

## So you're coming to Annapolis

(West Point/Colorado Springs/King's Point)! *What to expect during your four years by the Bay, or at another service academy. A summary of 22 years listening to midshipmen at the US Naval Academy For the USNA Class of 2013*

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### The Good News

Congratulations! You're coming to Annapolis, the U.S. Naval Academy—or one of the other service academies (though I'll talk only about Annapolis, a lot of what I say here is true of the others as well). Maybe I'll get lucky at the end of August, after you're done with plebe summer, and have you in one of my plebe English classes, required for all students: we have several levels, however, and I only teach two sections a semester, for a total of about 40 students out of a plebe class of 1200. So probably not. If you don't get me, you'll get the results of a computer lottery that slots you into a schedule that works. Thus you'll get one of my civilian colleagues, all of whom have a Ph.D. and have been here for a while, or a military instructor, almost all of whom have an M.A. and many of whom have just arrived. The same is true in your other required courses, where you'll be placed depending on how well you do on the placement exams you'll take during the summer. If you are at any service academy but Annapolis, the civilians will all be fewer, and not so entrenched. Annapolis has had civilian professors since its founding in 1845; it seems to be a point of pride of the administration to claim that there are equal numbers of civilian and military instructors. It's not true—there are far fewer military than civilians, and the military instructors (who typically stay only 3 years, as opposed to a career) are concentrated in subjects like Leadership, Ethics, and Law, Naval Architecture, or some of the Engineering departments. Still, in English we have some uniforms too. Probably you'll be too zonked out being a plebe to notice: I've had students who can't remember who their teachers were from the semester before. Or is that the fault of the professor/instructor?

### Top Gun

As I write, it's May, so all but a small handful of members of the USNA Class of 2013 (a number you'll say many times in marching cadences, in an attempt to bond you together into a unit) have heard that they have been accepted, and have sent in their counter-acceptance. For many of you, this is the fulfillment of a dream: perhaps you saw "Top Gun... in the 4th grade and have wanted ever since to fly. I know you've also seen "A Few Good Men" and can all quote Jack Nicholson's famous speech verbatim, and can probably also do "Monty Python and the Holy Grail" without a script. Maybe you had a family member come here or to one of the other service academies; maybe you're the first in your family to do so. Probably, in any case, you have a history of military service in the family. Of course, there are exceptions. I remember a young woman in the 1990s whose parents who had been self-professed anti-military hippies.

Still, they came through for her when she said she wanted to go to a service academy: “We want you to be happy,” they told her.

That’s what all parents should say: many don’t. Many of you are coming with an intense army of supporters and cheerleaders who have made clear to you that your coming is the fulfillment of their dream too and you really don’t have much of a choice in the matter. Perhaps your school guidance counselor or principal (who may have treated you with new-found respect when it was announced you’d gotten in) is one of them, perhaps your father most of all or Uncle Bob, or your whole town. You’re probably feeling the heat: will you succeed? I can’t let them all down! Some of you may feel this is as much Dad’s decision as your own: for your sake, I hope not, because things are going to get hairy when you start to realize the real nature of the Academy as opposed to the hype. But to that below.

One thing is clear: the US Naval Academy hype machine is one of the most effective on the planet. Those of you who have dreamed of Navy since forever have seen the stirring promo videos with the swelling music, the spotless whites, the whipping U.S. flag... and been so motivated you wanted to cry. You’ve talked to garrulous alumni who begin to cry themselves when they speak of their time, now so long ago, at Annapolis. In my experience the cloud of nostalgia begins to blanket the Yard as of the moment our First Class become Ensigns and Second Lieutenants on Graduation Day. Graduates typically mind-dump the bad and retain the sense of great intensity: it was all so loud, and so unrelenting, but now it’s behind you, and the world seems open, so why complain? You’re young, you’re outta here, and the world is suddenly open to you. Plus, you don’t want to let down the team by letting on what it was really like. Apparently at Annapolis, and by extension the military as a whole, there’s no such thing as fixing things, because by definition they ain’t broke. (That conviction that we always have to blow sunshine is one of our worst enemies, and we’re the ones who encourage it. Go figure.)

### Airport etiquette

I regularly have to remind students before vacations or break to be polite to the people in the airports who will want to fawn over them, as they’re (you’re) so nice looking in SDB (double breasted black—though called Navy blue—suits, very flattering and very adult on guys, frankly less flattering to girls). One of my third class asked me last year: “Sir, what would they say if we told them the truth?” My advice: don’t. Just smile and say “thank you sir/ma’am.” After all, they’re paying for it (current U.S. government figures place the cost of a midshipman education at \$350,000, with West Point \$100,000 more—and that’s what’s reported to high schools that count the “scholarships” their students get, so you probably skewed the numbers of your high school tallies) All those taxpayers who are bankrolling you love to come see you in action too: you’ll feel like a fish in a bowl, with lots of tourists watching you come and go on our picturesque campus. Tourists think female mids are especially interesting: “Look Mabel, a girl one!” There are more tourists at Annapolis than at any other service academy, because they’re so isolated and Annapolis is so close to Washington, D.C. Our campus is part of the Ye Olde

Annapolis tour, so you'll get used to seeing guides in 18th century costumes leading around tourists, or the local Naval Academy ones reciting all the lore. Get used to being looked at. After all, part of your job is PR—the administration has gotten clear about that in recent years, and you'll hear over and over that you're the “face of the Navy.” Your job, that is, is to look neat in your uniform and keep our paymasters happy—the taxpayers. Some of you will resent this, and resent being animals in a zoo. You'll hate drill and pray for rain on parade days, but the tourists love it. Live with it. You may have thought you were training to be a badass Marine, but in fact you're here in part to look good.

Perhaps you visited my class as a “drag” when in high school. If so, I sometimes ask my plebes if they have any advice for you. “DON'T COME,” they all chorus. I tell you not to pay attention to that advice: “They just want to keep it for themselves,” I say. But that's a lie. Actually this contact between someone on one side of the Wall and those on the inside is always striking to me: the kids with long hair and civilian clothes really have no clue, and they're just the way my plebes were a year ago. The gulf is striking. The plebes probably pitied you, what you don't know that is. That's what they tell me, at any rate. I'm writing this so you know something of what they know. Maybe that way the gap will lessen.

