
SCENE

11

COAST GUARD ACADEMY—1935-1936 (FOURTH CLASS YEAR)

Cadet Life

The end of Swab Summer marks the beginning of my first academic year. The number of Swabs remaining to form my new Fourth Class had been reduced in size by the traditionally high attrition of the summer screening process. The returning upper classes also have some members withdrawing by choice and some being “bilgers.”

(Perhaps I should explain what is meant by “bilger.” When you bail water out of a leaking boat, you dump the bilge water back over the side. When a cadet fails to meet the minimum standards of the Academy, in other words “flunks out,” he is discharged “like bilge water” and sent home. Some voluntarily quit. Some take the entrance exams again and re-enter. These are known as “bilgers.”)

To illustrate how great the attrition is at the Academy (viewed by cadets as how hard it is to make it through the Academy), let’s look at my Class of 1939:

Number sworn in as Fourth Class cadets (beginning of Swab Summer) = 87

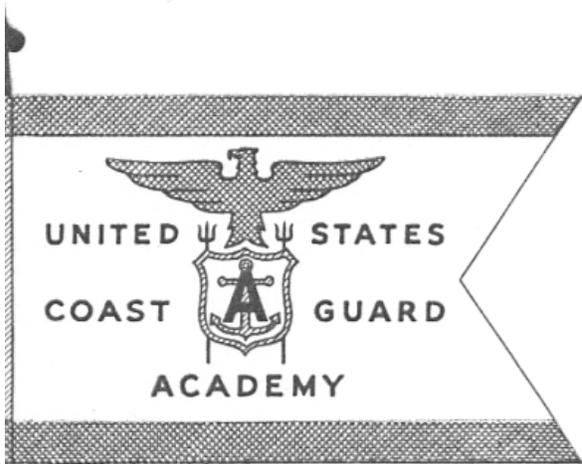
Number sworn in as Third Class cadets = 45

Number sworn in as Second Class cadets = 37

Number sworn in as First Class cadets = 24

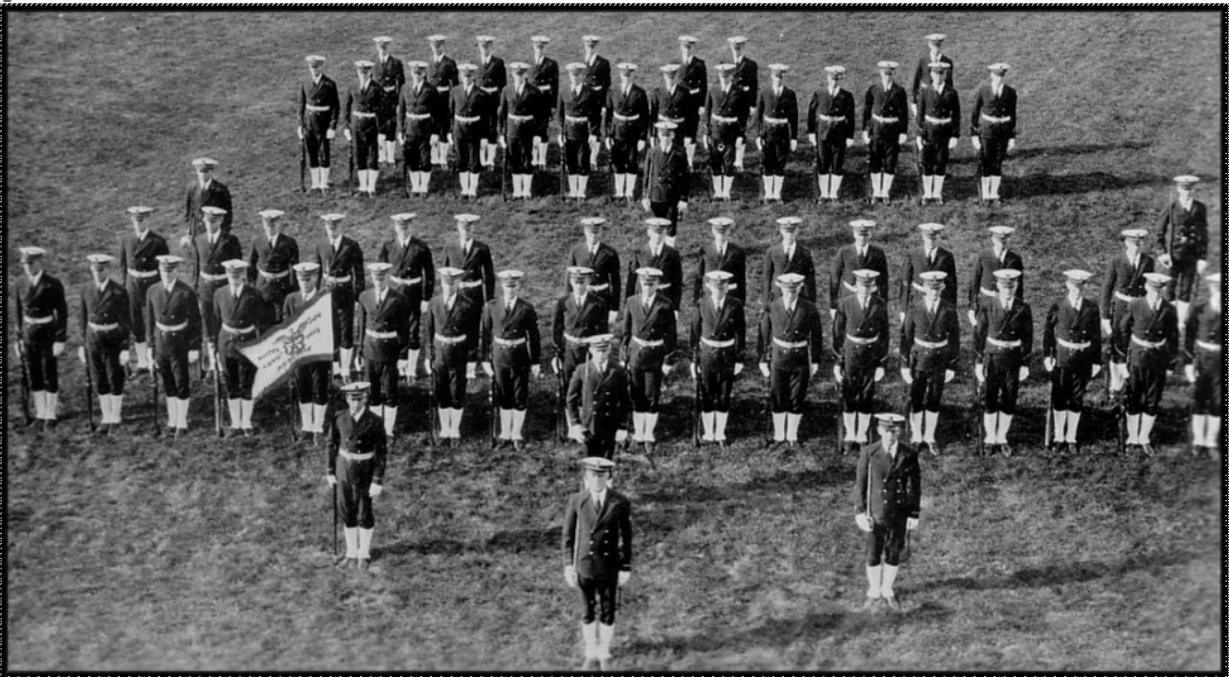
Number that graduated and were commissioned Ensigns = 23

(One developed tuberculosis in his First Class year and did not receive a commission but did receive a diploma.)



