
SCENE**13**

COAST GUARD ACADEMY—1937-1938 (SECOND CLASS YEAR / ACADEMICS)**Academics, Local Cruising in Schooner *Chase*, Home Leave by Car**

In June each year, there is a special formal ball known as the Ring Dance. A replica of the First Class ring (but large enough to walk through) is fashioned and mounted on a raised platform. A rite of passage will honor the Third Class as it ascends to Second Class status, and honor the Second Class on becoming First Class cadets. The Third Classmen have designed and purchased miniature rings sized to fit their little fingers, but they have not yet been allowed to wear them. The Second Class purchased their miniatures last year and now have their full-sized rings ready for the ceremony. (These rings are, by design, a standard tradition of all the service academies. It is one way to spot an academy grad.)

When his name is announced, the Cadet Third Class and his date mount the platform and stand inside the ring. He takes out the miniature, and she places it on the little finger of his left hand. She most likely will give him a kiss. If they are, or intend to become engaged, the cadet may place the ring on his girl's ring finger. (Not usually the case with a Cadet Second Class.)

A similar ceremony takes place for the Cadet Second Class ascending to First Class, except he already has the miniature on his little finger. His lady removes it and hands it to him. If they wish to signal an engagement, he places the miniature on her ring finger. Otherwise he simply pockets the miniature. Then, he hands her the full-sized ring for her to place on his ring finger. (And surely he will get a kiss!)

The miniature is often used instead of a diamond solitaire along with the wedding ring. My wife, Mary, chose to do that.

Academics. The curriculum is structured to meet the requirements for a Bachelor of Science degree in Marine Engineering. To qualify, the Academy must be “accredited” by the New England Association of Schools. To meet their goals, we followed closely the M.I.T. curriculum. But in addition to their courses in science, mathematics, mechanical, electrical, electronic and chemistry, we had superimposed professional subjects including seamanship, navigation, ordnance, military law, leadership, infantry drill, and physical education.



The *Tide Rips* yearbook staff

The spring and fall terms lasted about seventeen weeks, with one week devoted to examinations. Each cadet had to pass all subjects in the prescribed course of study. A grade of at least sixty-five was required to pass. Cadets attended seven class periods a day of fifty-five minutes each. Those who scored below sixty-five in the final exam would be given a re-exam. Failing that exam led to dismissal.

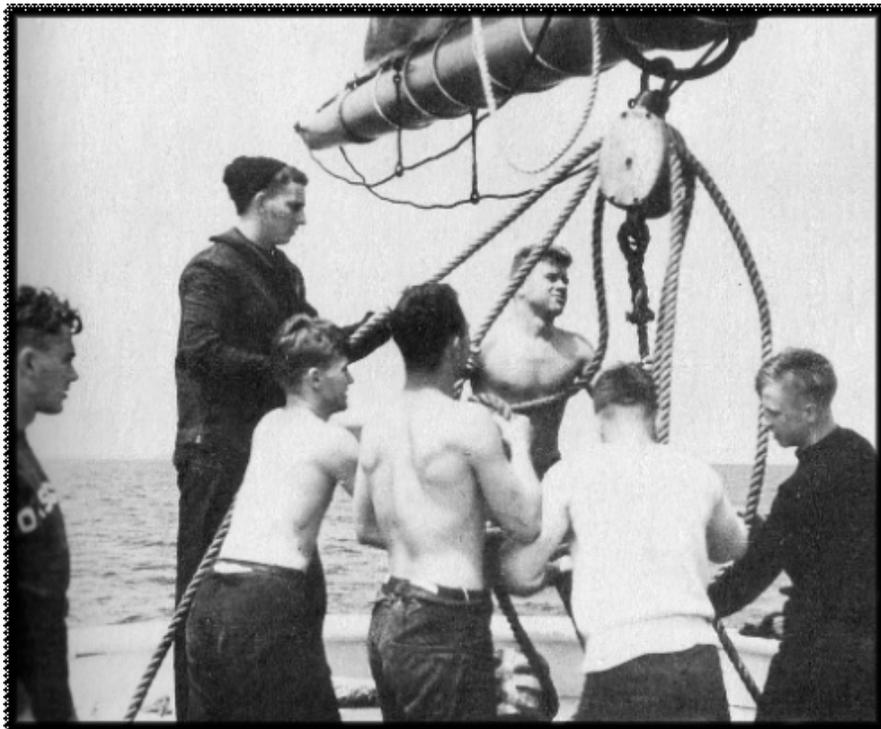
However, there was room for manipulation by the teaching staff when it was in the service's interest to retain a cadet with high adaptability. Without bragging, I believe I twice fell into that category. The two-and-a-half years of pre-engineering courses at UCLA made the first two years at the Academy relatively easy, and the physics lab a bore. My classmates would crowd around the instructor when he was demonstrating something. I would let them do the crowding while I stood back.

Some wise-guy found out our academic records were kept in the Commandant of Cadets' office, and if we asked his yeoman he would give us a peek. I found that the physics instructor (a Lieutenant) had given me a low mark in adaptability and the Commandant of Cadets (a Commander) gave me a high mark, quite obviously as a counter-balance.

Spanish was my elective foreign language. I took beginning Spanish in high school, beginning Spanish in college, and beginning Spanish yet again at the Academy. Still, I failed the course and had to take the re-exam! My re-exam grade was sixty-five! (They obviously were not going to send me, with high adaptability marks, home for failing Spanish.)