## Big Gap

As it is, the gap is huge. I assigned a paper to plebes just last year and picked a topic on a whim (it's an exercise in focusing on the topic; the topic doesn't matter): How My Views of the US Naval Academy Have Changed Since Coming Here. I was floored by what I got. Almost every one of close to 40 papers contrasted the golden pumped-up glow of pre-arrival with the horrified realization that we're nothing like what the outside world thinks we are, and nothing like what they wanted us to be. It was the beginning of a long discussion.

Most of you are incredibly idealistic. I've been a member of the Admissions Board and have read countless (not usually too well written) professions of patriotism and longing to serve, the stuff that brought you here. Probably you've had a Blue and Gold officer who told you the usual stuff about more astronauts from Annapolis than anywhere else per capita, higher flag officer rates of Academy graduates, and the vast network of alumni and citizens proud of your military service who stand ready to make you a success in civilian life after your time in the Navy or Marine Corps (the latter about 20% of our student body, rising from about 15% in recent years). So you probably feel you're doing the right thing, and you're going to be rewarded for it. Doing well by doing good, as we sometimes say. They don't tell you that astronauts are largely a thing of the past and that the upper ranks are being filled by women, minorities, and ROTC graduates: the times they are a'changin'. Nor do they talk to you about the necessity to re-tread if you get out after your five years of service (more if you fly), by which point you'll be 30, or the necessity to do so in your mid-40s if you do a “career” of 20 years.

Plus it's a free education. I know you've heard someone tell you with a snicker that it's "free" but shoved up your behind a nickel at a time. You're uncertain what that means. But it still beats the astronomical cost of college elsewhere.

About half the class, perhaps some more, are the hyper-motivated ones who think they're coming, finally, to the shrine of all that's good and pure, a kind of modern-day Camelot on the Severn. Maybe you got tired of unmotivated goofballs at home. Maybe the challenges weren't challenging enough. Maybe the guys weren't studs. Forget that, you say to yourself; you're putting it behind you. You have made it! You're coming to a place where all the students got 1600 on their SATs and can do 25 perfect pull-ups without breaking a sweat.

If you're of this group, you long for challenge. You were always the standout in high school, probably the football team captain, the debating champion, the marathon runner. You love succeeding, and you love the chance to do so. Annapolis seems to offer that chance. You relish the horror stories about doing push-ups until you collapse, running until you puke. You loved "A Sense of Honor." You love being told that admission to Annapolis certifies your membership in the club of "the best and the brightest." All you have to do is succeed, and you're pretty confident you will, since you've always done so before.

## Camelot

The more convinced you are when you come that this place is the pinnacle of your dreams, a modern-day Camelot, the place where golden boys and girls come to push themselves from success to success, the more you're going to be knocked for a loop by its myriad of imperfections. Some of these are the result of the fact that our hype about uniformly high midshipman quality is only hype; some are the result of our current policies; some are the result of the fact that NOTHING ON EARTH is as perfect as an idealistic 18-year-old can imagine it to be. In my view, we should be clear with students about what they're getting into so they don't have to deal with the intense, for some life-changing let-down that follows. Me, I believe we can be truthful about what Annapolis offers and still get people to come. And they'd spend a lot less time dealing with the realization that we're not what they expected.

Your first disappointment will be looking around and wondering, where are the jacked geniuses I expected to be swimming in? We let in people for many reasons, only some of which have to do with being jacked geniuses. This means that if you are one of the super-motivated hyper-achiever good student, good athlete, good leader, coming direct from high school, who expected to be surrounded by people you could look up to and who would push you, you are in for a surprise. Our geniuses tend not to be jacked, and our jacked guys tend not to be geniuses.

And the women aren't quite sure how to negotiate in a world where genius alone doesn't cut it and jacked isn't really an option for them. About 20% of you will be women. If you're one of them and typical, you won't be very different from the guys in terms of motivation and reasons

for coming. Studies have shown that women at Annapolis do best when they're team members: being athletic is prized at Annapolis, so that gives you status, and the support of the team seems huge. So a larger proportion of women than men are recruited athletes. Otherwise women aren't let in by any different mechanism or track than men are.

The other half the class is going to be a bit different. It's not let in by the same standards as the over-achievers; it's let in to fulfill specific institutional and political goals. The top layer of the class is going to be just as bright as you thought everyone would be, and some are in fact going to be studs (defined as being jacked and able to do countless pull-ups and run forever with a weight on your back). But the fact is that we admit what for outsiders is an astonishing percentage of our class based on other criteria completely, and in most cases, those other criteria had nothing to do with being the high-caliber candidates that the hype machine tells the world is our norm.

### Cowards about race

For example, to follow Attorney General Eric Holder's suggestion that we stop being "cowards" in talking about race: we're mad keen to get non-white midshipmen, and will go to practically any lengths nowadays to get them. Having been on the Admissions Board, I know and have written about the fact that the admissions hurdle for non-white students is far lower than for whites, though some of the non-white students obviously don't need it that low. In addition, minority applicants are admitted "direct" and do not have to win over other contenders competing against them on a Congress(wo)man's "slate." Some of you had interviews with members of their staff. We do turn away many stellar white students, however we turn away no stellar minority ones, and in fact offer "direct" admission to many distinctly non-stellar ones. This means that one more stellar all-around (but not minority) candidate got a rejection letter. (All this is taxpayer money at work, remember.) Nobody will tell you this, however; if you're perceptive you'll notice it, and think you have to be mistaken.

But you're not. The Naval Academy is engaged in one of the most aggressive affirmative action pushes anywhere in the U.S.: the bottom line is that checking one of the boxes listed below virtually guarantees you admission, if you can walk, and get SAT scores above about 15% of those taking the tests nationally (400). If your grandmother is from Puerto Rico, Honduras, or even Spain, as a result, now is the time to remember it. You're suddenly Hispanic and you're in. (If Grandma is from France, however, that doesn't help.)