A

COMPANY



Company A in Parade Formation—"All present or accounted for"!

Getting Organized. With the corps shaken down in size for the year, now was a good time to get further organized. The first step was to get the Battalion looking its best in Parade formation. To get a straight line of caps, no hills and dales, we were all put in a single line and rearranged so that the tallest were at the north end and the shortest at the south end. First Classmen were pulled out of line to be the staff officers. They were assigned corner rooms in the barracks and charged with keeping order. The tallest of the other cadets were assigned to the north wing and the shortest to the south wing. Some system, huh?

Now was the time to get our other uniforms (to be paid for out of our monthly cadet pay, as there was no clothing allowance). We received one-half of an Ensign's pay which was \$125.00 a month. Our \$62.50 went into our accounts which the administration

controlled. We used it to pay for laundry, dry cleaning, and various sundry items, as well as to pay for new uniforms. Our weekend liberty allowance was \$7 in our Fourth Class year, increasing to \$11 in our First Class year. We had to submit a voucher for Christmas and summer leave money.

We were not granted liberty during Swab Summer as we had no liberty uniforms. That would change now. We were issued Blue Service, White Service, white shoes and socks, visor caps, gray gloves, pea coat, white leggings, drill belt, and white shirts with stud-fastened collars.

Our blue uniforms (which actually were black) were tailored to us individually. They fit beautifully and made the Annapolis midshipmen's off-the-rack uniforms look seedy!

Vignettes. I think you might get a better feel for the life of a cadet through some memories that come to mind. I will put them in somewhat of an order by my class standing at the time (*i.e.*, Fourth Class year, Second Class year, etc.).

At the end of Swab Summer, I began to experience for the first time the seasonal changes of the weather. Newcomers to the West Coast often said they missed not having **seasons** like Back East. I was anxious to experience them. The first weather change was not a season but was a hot and humid week or two called Indian Summer. It led into autumn when the leaves changed color and dropped from the trees. It all happened fast and mostly while we were confined to the reservation and in class. Before we knew it, a freezing nor'easter whipped through and denuded all the deciduous trees. I thought they were dead! Closely following the short autumn came not only the long cold winter of Connecticut but a record breaking extra cold one. Spring arrived at last and the "dead" trees came back to life with beautiful light green foliage and blossoms on the fruit trees. Summer was a welcome relief with generally comfortable weather.

Our cadet view of the environment was very limited. The two-year-old reservation was sparsely landscaped. No color changes there. Our opportunities to "go ashore" were limited to being granted liberty, and without transportation there was no way of going to the countryside.

Liberty was granted from 1-4 p.m. on Wednesday afternoons, from 1-8 p.m. on Saturdays, and from 10-12 a.m. on Sundays (for those wishing to go to a church in town rather than to the chapel service).

To call the times we could leave the reservation **liberty** is a distortion of the word which means "free to do as one pleases." We were cadets at all times and subject to Academy regulations and orders. For example: no smoking in public. No loitering on street corners. (No watching all the girls go by!) No hands in pockets. No drinking hard liquor. Be attired in the designated uniform of the day. (The uniform might be simply Blue Service, or Blue Service with gray gloves carried (in left hand to keep right hand free for saluting), or Blue Service with top coats and gray gloves carried.)

Liberty granted? Or parole granted?

A cadet could lose the liberty privilege if he received too many demerits or fell below passing in his study courses. He received demerits if his room did not pass inspection, or his uniform was dirty, or if late to formation, and for many other things. Cadets were taught that a sailor must learn, for the safety of his ship, to have a place for everything and keep everything in its place. This discipline started with room inspection. Even in the drawers of his dresser every item (socks, underwear, shirts, etc.) had to be folded and in the designated place within the drawer!

For full liberty privileges, a cadet had to be passing in all subjects. A grade of sixty-five was required. If he fell below that level, he would be placed on an Academic “Tree” and lose liberty days according to some kind of a scale. By the time Christmas leave rolled around, the autumn leaves were gone. So much for **fall colors**.

Until the weather turned from fall to winter, the cadet corps jogged before breakfast to the cove where we manned ten-oared lifeboats coxswained by First Classmen, for a row across the Thames River. Sometimes in thick fog, we would row only into the “soup” and rest there for an appropriate period of time before returning. One officer was on to that and required we bring back a rock from the other shore.

When the river began to ice over, the morning row was cancelled and instead we went jogging before breakfast around the Connecticut College for Women, loudly counting cadence.

