolmates eyes. He was active in worthwhile community activities. His recommendations from adults who knew him were unquestionably superb. Now he takes pride in boasting of missing what is supposed to be his job, what is supposed to be that which will build and develop those potentials he has already amply displayed in his pre-academy years. Why is missing these obligations so important to him?

When such an attitude is pervasive among the Brigade, and it is, what chance does morale have? The answer is obvious, morale has no chance at all. If most mids would rather be doing something other than their duties, i.e. attending class, marching parades, studying, even if what they would rather do is something meaningless such as sleeping or watching television, performance at their duties is certainly not going to contribute to good morale.

Another recent development at the Naval Academy has been the institution of discharge paps for certain conduct offenses. Specifically those in question are alcoholic beverage consumption or alcoholic beverage container possession and second offense automobile violations. The simple presence of these rules may not be wrong in itself but it is wrong for these rules to be made, promulgated and effected without at the same time explaining the reason for the rule. The gross paradox posed by the absence of a reason for such a rule that results in the discharge of a midshipman for having in his possession an empty beer can becomes blatantly clear when the situation is viewed by a civilian. The civilian asks why this man is not at the Academy any longer and receives the answer 'because I had an empty beer can in my room'. The civilian will almost certainly think the reply a joke or a poor attempt to evade his question. But what can the former midshipman, who may have committed more than three years of his life to the Naval Academy, answer? There must be a good reason to justify such harsh punishment; why doesn't the brigade know it?

Another condition which somehow indicates a fundamental lack of motivation and proper attitude on the part of midshipmen is the typical performance of Academy graduates at Nuclear Power School. Average class standing at the conclusion of Nuclear Power School of USNA grads is third, behind NROTC and OCS junior officers. Is this fact the result of inadequate academic preparation or is it undisputable evidence of the typical Naval Academy graduate's lack of desire to do his best for the Navy? And should we be so short-sighted to think this relative degree of performance is limited only to Nuclear Power School? Isn't it very likely that the Naval Academy Ensign, despite or perhaps in spite of his Academy training, does not care to do the best job he is capable of performing in the fleet?

So far this paper has made many negative observations and has raised several pointed questions which

contain negative implications toward the Naval Academy. These observations and questions are easy to make and raise but they are only the short half of the overall situation. The long half is a positive view of what changes can be effected which will constructively overcome the problems. To begin this side of the analysis a hard look at the Naval Academy's mission is in order. The formal mission is:

To prepare young men morally, mentally and physically to be professional officers in the Naval Service.

The key word in this mission is 'prepare'. 'Prepare' is a tremendously versatile word—prepare how? is an implicit question. The remainder of this article will attempt to relate the previous observations to the existing philosophy of 'how' midshipmen are being prepared for the fleet and then propose a new philosophy to supersede the existing one.

Undisputable facts and observations already described have almost without question demotivated and demoralized midshipmen and have done so pervasively, not in just isolated cases. This demotivation must be a result of the existing 'system'; the system being the collective experience a young man receives as a midshipman. How does the system demotivate a highly capable, motivated person? It does so by regulating this man's life in a way which eliminates his exercise of personal responsibility and sense of importance and at the same time does not replace these vital qualities of an intelligent capable person's life with something meaningful. This is the essence of the existing philosophy of 'preparation'. A midshipman is made responsible for attending many, many mandatory evolutions, e.g. classes, formations, intramurals, and is told this 'accountability' places a serious responsibility on him. But how great is the responsibility of going to formation and class when for the vast majority of these evolutions the mid is confined to the yard to begin with? A similar lack of responsibility now exists in the way a midshipman's salary is handled for him. If preparation is the mission why shouldn't experience be given in handling of finances by giving a midshipman his salary and then sending him bills to pay. If the admission standards here mean anything at all every mid is certainly capable of managing his paycheck.

This existing system of preparation can without doubt be better described by the word 'mold'. And the mission could be rewritten '. . . to mold young men morally, mentally, and physically. . . .' What a midshipman is supposed to be responsible for is so overwhelmingly a mere mandatory evolution that in fact his rational, intelligent sense of good judgment and exercise of personal responsibility is not only ignored, but is unquestionably put down. The proposition about to be made would try to reverse this situation by instituting the need for each midshipman to exercise his own

sense of judgment and responsibility. This new system could be described by the word develop; the mission could be rewritten '... to *develop* midshipmen morally, mentally and physically ...'

This new philosophy would rely on the individual sense of responsibility and level of maturity of each midshipman. The basic difference between this philosophy and that governing the existing system is that the new one would rely on a sense of mutual trust and respect between the executive department and the midshipmen. The executive department would have to recognize and acknowledge the scope of each midshipman's abilities and sense of judgment and especially acknowledge the large commitment accepted by second class midshipmen. With this recognition and understanding the executive department would have to entrust at least the first and second class with a reasonable amount of personal freedom. Specifically, it would seem entirely reasonable for second class to be on today's first class rates and have first class on rates somewhat commensurate with those they'll immediately face upon graduation.

The midshipman's end of the bargain would then be one of accepting the challenge from the executive department. If the midshipmen have been entrusted with personal freedoms commensurate with their maturity and responsibility then the executive and academic departments can demand a high level of performance and get a positive reaction. Another way of viewing this new relationship is that the administration says to each midshipman: 'okay, you've signed an agreement which makes your being a midshipman a full time job; you've committed yourself for seven years (at the

start of second class year); we recognize the size of this commitment and respect you for accepting it; we also respect your personal capabilities and sense of judgment; we are going to expect, in fact demand, a level of performance in academics and military duties commensurate with these abilities and with a full time job and in return for this performance we are entrusting you with a high degree of personal freedom as well'.

This writer feels that with such a philosophy governing the 'system' at the Naval Academy an astonishingly positive reaction would result. No longer would the Naval Academy be just a good place to be from, as most graduates will concede, but it would also be a good place to be. Midshipmen would no longer perform their academic and military duties in a disinterested and sullen manner. These duties could be understood as a real job and a worthwhile one, not just another way of wasting a young man's time. Midshipmen could feel a high degree of pride in fulfilling their half of the contract with the executive department. The existing system of executive department demands being negatively accepted by the midshipmen would be replaced by a relationship based on mutual trust and respect which would produce positive reactions from midshipmen. And the years spent at the Naval Academy would then truly be years of development and growth morally, mentally and physically; and each year at graduation a group of men would be sent to the fleet who have not only a tremendous potential but who would also have a tremendously positive attitude toward the Navy and without doubt their performance in the fleet would reflect this attitude.