Listen to the brass. The current CNO, Chief of Naval Operations, told an NROTC group in Annapolis in March that "Diversity is our number one priority." That means that the admissions office is proud to claim that 28% of your shipmates have checked a box that said they were African-American, Hispanic, Native American/Pacific Islander, or Asian.

In order to fulfill this "number one priority," the fact is that we recruit many of these. That means that probably they hadn't ever thought of the military before a Naval Academy

admissions recruiter—not wearing a uniform, we hear—showed up at their school to talk about the advantages of Annapolis. In order to get them, we will take minorities with SAT scores into the 300s through our feeder school, NAPS, and minorities with SAT scores in the 500s directly to Annapolis. They don't have to be studs either. All they have to be is non-white.

Thus if you come from a “post-racial” high school where you barely noticed what color the other kids were, you're in for a shock. Here, we notice. You may be totally “over” race and resentful that the institution clearly isn't: I heard this from a black student from New York, who hadn't thought about the fact she's black in a while, and found herself having to think about it constantly at Annapolis.

After a while, whatever your skin color, you'll begin to notice that the non-white kids are regularly, apparently too regularly, picked for top slots, that low performing minority students are retained when they screw up, and so on. This leads to a certain amount of resentment on the part of the white students. If you are one of the minorities and didn't need the huge boost you had to get in, you'll probably resent the resentment. I had a black student recently, very bright, who wrote that she hated the assumption that she was dumb based on her skin color. I could understand that counter-resentment. Still, I don't think that assumption on the part of midshipmen was the result of their having brought in racist values; it seems more likely to me that it was the result of noticing their surroundings.

If you're black, therefore, it's going to be a bit rough. You won't like the feeling of getting special attention or being cut slack, and you'll resent the white students' conviction that all that happens. Weak white students, if not athletes, don't get in. Weak minority ones do. So many lower-level classes are composed almost entirely of minorities and athletes. If you're one of these, you may be sweating academically: students with SAT scores in the 400s typically do, understandably. You may resent the institution for pulling you in over your head. If you a black guy or gal who got 750 on your SAT, you won't like being lumped together with the guys and gals who didn't.

### Blue-chips

You might have been recruited for another reason, because a coach “blue-chipped” you for one of our teams. Probably civilian schools were recruiting you too. You may not be so sure about this military business. If Annapolis succeeds in convincing, begging, you to come, you'll get the same breaks as the other “set-aside” admissions (as I've called them, much to the disgust of those who got this break): you'll be able to go to NAPS with C grades and 400s on your SATs, and direct to Annapolis with Bs and Cs and mid-500s, while a non-recruit gets rejected for less than 600 and more than a single C past sophomore year. So sure, it's a double standard. We'll do anything to field our teams. The people who got rejected are also fine high school athletes too, just not nationally competitive. It's a little unclear what being a nationally competitive (say) shot-putter

or runner has to do with being an officer, rather than merely a good high school one, but that's our program.

The athletic recruits are (by my best estimation; figures aren't available) between 15-20% of the class. So that probably means you're not in the group that has wanted to come since the 4th grade. Many of the athletes are here to play their sport and had to be sweet-talked into coming: the non-athletes who prayed and sweated to get here are going to resent this. The resentment may not end there. The big ticket sports are football and basketball: their team members are treated like kings, especially football players, who are idolized, given lots of privileges, and don't have to do a lot of the scut stuff.

I've had football players who have felt ashamed that they got cut such slack for being football players, and there are others who don't take advantage of their situation. But some do. And midshipmen note it. Midshipmen also note that everybody has to fall in line behind the football team. We don't have mando chapel any more, but we do have mando football. Every home football game you'll spend most of the day marching in formation from the Academy around downtown Annapolis, waiting for the game to start, watching the game, and running on the field to do pushups when Navy scores. If it's a nice day you'll have a good time, unless you're sitting there grouching about the other things you're not getting done. The fans love to see you perform, and you're the "pampered pets of Uncle Sam," as one of the songs you'll learn reminds you. If the team wins an important game, the Supe may give you weekend liberty, so you're rooting for them to win too. The only one that really matters is the Army-Navy game, however: as a plebe you'll yell something "motivational" like BEAT ARMY SIR! Or GO NAVY SIR! Every time you square (not turn) a corner in Bancroft Hall. That means The Game. Our football rivalry with Army keeps things hopping. If you're not onto the fact that we're a football school, you should be aware of it and prepared to live with it. They'll tell you we're about preparing officers for the Navy and Marine Corps, but really we're about winning the Army-Navy football game. (Remember: if Navy wins, Army loses, so the net benefit to defense of the citizens of the U.S. is a bit murky.)

## Priors

There will also be a small group (6%) of old men and women (nobody over 23 on the first day of plebe summer, however) who have been in the Navy and Marine Corps. The gold standard here will be the prior Marines, best of all the two or three Marines with combat experience. Right up there too will be people like the Navy diver who was a student of mine until last year, when he graduated. Most "priors," however, will have spent a year in Navy nuke school: they probably won't be "motivated" because they'll all be older than the people telling them what to do, and whom they have to call "sir." Nor are they likely to believe that the nonsense that fills our day is necessary for the fleet: they know it's not true. The older priors are the ones with the worst attitude problems, understandably—the more studly they are, the more it grates on them to have a still-wet-behind-the-ears upperclassman who's never been in the real Navy or Marine Corps

telling them they're not "professional." They can turn it around only if someone takes them aside and reiterates that the other plebes are looking up to them as role models. But USNA is rough for priors, no question.

If you are one, think of it as a means to an end, and you'll be fine. If you try to insist on the respect that you've earned in the uniform, you're dead. "Lose the chip on your shoulder," as one of our Marine colonel Division Directors used to tell the prior Marines. I think it's just that you know what you're hearing is wrong, and you know you're entitled to the respect you're not going to get. If you can't deal with that, don't come.

