

THE NAVAL ACADEMY . . . A CRUCIBLE FOR WARRIORS

By Vice Admiral Jeffrey Fowler, U.S. Navy



**The Academy's
new boss says a
midshipman's first
duty is to learn to
lead Sailors and
Marines in combat.
Everything else
is "secondary,
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conditional."**

The Naval Academy, like all commissioning sources, aims to develop high-caliber junior officers to meet the demands of the Navy and Marine Corps. Today's naval forces are continuously adapting to maintain strategic, operational, and tactical superiority over our enemies. Our commissioning sources must be equally innovative and adaptive. We are charged with recruiting and transforming America's most talented and patriotic young volunteers into effective junior officers, men and women who are privileged to serve as leaders of Sailors and Marines.

How are we to most effectively use our resources to better prepare midshipmen and officer candidates for service during these challenging and perilous times? Since assuming responsibilities as the 60th Superintendent of the Naval Academy in June, I, along with my leadership team, have devised a road map for developing exceptional Navy and Marine Corps officers who understand and embrace the unremitting responsibility of military leadership. This article lays out this vision for the midshipmen at the Naval Academy, but I believe it applies to other officer accession programs across the country.

The road map focuses on the following three concepts.

- We are a nation at war.
- We must develop every midshipman morally, mentally, and physically to lead the Sailors and Marines who volunteered to serve their country during wartime.
- We are the face of the Navy

A Nation at War

Make no mistake, this is war. Our enemies want to hurt us and our allies at home and abroad. Sadly, many Americans are so far removed from the conflict that they easily forget its existence. Attacks against innocent civilians continue throughout the world, not just in Iraq and Afghanistan. If you want to see Americans who realize the impact of a ruthless enemy, go to Manhattan and Ground Zero. New Yorkers get it because their city was a battleground. Ask the mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, sons and daughters who have loved ones in harm's way. They understand.

This has significant implications for those responsible for training the next generation of naval officers. This war will last for the entire commissioned careers of today's midshipmen. Those commissioned in 2008 will discuss this war when they are leading the Navy and Marine Corps as flag officers. And this conflict is not just an Army, Marine Corps, and Special Operations war. Every specialty within the Navy has an active part in the fight: in the air, on the sea, and beneath the sea. We must prepare our future officers for the sacrifices of serving during wartime.

Since 11 September 2001, more than 4,000 American military men and women have died in this global war against Islamic terrorists. Our Brigade represents all of

those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for our country. Does every one of our midshipmen feel a call to duty to serve our country during wartime?

Developing Midshipmen

As we fight this war, our focus must be on the output of the Naval Academy, not just the institution itself. My second fundamental belief is that we must work together to develop every midshipman morally, mentally, and physically to lead Sailors and Marines in combat. Develop is an active verb requiring intrusive leadership from staff, faculty, coaches, and the midshipmen chain of command.

I have three teenagers at home—one who recently began her freshman year at college. I know how easy it is for them to get distracted from the task at hand, particularly when peer pressure is involved. Our mission is the moral, mental, and physical development of every midshipman.

Graduating and earning a commission are significant accomplishments, but they are just the beginning. Junior officers need to be ready to lead starting on the first day.

All other activity is secondary, optional, and conditional. We intend to remove distractions and help guide this development process. There may be bumps in the road and adjustments to make as we do this, but it is essential for the successful development of our wartime leaders.

Earning a bachelor's degree and developing military professionalism in four years require absolute efficiency. Time management is critical, and all efforts must be focused toward the mission. Our midshipmen must understand that they do not have a long time to develop the skills required to lead Sailors and Marines in the Fleet.

Leadership is service. Upon graduation as newly commissioned ensigns and second lieutenants, our midshipmen need to join their divisions or platoons ready to humbly lead an all-volunteer force that has served in combat longer than any previous force in the history of our country. Graduating and earning a commission are significant accomplishments, but they are just the beginning. Junior officers need to be ready to lead starting on the first day.

My first division was headed by a salty master chief who had given nearly 20 years of service to the Navy. Learning to lead as a new division officer with a seasoned master chief was challenging, but I had practice from my time as a midshipman first class on a submarine cruise, as a plebe summer squad leader, and from my other first class leadership assignments. Midshipman Fleet and leadership experiences gave me confidence to work with "The Chief" to accomplish the mission.

For all of us leading, managing, administering, coaching, and teaching, our job is all about developing mid-



DUNCKER HAS THE CONN Midshipman David C. Duncker participates as officer of the deck in seamanship and navigation training on board a Yard Patrol craft at the Naval Academy.

- Seek out the people whose help and advice they need—the chief, their department head.
- Learn about every man and woman working for them.
- Understand their Sailors’ and Marines’ families and family readiness issues.

This mindset must be absorbed during Plebe year and maintained for four years. It is the true north reference point guiding midshipmen in their development.

How can we prepare midshipmen for the real challenges Sailors face? I remember one experience where my submarine left Norfolk for a training exercise and subsequent visit to Port Canaveral, Florida. After we arrived in port one of my first class petty officers approached me with a personal problem. He said, “Sir, I just talked to my neighbor. He said my wife packed

shipmen. But for midshipmen, it is not all about being a midshipman. It is not just about graduating. It is about pursuing personal and unit excellence so that they can successfully lead Sailors and Marines from their first day of commissioned service.