Our navigation instructor challenged our class to do a little research before the next class to explain the difference between a watch and a chronometer and why the precision was essential for accurate navigation. After the "ATTENTION" and "BE SEATED," the instructor asked, "Who can tell me about the chronometer?" (Silence! What he didn't know was that we were having an exam in physics later in the morning, which was of higher priority and to which we gave all our study time to the exclusion of the little chronometer question.) He asked the question again. Again silence! Finally, in an exasperated voice he said, "Doesn't anyone know anything about chronometers?" To which a voice from the back row exclaimed, "NO, SIR. YOU CAN SPEAK FREELY!"

When the Connecticut winter sets in, it is a lot easier to attend chapel in the Academy auditorium than to walk down to town for church. Quite a few officers and some with their wives attended the chapel too. Hymns were belted out accompanied by selected



Local sailing on Bluenose Schooner *Chase*

instruments from the official Coast Guard Band. The Coast Guard did not have a chaplain so one from the Navy submarine base came over to conduct our service. One Sunday, the chaplain was a hellfire and brimstone preacher. He was laying it on pretty thick. Directly below the improvised pulpit was the clarinet player who was hung over from the night before. He listened patiently as long as he could, but finally he had to comment. He leaned

way back in his chair and looked straight up at the chaplain and said in a loud gravelly voice, "You tell 'em, chaplain!"

Our formal uniform jacket was short-waisted with two rows of buttons to a built-in high collar. It was nicknamed the monkey jacket because it resembled the uniform worn by an organ grinder's monkey. A group of us wore them during one Christmas leave to crash debutante coming-out balls in New York City. It worked! We were never thrown out or asked to depart.

But one night, I was waiting in the lobby of the Pennsylvania Hotel in that uniform when a dowager came up to me and asked for a light. I didn't smoke and had no matches anyway, but I was put out that she thought I was a bellhop. I simply said, "I'm sorry ma'am. I am not a bellhop." To which she replied, "Well! I thought at least you were a gentleman!" and walked away. (I was so embarrassed that I remember that put-down to this day.)

I owned an auto the last two years at the Academy. It was against regulations to own a car in New London, so I kept mine just across the city line, in a farmer's old barn a short walk from our North Gate. My winter project was to put it in good condition for a drive to California during summer leave. But, returning from liberty, the engine threw a piston, and I had to leave it on the street outside. Together with three other cadets who were planning the cross-country journey, we laid detailed plans to repair the engine in the Academy's garage.

We talked a classmate into going to a wrecker for the necessary part and driving the car onto the reservation and into the garage. This he did and on a Saturday afternoon, in the garage, we pulled the pan and replaced the piston. We worked late into the evening, a time there would be no officers around. We tuned the engine and had it running beautifully. Now part of our plan was based on the garage being directly across from the auditorium where chapel services are held. We had just one chance to pull this off or we were in deep trouble.

The band struck up a good Baptist hymn and everyone present burst into song with loud, clear voices. We swung open the garage door, revved up the engine, and the same classmate drove the car off the reservation and to my barn garage, without missing a beat.

We were getting the car in as good shape as we could because three classmates joined me in a plan to drive to the West Coast on summer leave. One had a mother in Oakland. One a mother in Coronado. My family was in Santa Monica. The fourth's family was in New Jersey, and he had been visiting home regularly, but had never been far from New England. He grabbed at this chance to see the West Coast.

The car was a two-door Ford, which I bought off the salvage yard lot. (Back to Jalopies.) It was a drab olive color, which was nice because it didn't show the dirt. There was a running board on each side and a rack on the back bumper on which we tied everything we could. We pooled our resources for a new set of tires. We bought the cheapest we

could find, guaranteed to last four thousand miles. We named the car "Fukalo," although I never did know the meaning. It sounded nice.

One fine spring day, I followed the practice we cadets had of checking our mail boxes en route to the next class. I found this in mine: "WESTERN UNION 1937 MAY 10 COMMANDING OFFICER...USCG ACADEMY...NOTIFY CADET SINCLAIR HIS MOTHER PASSED ON PEACEFULLY AT SIX THIRTY THIS MORNING= FRED W SINCLAIR." Yes, I was notified, but in what a cold way...left standing alone with the telegram in my hand.

This was shattering news, but with the support of the others we decided to go ahead with the trip.

There were no Interstate Highways in those days. There were U.S. highways, but these were not Freeways. They were numbered by routes. For instance, the northernmost east-west route was Route 10. The southernmost was 90. North and south were odd numbers like 1, 17, and 101. In the Plain states, squatters were granted land in parcels often in squares. The U.S. highways honored those property rights and made square corners (tricky driving at night). And we drove day and night. We slept in Fukalo anyway, so it didn't matter much if we were underway or pulled off to a side road.

Top driving speed was 45 miles per hour. It took us five days each way. We used public and service station toilets, but we didn't have a bath or shave the whole way from sea to shining sea. We ate at diners and car-hops. It was about six thousand miles round trip, and, as we reached the final stretch back to New London, we had blow-outs one by one! We replaced them with re-treads.

My time at home was bittersweet. It was so sad that my mom was not there, but so wonderful to see many family members and Sea Scout friends. And to sail to Catalina with my brother on his boat.