About 200 of you, out of about 1200, will be coming from NAPS, our preparatory school, and an additional ca. 60 from a year at a 13th grade at a private prep school. People are sent to NAPS who have a broken leg academically: low SAT scores, no upper-level courses, generally poor preparation. The idea is to let the leg mend and give you rehab, but there's no proof that the rehab is successful. Because the system has a stronger hold on you if they send you to NAPS, you probably were in one of the groups the system wants to be sure ends up at Annapolis rather than changing his or her mind: recruited athletes, recruited minorities. (They send the white kids with some money in the family to the private prep schools, on Naval Academy Foundation scholarships: perhaps you were one.) Having identified you and paid for remediation, the system wants to get you through your remedial year and to—as well as through--Annapolis. You're supposed to have a 2.0 (C) average at NAPS to be guaranteed a slot at Annapolis, but a) this isn't hard to get and b) if you don't get it they'll probably negotiate with you and you'll come anyway. If you come from NAPS you've already done a boot camp and plebe summer won't be a problem. However because NAPS is a remedial school you're liable to be rather defensive: you know you're not the "best and the brightest" and you're probably a bit defensive, waiting for people to say that. It's not fun feeling that way, but the Navy said it wanted you to come, so you'll give it a try.

### Plebe summer

Wherever you came from and however you got in, during plebe summer your idealism will still be at its height. You'll note and be puzzled by the fact that the jacked geniuses aren't all that numerous and that many seem weak indeed, but there are no academics plebe summer, and everybody is shell-shocked and hence non-judgmental, not to mention no good at seeing the Big Picture. So this first realization that not everybody here is stellar probably won't affect you too badly.

A generation of plebes have convinced me that if you're halfway in shape physically, plebe summer will not be a problem. You'll function on too little sleep, for sure, you won't eat enough, you'll stink because you don't have time to shower and you'll grow mold on any place where the sun don't shine. But you'll do fine physically. In fact those of you who are studs will find it somewhat puff-ball. Every class maintains it had the "last real plebe summer," however. You'll



hear from old boy alumni who complain that detailers (or cadre, as they were called for a time, the newly minted 2nd class, juniors—they've had two years at Annapolis and were where you were only two years before) can't touch you (that's the effect of having women) and can't drop you to "give me 20" or make you run more than a certain amount. And nothing happens on "black-flag" days, which in July and August by the Bay can be 100 degrees with bad air. If you're a stud and wanted to be pushed to the max, you'll be disappointed.

Parris Island, it isn't. (And it's not a bit like that ridiculous movie "Annapolis," which as you know was shot at a private high school in Philadelphia, not here.) If you were out of shape when you came, you'll lose a lot of weight and be knocked into something like shape. My figures run about 50-50 on the percentages of plebes who thought plebe summer was harder than they expected or softer.

But there is a constant in what I hear about plebe summer. During plebe summer, you'll be made to feel like a failure. That doesn't feel good, but people learn to "suck it up" and are told it's part of being a plebe. I'm not sure anyone has ever shown scientifically that the alpha people we attract are motivated by being made to feel like a failure, but that's what you're going to experience.

That's the system; it's like a casino where the bank always wins—if the bank loses too much, they just change the machinery so that it does. Anybody will feel like a failure if s/he is overloaded. The purpose of plebe summer is to overload you so you fail. Me, I don't feel like a failure because I have to run a life that's manageable for the long haul: I have only three kids, and teach three classes a semester, and write about a book a year, and work out only once a day. If, however, I had 30 kids, 10 classes, had to write three books, and worked out four times a day, I'd feel a failure, because I wouldn't be able to fit it in. That's going to be your situation plebe summer. It's purposely engineered to be too much. You've had achievable goals before; these are designed not to be achievable. One school of thought says the resulting frustration (an inevitable result in alpha people) strips you of your individuality so you rely on your shipmates: ship, shipmate, self, as we say around here, that's the order of priorities in descending order. That's an awakening for all of our big-fish-in-little-pond self-starters. The defenders of the system insist that's its point. In any case you're going to spend the summer dealing with this particular set of thoughts: maybe I'm not as good as I thought, I'm so frustrated, and so on. Whatever you do will be wrong. Students have told me we can't physically haze any more, so we do psychological hazing. The old guard insists that tough is good, and it "makes you a (wo)man." But even if it doesn't we're going to do it. It's a rite of passage: if they haven't made you miserable, they've failed. Most of you being men, you rather like being miserable—or if you don't like it, think it's the male lot: we're the ones who suck it up. So you suck it up. If you're female, the constant challenge is to show you're as good as the guys. So you'll suck it up twice as fast.

In fact, it's an interesting peculiarity of Annapolis that some of our most ardent defenders are the female mids, though I'd say it's about twice as hard for them as for the guys because of the

double whammy (see below) of what is arguably preferential treatment for women and what is unarguably the male resentment that follows their conviction that that's so. In the old days (first women arrived in 1976) women were treated abominably. I know a graduate from the early 80s who says she kept a broom handle by her bed to grab in the middle of the night to body-block male mids coming in and throwing themselves on her. When she complained to the then-Commandant, he said, "What did you expect when you came here?" Now the pendulum has swung hard in the opposite direction, so we're one of the most "politically correct" places on Earth. You're not supposed to notice someone is female, or think that there may be things men do better than women (or the reverse).

The goal is gender-neutrality. Being a high-on-hormones 18-22-year-old, you'll think that's ridiculous, and feel as if you're checking your speech at every turn. It'll be a bit like living through Orwell's 1984: have your thoughts or facial expressions or words betrayed you?

But all that is after plebe summer. Back to that, and one urgent word of advice: know "Reef Points" by heart by I-Day. That means BACKWARDS AND FORWARDS before you get here. MEMORIZE IT. BE ABLE TO REPEAT IT IN YOUR SLEEP. This is far important than, say, getting in shape if you aren't already. Lots of your fellow plebes won't be in shape, and the system will get you in shape. But not knowing "Reef Points" is death. It'll get you behind in everything and double if not triple your frustration level as a result. You can't really learn it here. I see plebes during plebe summer standing in a line with "Reef Points" in their faces, pretending to concentrate. They aren't, because they can't. They're tired, hungry, frustrated, and nothing makes sense. So LEARN IT BACK IN PODUNK in your warm kitchen while smelling your mom's pancakes cooking. It'll stick a lot better. And you get the pancakes after.

