

New Lineup—June 1966

My elder brother Eric had always been four grades ahead of me in school. So when I entered high school in the ninth grade, he had just graduated and was headed off to college. And when I then graduated from high school in June 1965, he had just graduated from the University of New Mexico, was commissioned as an Ensign in the U.S. Navy, was married a few days later, and he and his wife Kathe were headed to Pensacola, Florida, where he would enter Naval Flight School.

I was headed off to the University of New Mexico (UNM) in Albuquerque where he and Kathe had just graduated. I did not receive an NROTC scholarship, but I had been told by the UNM NROTC officers that I would be granted one after my freshman year. There were exams and applications that year for upcoming scholarships, and the NROTC Unit encouraged me to apply for all of them. One of them was for the United States Naval Academy. I responded, “I’m not interested,” and the Unit said, “Apply; it looks good for the NROTC scholarship.”

After an “Aye, aye, sir,” I took the examination and applied for the Naval Academy.

It’s early Spring 1966; I’ve just turned eighteen years old, and I received four scholarship offers. Three of them were for the full NROTC scholarship at UNM, and one was for admittance to the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. I wasn’t interested in going to Navy; I applied only because it was supposed to “help me” get the NROTC scholarship at New Mexico.

Now what do I do?

The officers at the NROTC Unit were excited for me; it wasn’t typical to have one of their freshmen receive an appointment to THE Academy. Thinking back on it, I think they were more excited than I was. I don’t remember the names of any of the officers, but I do know they said that it was an amazing opportunity. If I wanted to be a United States Naval Officer, then going to the Naval Academy was far better than staying at UNM with an NROTC scholarship.

And so it was. Like any eighteen-year-old who had new visions in his sights, I slacked off my academics for the second semester. Hey, why not? I was moving on to bigger and better things. Those grades won’t matter because every incoming student at the Naval Academy comes in as a Plebe. I took the Greyhound bus back from Albuquerque to El Centro in early June, and a few weeks later I was on an airplane to the East Coast.

Destination: Annapolis, Maryland (the only state capital, by the way, without an airport; nor does it have a train station). On June 29, 1966, I was standing in the middle of Tecumseh Court of the United States Naval Academy taking my oath as a Midshipman in the U.S. Navy. Plebe Summer was hard; there’s no question about it. But I was ready for it. As a member of the Class of 1970, I knew I had to be able to “drop” and do 70 pushups. I could do that; I was in shape, both mentally and physically.

I was able to take some examinations during Plebe Summer and “test out” of a few classes like Chemistry and some early Mathematics classes. As the academic year began, I had settled into life in the 28th Company in Bancroft Hall, the huge “dormitory” that houses all the midshipmen. My choice of foreign languages was Russian (the other options were Italian and I think German). I loved the learning of the language. When you live it five days a week, and English is not spoken in the

classroom, you learn it very quickly—that is if you want to pass the course. Due to the intense and immersive nature of the learning, I became fluent in Russian in just one year, and that was put to use about a year later.

During the summer of 1968, Mom and I went to Hawaii to visit Eric and his wife who were stationed at Ewa Beach as part of the VP-22 (Patrol) squadron. As a Naval Academy Midshipman, I was on Active Duty with a Secret Clearance. Eric asked me if I wanted to go up on a patrol with them; I said “Of course.” For the most part, it was a boring exercise, flying zig-zag patterns in the P-3 Orion at low elevation over the vast Pacific Ocean. But then we came upon an unidentified fishing boat. “It looks like a Russian trawler,” one of the enlisted men said.

Communication with the boat was unsuccessful as no one on the boat spoke English (or didn't want to acknowledge it), and none of the P-3 crew spoke Russian. “I speak Russian,” I said. “What do you want to ask?” I don't recall the actual conversation (remember, this was over 50 years ago, and even if I did recall it, I couldn't reveal the actual contents for security reasons), but I exchanged questions and answers in Russian with the boat for a few minutes. It didn't take long before the P-3 crew said something like, “It's just a fishing boat; not a problem,” and the plane veered off. That was the only time I used my ability to speak Russian in an “official” manner, but I have used it several times while visiting St. Petersburg, Russia, on cruise ships.

That jumped ahead a bit; there were still some exciting things to take place in Plebe year.

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We Lost the Game, but I Won—October 1966

Football games at the Naval Academy were a big deal. As Plebes, we had to know just about everything about the upcoming opponent. We had to know the coach's name, the team's nickname, their fight song, and more that has drifted from my memory of over fifty years ago. But one thing that I will never forget was the week leading up to, and the "after party" for, Navy's game against Notre Dame.

We Plebes were typically grilled (asked lots of questions) during meal times in Bancroft Hall's Mess Hall (a huge dining area where ALL the Midshipmen eat at a single time). Leading up to the annual football game against Notre Dame, all of us Plebes were ready. We knew the information, and we were ready for the questions:

What's their nickname? "Sir, the Notre Dame football team is called the Fighting Irish."