Flashback! Football was a favorite sport when I was a lad in Santa Monica. We would follow the college games on the radio, and at halftime we would run out and toss the ball. I was just under 145 pounds and eligible for the junior varsity team. I was made a tackle, a good spot for a heavyweight that wasn't any good elsewhere. On the opening game of the season, and on the starting kick-off play, as defensive tackle I rushed down the field and made the tackle! I was so proud, I raised my head to be recognized just as the pile-on started. My face was bashed into the victim's thigh pad and my nose smashed. That ended my football career. Cotton was stuffed up my nose, and I stopped by our family doctor's office on the walk home. He pushed on one side of my nose and straightened it quite a bit. I smelled dried blood for a month.

When I was in college, I loved to go to football games in the Los Angeles Coliseum and sit in the rooting section. We were required to wear white shirts which would give a background for the colored card displays. We basked in the sun until after halftime when it started to cool off, and then we could put on our sweaters. If the game turned dull, we could always admire the antics of the beautiful cheerleaders.

Attending an Academy game was entirely different and we were required to attend. There was either rain or snow or sleet, and a freezing wind. We always lost, as we were playing against small colleges that could offer incentives like football scholarships. And we Fourth Classmen were required by our Second Class tormentors to yell constantly, whether winning or losing a play. And there were no female cheerleaders to ogle. I haven't enjoyed football since.

That is enough about fall in New England. Now for **winter**. I had no idea it got so cold anywhere. It brought out some strange behavior in the easterners. I was used to lots of fresh air in classrooms. At the Academy, if a window was ajar, someone would rush over and close it. The room would get stuffy. The Californians, Texans, and Floridians would fall asleep in class.

One way to haze Fourth Classmen went like this: a designated Swab would have to get up thirty minutes before reveille, run to the First Classmen's rooms, close the windows, and turn up the heat. Go back to bed.

My first winter was extra cold. The river was frozen so solid the town people drove a light pickup truck all the way across, which was unusual. Never mind the cold—some days we were mustered on the cement road in front of the barracks in “Undress Whites with jersey worn,” dressed for infantry drill (*i.e.*, rifles, belts, and leggings). One Officer-of-the-Day came out to inspect the troops and their rifles. He wore his heavy bridge coat and gray gloves (turned down so we could see the rabbit fur lining). Cadet McDowell, from southern Texas stood next to me. He was shivering from the cold. He found that by lifting the rifle about one-eighth inch off the pavement he could make it chatter loud and clear. OOD: “Mr. McDowell, stop that noise.” Mac: “Sorry, sir. I can't stop shaking.” With that, the OOD proceeded with infantry drill.

The only good thing about a New London winter was the ice skating. Several little mill ponds froze solid enough. One was right across the women's campus and made for a convenient rendezvous. Another reward, if you could get in with a group that included a local girl, would be the hot toddy offered in front of a roaring fire in the open hearth!

What can I say about **spring**? These young men's hearts turned to thoughts of the summer training cruise to far off places and the summer leave that follows. But I also had two other things on my mind.

In the mess hall, we ate at tables for ten. In the center of one side, there was a single table for the Officer-of-the-Day. We would enter all at once from being mustered outside, and when all were at their places the OOD would command, “Be seated.” When he thought we were through eating, he either commanded, “RISE. PASS OUT.” Or, “LEAVE AT WILL.”

At the table, we were made to do things like saluting the catsup as it passed by down the table, announcing the contents of a fresh pitcher as “muddy bottom” for coffee, “shallow water” for cocoa, “rocks and shoals” for lemonade on ice cubes, etc. If ordered to “eat a square meal, mister,” we would raise a loaded fork vertically from the plate to mouth level, execute a square corner, and direct the fork and food horizontally into the mouth.

I have always been a slow eater, so I would often be cheated out of dessert if the OOD commanded, “RISE AND PASS OUT.” I thought that unfair. I got my dander up and went to the Commandant of Cadets and complained. He agreed and told the OODs to only use “LEAVE AT WILL.”

Still on my mind was the desire to take one of those knockabout sloops out for a sail. The chance came! I learned that, every year during Graduation Week, there was an inter-class race. I talked my class into letting me skipper. I picked three to crew, and we got permission to practice during our regular liberty hours!! I beat the system!

It was a dumb racecourse. We simply started at a line between two buoys, sailed up stream to round a buoy off the Navy submarine base, and return to the starting line to finish. We were first across the starting line, so we were first to finish. I skippered the next three years and we won every time!!

With graduation of the First Class cadets, we became Third Class cadets, and started that year off excited about the forthcoming cruise to Europe. I will report on that in the next Scene.