In sum, the effect of plebe summer is to frustrate alpha people rather than motivate them positively. I'm not sure there's a point in that; me, I think alpha people need to be inspired and shown realistic, achievable goals, and cheered on while they try for those goals. You know, like reasonable parents at sports events in high school. We're not reasonable parents, we're helicopter parents. The Naval Academy is the ultimate Nanny state, which (see below) means you'll end by feeling that your initiative has been taken from you. Ultimately it'll give you the feeling that no matter what you do, the system is going to take you where it wants to take you no matter what you do: all you can do is hang on for the ride. The experience typically makes midshipmen resentful, and surly: what Freud called passive-aggressive, overtly quiescent but steaming inside.

However, this won't happen until later. Plebe summer, in fact, will probably make you even more idealistic: it's incredibly bonding to be so close to so many people you never saw before in your life and have it all be so intense and have them matter so much in terms of quality of life. Bond or die. What self-starters do learn from plebe summer is.... Teamwork. You can't pass a room inspection in limited time unless everybody does the work assembly-line style, for example; you won't be allowed to show up ready if the rest of your company isn't. Being first is a bad thing during plebe summer. You'll learn all that the hard way.

You'll probably also bond on your 2nd class, if s/he is halfway decent. You came looking for heroes—after all you've heard about Stockdale and know about McCain, and you know they walked these walkways. The hyper-motivated achievers we attract tend to love heroes. The system knows this, and lays it on thick: there are statues, memorials, and even plaques of Medal of Honor winners on rooms in Bancroft Hall. You may wonder if living in a room of a Medal of Honor winner is more likely to make you a Medal of Honor winner, but probably not: it's too much fun to dream.

The upperclass detailers like plebe summer too: they have all those eager young people dying to be them and please them. They love having you loving them: it's a huge pump. I've had upperclass tell me that their best leadership experience was as a squad leader during plebe summer: it was just them and you, and the good ones rose to the occasion. You're ready to pay attention, and you're eager to hero-worship. So if they give you half a chance, you will. If your detailer is one of our jacked geniuses, you certainly will. If he's a male prior Marine with combat experience and huge guns, you'll be ready to die for him then and there. The bad news is, it's possible your detailer will be a dirtbag—someone you wouldn't want to be in a million years and who has no people skills and no guns. That can happen too. That will be bad, however, because it's all so intense, and they control so much of your life.

Plebe summer is fun, too. They take you to an Orioles game, you get 4th of July for a picnic, you get to roll around in the mud and play with the firehoses, maybe hang from the helos. You'll be tired and stinky, but who cares? Everybody will look like hell, girls and guys, you'll be exhausted and have no libido (probably a good thing), but when your parents come to see you standing tall in your whites on Parents' Weekend, they'll say how much older you look. That's worth it, right? Then you have another week of plebe summer, but it's all downhill to Brigade Re-form. And I do mean downhill.

By my calculation, after observing and talking with midshipmen for 22 years, your idealism, the thing that brought many of you here, will peak during plebe summer. I've heard they no longer give the "body bag" speech where they bring in a body bag and you feel it and think of the sacrifice that may be required and everybody has good cry. But they do something comparable. Certainly you'll go to Memorial Hall, with the names of graduates who gave the last full measure of devotion. They want you to understand that This Is Serious Stuff. And you'll get it, big time. You came wanting intensity, mental, physical, and moral: this is the moral intensity.

## Re-form

And then the rest of the Brigade comes back. Your idealism will be at its height just before Brigade re-form in August. Then it drops off a cliff. And it never recovers. That's what your Blue and Gold officer never told you, and what you didn't see in "Top Gun," and what's not in the motivational promo videos. I call it the plebe's "October surprise." You'll be robbed of the idealism you came in with, and overwhelmed with a feeling of being surrounded by dirtbags.

Brigade re-form will make the following things clear to you, and ambush your idealism about having arrived at Camelot:

There are many honor violations that go unreported and unpunished. Those that are reported are frequently declared not to be violations (we don't want to separate anyone these days) or are "remediated," which is like going to driver's ed classes after a DUI. You thought we were tough, big on "accountability," one-strike-you're-out, and find the system patting the wrists of people with huge violations and giving them "just one more chance." That's especially true if they're members of one of our heavily recruited groups, you'll probably conclude.

Even if they're not violating some honor or conduct rule, members of high-profile athletic teams are treated better, given more bennies, and treated more gently than other midshipmen. Some midshipmen, you conclude, are actually more equal than others.

Simply by keeping your eyes open, you realize that many of the first-class you were prepared to idolize are goof-offs, looking for ways to get out of doing things rather than being fired up with The Spirit. Some may be downright unprofessional. Their sloppiness may be in their uniforms, their rooms, their attitude, or their people skills. Yet so long as they pass their inspection and don't get caught doing whatever it is they're doing, they seem to think it's okay. They get away with it. And it doesn't seem to bother them. You'll realize that people here aren't interested so much in being good as in looking good. This will be a huge blow to your idealism, which has all the intensity of an 18-year-old eager to take on the world. How can they lecture you on not being "professional" when they're so lax themselves?

Your company officer, a lieutenant (sometimes LCDR) or USMC captain, may or may not be a good guy/gal. You will realize for the first time that being a US Navy or Marine officer does NOT mean the person will automatically be worthy of your respect.

You'll begin to think nobody realizes that the upperclass have to give respect to get respect. It'll be the little stuff that grates, too—and life is full of little stuff. You'll put your whole heart into saying "Good Morning Sir/Ma'am" to an upper-classman, only to have them ignore you. Don't they understand they have to respect you too? you'll wonder.