Who's the coach? "Sir, Ara Parseghian is the coach."

What was their record last year? "Sir, Notre Dame was 7-2-1 last year."

And how did we do last year? "Sir, Notre Dame outscored Navy 29 to 3 last year in South Bend, Indiana."

And here comes the part that I'm still amazed that I got away with. Perhaps it was the moxie, or maybe the upperclass just didn't care that much. But it did take guts, something that I had learned in Plebe Summer that was respected. Don't show anyone up, but showing guts was okay. Back to the noon meal (it wasn't called lunch) questioning.

What's their fight song? "Sir, the Notre Dame fight song is," and I began to sing the song. As I got to the end of the second verse, I pushed back my chair (I was sitting on only about two inches of it anyway), stood up, and finished the song: "What though the odds be great or small, Old Notre Dame will win over all, While her loyal sons are marching Onward to victory!" As I sang "Onward to victory," I grabbed my cap and marched out of the Dining Hall and went back to my room. That either shocked them, or they were impressed with my moxie, but I never heard anything about it. So I had a few minutes of reprieve before heading back to class.

Heading into the game on October 29, 1966, undefeated Notre Dame had won its previous three games with shutouts, and had moved up to number one in the national polls. The game against Navy was being played in JFK Stadium in Philadelphia, a relatively short bus ride from Annapolis. Navy didn't fare well, but at least we did score one touchdown compared to Army, North Carolina, and Oklahoma who'd not scored anything against Notre Dame. The game was essentially a rout, 31-7, and Notre Dame won the rest of its games and was crowned the national champion.

Oh, well. Another football game, another loss for Navy, which ended the year with a 4-6 record. There was a hosted party at a downtown Philadelphia hotel; transportation was provided. I went there with two of my company mates. Second Class (junior) Vinny Rice, and another one I don't recall. We saw three young ladies and approached them, Of course we let Vinny go first. And then I asked a young lady to dance with me; her name was Donna (and I'm intentionally omitting her last name because she knows nothing of this book, and I have not been in contact with her for almost fifty years).

Donna and I chatted; we danced; we exchanged information (there was no email or cellphones back then). It was getting late, and it was time for us to get back on the bus to head back to Annapolis. That was the evening of October 29, 1966; it was the beginning of a beautiful relationship. I would call Donna a couple times a month, usually on a Sunday evening. Remember, no cell phones. So I went to the bank of telephones and deposited quarter after quarter until I had put in the right amount. We would exchange small talk as were trying to get to know each other. I even went to the family house in Philadelphia over Thanksgiving Break; it was a short visit, but it was nice to see her again.

Our letters back and forth became more frequent, and our relationship grew. Was it love? It was certainly beginning to feel that way.

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Bases Are Loaded—June 1969

June Week has always been a tradition-filled time at Navy. The First Classmen (“Seniors”), and they were only males prior to the class of 1980, were taking their last finals. They were learning where their first duty assignment was going to be. Many of them were finalizing plans for getting married—many of them on the day of graduation. And there were always a few that had already been secretly married, a definite no-no that would get you expelled from the Academy if it were found out.

But it was also an enjoyable time for the Second Class (“Juniors”) who would receive their class rings at the Ring Dance during June Week. It was also a time when many a Midshipman would get engaged, or formally announce it if it had already occurred. The tradition would go something like this: The young lady would give the Midshipman his class ring, and he would in return give her a miniature of the same ring. If he were prepared, he’d also have the diamond engagement ring to put on her finger.

I was prepared. I had spent many hours at Tilghman Jewelers in Annapolis looking at loose diamonds; it had to be just right. I finally found one that I liked. It was a Flawless stone, perfect cut 0.58 carat pure white diamond. I remember the price; the diamond and the solitaire setting totaled \$695 in 1969—that was a lot of money back then. I didn’t care about the cost; the ring was gorgeous, and I knew it would look fantastic on Donna’s left hand.

Donna’s family had moved from Philadelphia across the river to Marlton, New Jersey. She and a friend came down to Annapolis for the June Week activities, culminating in the Ring Dance. She gave me my ring; it had the traditional Naval Academy design along with the logo for the class of 1970. My name was engraved on the inside of the ring, and the stone was a green tourmaline. I took the miniature ring that was hanging on a long loop of blue ribbon, and I placed it around her neck. I then formally proposed to her, even though we’d already discussed this, and I put the diamond ring on her finger. I’m sure we kissed, probably the only time that PDA (Public Display of Affection) was allowed and not penalized with demerits. We were engaged.

The other major event of the week was the graduation and commissioning of the First Class Midshipmen, at which time we Second Class took off our Second Class emblems and adorned our uniforms with First Class insignia. We were now the top of the heap, with just one more year until our graduation, commissioning, marriage (for many), and then off to the first duty station.

Life was good; what could go wrong?