The rules will seem arbitrary, and be applied/followed up in an arbitrary way. As members of each transient administration come and go, policies that were said to be absolutely necessary one day are down away with the next, and the reverse. Yet while they were in force, you were told they the lid would blow if they weren't followed. You will hear constantly that "people die if you do X," where X can be anything from not shining your shoes to having mold on your shower curtain. The idea is certainly to get you to "sweat the small stuff," but the constant (over-)repetition of this phrase will make it a punch line. (So dies a bit more of your idealism.)

You'll realize that many of the things we do have absolutely nothing to do with the fleet—as conversations with the priors will convince you. You'll realize that your buddy in ROTC at, say, Vanderbilt, does nothing that you do and still will get the same commission you do, and serve next to you. You'll realize that plebe year is nonsense. What purpose is there in “squaring corners,” for example? It's “tradition,” you'll hear.

## Sex

The sexual frustration will drive you crazy. If you're gay and realize it only after coming to Annapolis, your life will be hell. If you say it, you're out. If you leave, you'll think of yourself as a quitter. If you're a straight guy, you'll realize that though there are some attractive women at Annapolis, all the guys are in competition for them. It's difficult dating a woman you see in uniforms and gym gear all the time, even if you're allowed to (no dating in your company, no dating plebes, no sex on campus). If you're a woman you'll feel that the men are being overly-critical of stuff you can't help, like the fact that upper body strength isn't what you're built for. It'll feel as if you're taking heat because you're a woman, which isn't fair. After all, you came for the same reasons of duty, honor, and country that they did.

The men, meanwhile, will feel they're living in a Nazi state where even to suggest that women and men might be different from each other is ruthlessly punished. Men typically resent the women here: it seems they get special treatment, are pushed forward into leadership positions in higher numbers than their proportions, and control the men through the presupposition that if there's unauthorized sex, the man started it and/or is a rapist. All of you will go to countless SHAPE and SAVI briefs: on that one, you'll find out. The “V” in SAVI, I'll note here, stands for “victim,” as in “Sexual Assault Victim Intervention.” Thus the systemic assumption is that all alleged assaults are real assaults—if there's a victim, there had to have been an assailant—and that it's typically men are the assailants. If someone, the woman most typically, says she's a victim of an assault (rather than, say, what the male calls consensual sex), then she is the victim, which means he's the assailant. The Naval Academy prosecuted two rape trials a few years ago by male midshipmen on female: it lost both of them, and the first thing the judge did in one was to prohibit the Academy lawyer from referring to the alleged victim as simply “the victim.” Still, that didn't slow down the SAVI briefs: they're Navy-wide, and you'll get your share. The men hate them, typically, and the women hate the fact that the men hate them.

At the very least, you'll become very conscious of gender: probably, if male, you liked girls fine in high school, sat next to them in math class, and looked forward to hanging out with them. You'll soon learn that it's frowned on to spend too much time with the female mids (if they're in your company you can't even date them)—dating a female mid is called “dark-siding.” There's a term for female mids derived from the letters designating their uniform that was used in a derogatory fashion (you can be punished for saying it nowadays, though it used to be printed in “Reef Points” as a term you had to learn, and was only removed in the 1990s)—but ever-resourceful mids have coined a short version of that, “Dub,” which is the first syllable of

“Dubya,” as in what the last president was sometimes called—that’s the first letter of the acronym you’re not allowed to use any more.

### Chart of motivation

I’ve talked to so many midshipmen, I can chart the downs (and occasional ups) of the pattern of diminishing midshipmen motivation over the next four years. It looks like this: you have a huge drop-off by October of plebe year, and a slight up-turn as you go home for Thanksgiving and Christmas (first time back home); it levels off after Christmas as you put your heads down to get through “The Dark Ages” of Jan-Feb; spring break brings a sizeable upturn, and then you’re looking forward to climbing Herndon, our phallic greased obelisk, and being “plebes no more.” You end plebe year above the October crisis, but nowhere near as high as you were in mid-August.

And after plebe year? Here I’ll go more quickly, but the bad news is that nothing ever quite equals the intensity of plebe summer, when you were ready to sacrifice everything for your shipmates, and believed that they deserved to have you do so. Your 3/C year will have the positive side of you not being a plebe, but in general it’ll be your low point, the Academy’s “sophomore slump.” You’ll be robbed of the idealism you came in with, and overwhelmed with a feeling of being surrounded by dirtbags. What’s it all about?

Many of you will think of leaving at the end of your 3/C year: you don’t have to sign commitment papers until late summer before 2/C year. You’ll be disappointed, burnt out, your idealism gone, the pump you came for now frittered away by the realization that many midshipmen are anything but stellar, some are downright horrible, that adult role models are few and far between, and that all the system really cares about is you looking good, not being good. But you’re here, the education is “free,” and you’ll feel you’ll be letting down Dad and your hometown if you leave, be a “quitter.” Yet no one is acknowledging what you’re sensing: all they do is talk to you about Admiral Stockdale, not the average mid. The institution does what it can to convince you that there is no life outside the U.S. Naval Academy: transferring to a civilian school means you’re a dirtbag. In any case, you’re supposed to be so bonded to your classmates that abandoning them is unthinkable. At least most of you won’t do it. And then you might as well stay. Who knows? Perhaps it’s good it’s so hard to leave: certainly most people think about it a lot; if it were easy I wouldn’t have any students. One faculty member told me when I arrived that “we lose our best and our worst.” Some of the top end do leave for Ivy-level schools, and a rare few (rarer now than 22 years ago) are “separated” for flunking out. But that’s almost impossible: what people don’t realize is that it’s very difficult to flunk out of Annapolis. We’re committed to “success,” which means tutoring you over the finish line.

### Drinking the Kool-Aid

The ones who drink the Kool-Aid are denigrated by the other mids as “Joes.” Those in positions of authority, the “stripers,” are usually seen as “Joes,” stooges (I actually heard a more salty term, referring to prison relationships) of the administration. But to some degree, everybody drinks the Kool-Aid. It comes gushing all the time: mids are the best and the brightest, they’re “held to a higher standard” (which seems to mean, ultimately, do more busywork—certainly it’s not true morally), they’re the ones not “getting a free ride” (that’s the civilians down the road at Hopkins or Georgetown, presumably), and so on. Plus you’re here, and not there, and unless you went to college for a year before (you don’t get credit for the year, and still are a plebe from the beginning—I once had a student who had done three years [!!] at a civilian school and started over at Annapolis as a plebe) you don’t know what other colleges are like, and the prestige seems so high, and Dad would be so disappointed, and you’d feel like scum. It’s difficult to remind yourself that civilians are the people you’re here to protect, there’s no shame in (only) going to, say, Johns Hopkins (and they can be studs too), and that being in the military is not the only one way to serve your country. (Me, by the way, I want mids to be proud of the particular way they’re serving, without thinking it’s the only way, or even the best way: how can it be when their job is to protect the others? If the others weren’t worth protecting, why do it?)

Second class year: you’ve signed your 2-for-7 papers, so you’re committed; most of the “do I stay or do I go??” angst is behind you. Only two more years to go. You may start getting some responsibility, which is fun, or helping with plebe summer—and having all those idealistic guys and gals idolize you. If you picked a major you like, life is better and in any case you’ve got your required (ukky) courses out of the way and so are probably happier for that reason. Things have calmed down because you’ve got the lay of the land, and aren’t on the firing line. And then you’re a firsty, the cock of the walk, the cream of the cream among the best of the best. You’ve probably never gotten over your plebe year disillusion, but hey, you can count the months, the weeks, then the days. By the time you’re ready to graduate that’s all you’ll think about: leaving us behind. That’s on one hand natural with young people, but it’s also sad. Our seniors don’t have garden variety senioritis; it’s much more intense than that: they’re really really eager to be gone.

## Academics

That’s the pattern of midshipman motivation. On more general topics: over your four years here, you’ll have been spending a lot of your time and energy on academics. You’re going to be a bit frustrated at this, probably, because it’s a rare midshipman who comes for the academics—you can get those anywhere, after all. Some of you will regard them as a nuisance, something standing between you and your commission. If you’re an athlete, they’re doubly onerous, because you have to pass classes to continue past a year or two on your sport: the institution is very proud of its high graduation rates of team members—they claim between 95% and 100% in all sports—and the way they get these is to take you off the team before senior year. (Yes, it’s fake. There’s a lot that’s fake here at Navy, you’ll find.) Nobody will understand why you have to take courses like “wires”—especially if you’re going to fly or go Marines. Still, you do.

If you have a military instructor, s/he won't, by definition, be an academic, and will either be junior or in a military-type department. Some LTs seem defensive, as if they were afraid the students wouldn't respect them enough. Some seem too buddy-buddy. Some hit the happy medium. Some civilian professors seem uninvolved and boring, and you'll go to sleep in their classes (sleeping in class is the midshipman's favorite thing to do), especially if they never bother to learn your names. Some are more interesting. But probably you'll be a bit disparaging about academics: you probably don't see the point, and anyway you go through so much you're entitled to be a little grumpy, right? Some mids get seriously into the classwork—we even have a dozen or so seniors who spend most of their last year doing a huge research project. But they're not average mids, most of whom are checking off the boxes of the largely required courses, counting the years and months until you graduate. It's difficult for most mids to see academics as an opportunity, rather than as yet something else that is going to take your time. Plus it's always a game of robbing Peter to pay Paul: you can spend time on your English paper, but that means you get a lower grade in calc because there just isn't time for everything.

Most of you suffer through your two semesters of English; only about 6% end up majoring in it (though about 35% major in non-technical majors, which gives the administration heartburn so they'll try to talk you out of being, say, a History major if you're good in technical subjects). "Why do I have to write?" I hear constantly. "I just want to storm beaches." When I hear that, I say: if that's really all you want to do, drop out and enlist. The idea of education is to get you to be able to look at the big picture and weigh your options. We're teaching skills here, not primarily content—though all skills have to be taught using content. That's why you have to take English, and History, and calculus, and chemistry, and a major. It's all about understanding how to synthesize materials.

Unfortunately, nobody actually ever explains to you why you have to go to college to be an officer, so most of you will simply be left wondering, and frustrated. There's some dissonance in the system due to the fact that we're a technical institution: I don't mean engineering, though we do have a lot of that. I mean that we're like Juilliard, only not for musicians, but for military officers. We produce officers, that's all we do. We're college, but we're not college. In a sense we provide too broad an education if what we're about is technical training. And you'll wonder why you have to take X, Y, and Z—and not be out to lunch in doing so. The thing is, however, that officers are better if they can think. And thinking means mastering the ways other people have thought. So that's why we're a college. If you come in thinking of this as a commando school, all the hours in the classroom will do nothing but frustrate you. The problem is that nobody explains to you that we're trying to give you broad skills, not just technical training, so it may not make sense to you: you're probably going to be caught in the middle thinking, "this is crazy."

It is crazy, there's no doubt about it. It's schizo, too. At least that's the way it'll seem to you. The goal of Bancroft Hall are to make you say SIR YES SIR. The goal of the academic side of things is to make you ask, "Why?" These things aren't necessarily contradictory, in fact the idea is that they complement each other in the best officers. But it'll be frustrating that few individuals you'll deal with seem to understand this. Your company officer or gunny will be



almost totally on the SIR YES SIR side of things. Your profs will be almost totally on the Socratic side, unless they're the old school that reels out the information whether you're asleep or awake. You'll have to figure out yourself that these are two antithetical but complementary things: that is, if you figure it out. Most people don't. It would be better if somebody tried to explain it to you. I'm trying

Bottom line

All the motivation at Annapolis is negative, and it's unrelenting. That means you'll be like lab rats waiting to be shocked. Your spirit won't die, because you're 18-21 and probably pretty full of yourself, but you'll feel frustrated. There won't seem to be any way you can actually contribute on your own: you'll feel robbed of your initiative. You'll look for ways to rebel too: in the old days that meant jumping the Wall, but now it's got more sensors and guard dogs than the Berlin Wall, so you have to find other ways to get a little of your own back, flip off The System.

Mostly you'll learn to put your chin down and survive. If you just hang on, it'll all be over. Midshipmen are constantly counting down to something: the next vacation, the end of the semester, Herndon, graduation. Because you get zapped for everything you do, after a while you'll cease looking for ways to be pro-active. It's rare to hear midshipmen enthusiastic about an academic or military challenge—unless they make it themselves.

That's what you have to "get" about Annapolis: it has lots of opportunities, but despite our rhetoric of "ship, shipmate, self," the opportunities aren't collective, they're individual. Take advantage of everything offered, accept every new challenge—vow to become a leader. On your own, I mean, because in my view that's the only way anybody ever became a leader. Namely, because s/he decided to become one.

That's the big wake-up call I'd like to give here. You're coming, probably, because you were told, and believe, that the system itself will make you a leader. What you'll discover is that it won't. If you're one of the rare breed that comes out of Annapolis stronger than you came in it'll be because you realize that no system on Earth can make leaders. Only you can make yourself a leader. But you can set out to do this at Annapolis. It's not actually all that hard: just take advantage of the opportunities. Ace your classes (they contain useful information). Max out the PRT (you'll feel good and get respect). Sign up for everything (busy people always have room for more). Organize. Focus.

Yet if you're like most mids, you won't. You came expecting the system to solve your problems, and you never get past realizing it can't. You don't think to look elsewhere for a solution: inside yourself.

The most consistent justification for the Annapolis I hear is this: "Sir, it shows you what not to do." Don't think that the system is going to teach you leadership. It isn't, and it doesn't. And

that is a realization that most midshipmen never get over. They never see the level of individual initiative that lies beyond realizing no system ever made somebody great. Only that somebody, using the tools offered by others, made that somebody great. People like me are here to show you how to use the tools. But you have to go after them, and you have to want to master them.

Disillusionment is common, and pandemic at Annapolis. But it's not, logically speaking, the last step. It can be only the first—or better still, you can come knowing it's there, and simply avoid it altogether. You'll save time and energy that way.

A plebe a year or two ago asked me in despair: "Sir, has it always been this way?" She meant, have plebes always been this disillusioned? And if so, why didn't they do anything about it when they became First Class themselves? I said yes, it had always been that way, plebes have forgotten by the time they're First Class and in any case are concentrating only on leaving. They can't change the system, so they give up.

No, you can't change the system. But you can transcend it. Here you have a choice too: you can simply go beyond it, as in shrug it off and rise to your intrinsic greatness. The creepier alternative is to conclude that its justification was to give you a trial by fire that you withstood: heck with all the people it consumed. A lot of people leave convinced the experience was chaotic hell without purpose, but at least it bonded you to the people who withstood it with you. If you ask me, it's a pretty bad justification for the Blitz that you buddied up to the other people in the fallout shelters. Still, virtually all of you, when you graduate, will remember most of all your buddies who went through the experience with you. The experience itself may not have been what you expected, but you forged friendships you think will be life-long. For some people they are, for some they aren't. In fact the Navy and Marine Corps are hell on long-term relationships of any sort. But you'll find that out. Will you remember how you felt before you arrived at Annapolis?

#### Personal note

I think the taxpayers who support us and who count on us for good officers would be better served by fewer promo videos, more realism about the slog and the sheer arbitrariness of life in the military and especially at Annapolis, less obsession over Mickey Mouse rules that aren't translatable into the fleet, and greater positive motivation as opposed to negative. Students here are burnt out because they feel they'll be punished no matter what they do—and see people who are getting away with the midshipman equivalent of murder. There's no evidence that this kind of counter-motivational micro-management produces better officers than a system that has a much longer set of reins, say ROTC.

I deal day in and day out with the human and intellectual costs of this Big Letdown that almost all midshipmen experience: it consumes some plebes entirely, and makes it difficult for them to concentrate. Upperclassmen become passive-aggressive, and lose their fire, concentrating only on

getting through the storm. It hurts me to see the death of this motivation: we talk constantly about “motivation” at Annapolis, and in fact it’s a rare commodity.

It’s probably a given that 18-year-olds are going to be unrealistic in their idealism: no institution in the world is the way they think Annapolis is going to be. It’s like the joke about the sailor who joined the Navy because the ships were always gleaming. Now, he says, he knows who keeps them that way. It seems like a sucker-punch to get people to come to us, sign on the dotted line, merely because they don’t understand the real nature of the institution.

Greater realism would allow a more realistic, durable kind of motivation, rather than the more ephemeral kind of pump that typically doesn’t make it to Christmas of plebe year. We’re not all jacked geniuses at Annapolis; all systems have flaws; the military is run by individuals, each of whom has his or her own fiefdom so you’re at the mercy of an individual who may be good or not so good: if you can know this before you come and you still come, I think you’ll have an easier ride, and a more constant fund of motivation. It’s like the way healthy people eat a number of high-protein complex carb smaller meals through the day rather than getting a sugar high that dumps them in an hour, or too many empty carbs. We’re big on the empty carb kind of pump motivation at Annapolis. It’s a sugar rush, like a pep rally, but when it’s gone you’re dumped. I’d like to have us teach healthy motivation instead: it doesn’t taste as sweet initially, but it gives constant energy for longer. I call this the “existential YUT!”—it involves understanding that you have to try your hardest even if, in all likelihood, you won’t succeed. As it is, we rope you in to Annapolis by luring them with visions of a mirage, a place that not only doesn’t exist but can’t. When the sugar high dumps you, most of you feel absolutely abandoned. We need to be showing you what the alternative, initially less flashy but ultimately more nourishing, might be. But that’s another article.

Finally, the gravest problem at Annapolis is that there’s nobody behind the curtain: our administrators are all short-term, and come to us from something else. Our “Board of Visitors” is toothless and uninvolved, our fiercest alumni boosters remember, if at all, an institution that has ceased to exist, and nobody listens to the midshipmen, who complain among themselves and then graduate. Why should anything change? Nobody’s comparing what we do to anything else, say, what we might be doing. Certainly if you’re about to arrive as a powerless plebe, you won’t be in a position to do this. Still, if you’re about to come to Annapolis, you’ll be better prepared to weather the storms if you know what awaits you.