What do those Sailors and Marines and their staff non-commissioned officers care about? My first ship was the USS *Bremerton* (SSN-698). I checked in on the same day as another lieutenant junior grade who was the number one graduate from NROTC at Purdue University. We met our different department heads and chiefs, received divisions, started leading our Sailors, and set out to earn our warfare qualifications. In the process, no one ever asked where we went to school or how successful we were at those respective institutions. With the exception of polite conversation, no one seemed concerned about my background. From my experience, Sailors and Marines and their senior enlisted leaders care about three things when they meet their division officers or platoon leaders:

Competence Do you know your job?

Character Will you make the right decision even if it costs you personally?

Compassion Do you care about me as much as you care about yourself?

Our midshipmen should be proud of their commissioning source. They should be the best of the best, and they should not have to say a word. It is all about actions, not words. We should be developing officers who:

- Listen, learn, and lead.¹
- Have confidence that they will succeed and overcome the challenges they face in the Fleet because they have experience *with the Fleet* as midshipmen.
- As the new kids on the block, are humble, work harder than their troops, and *serve* as leaders.

up the entire house this past week and that she and my children are gone. I need to go home.” This Sailor was essential to his division and the operation of the ship, but he, and our other Sailors, cannot perform their best if they are worried about the well-being of their families. As many of you know, family readiness issues like this one often have the biggest impact on military readiness and are the toughest leadership challenges a junior officer will face.

“Midshipmen leading midshipmen” has great value in practicing the theories of leadership, but we must remember that other USNA midshipmen are *not* Sailors and Marines. They are not “The Chief,” are not married, do not have to take care of children, and do not have rent or mortgages. They do not have to address the basic life responsibilities that challenge our Sailors and Marines every day. Interaction with the Fleet is the only way to understand these challenges.

We must practice for the real world with conditions and expectations of the Fleet. We must train as we will fight, and no matter how hard our midshipmen think it is here, the real world challenges facing them after commissioning will be tougher. To provide perspective, I have asked the Brigade to consider the USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower*’s (CVN-69) last deployment. In response to the need for a two-carrier presence in the Arabian Gulf, the strike group spent 233 days deployed, with a total of only 15 days in port. This is the necessarily demanding environment in which our graduates will be expected to excel. We must guide midshipmen development, limit their distractions, and ensure they succeed. I consider it all of our responsibility to ensure no midshipman is left behind in his or her personal development and leadership experience. None of them can opt out of a commitment to excellence.

Every commissioned officer that we produce, from the anchorman to the top of the class, will be assigned to Sailors and Marines. A single failed leader can demoralize and destroy a division or platoon.

Face of the Navy

That leads me to my third fundamental belief: midshipmen and those who participate in their development are the face of the Navy. As I spent three years in Navy recruiting, traveling to every state in our country, I was amazed to discover the general lack of knowledge about our armed forces. Many people do not know the difference between the Army and the Navy, and believe all who serve in the military are “Soldiers.” This past year I was traveling through the airport in my khakis when someone called me “Sarge.”

Growing up in North Dakota I can remember wondering why Navy ever lost a football game, since they had the whole Navy to use for the team. I had no idea “Navy” was actually an institution called the Naval Academy. So during this war, whenever an American sees a midshipman, they think “soldier,” and our Naval Academy “soldiers” are on the news and in the paper next to those soldiers who have been killed in combat. We must be proud of our heritage and careful how we portray ourselves as we wear the “cloth of the nation.”

Most midshipmen make mature decisions regarding alcohol use, but, like many issues, the inappropriate actions of a few can negate the good work of an entire unit. Why do we care about midshipmen going out into town, having too much to drink, and then making poor decisions? Last fall, during my tour in Naples, Italy, a few American ships pulled in to Civitavecchia, the port closest to Rome. Sailors and Marines from those ships, including officers, went on liberty, consumed too much alcohol, and started a bar brawl that ended with “America’s finest” fighting with Italian police. This spring, I met with Italian police and local officials to apologize for the behavior of our American “ambassadors.”

Immediately after this incident, we closed the port to American ships. Three ships had planned on visiting Civitavecchia for Christmas, and Sailors had made arrangements for their families to meet them in Rome for the holidays. Spouses, friends, and children had bought nonrefundable plane tickets, yet the ships could not steam into port as scheduled. The actions of a few impacted the lives of many.

Alcohol incidents can have strategic consequences. We will teach responsible drinking at the Naval Academy.

We are always on display. Every year more than a million people visit the Naval Academy, some for the first time. Others observe a march over to a football game for the first time. Americans come here believing that we are preparing the best of the best.

What impression does the Brigade leave with those Americans?

How well do we represent First Lieutenant Andrew Kinard, U.S. Marine Corps (USNA Class of '05), who lost his legs to an IED in Iraq?

How well do we represent Lieutenant Commander Erik Kristensen, (USNA Class of '95) and Lieutenant Michael McGreevy, U.S. Navy (USNA Class of '97); SEALs who died trying to save their brothers-in-arms in Afghanistan?

How well do we represent the Sailors and Marines who evacuated 15,000 U.S. citizens from Lebanon last year?

When is it appropriate for the Brigade to show spirit and non-military fraternity/sorority behavior and when do they need to be the face of the Navy to the nation?

Do we demonstrate honor, courage, and commitment every day?

Final Thought

The class of 2008 only has eight months left before they receive their commissions. The underclasses have more time, but not enough to be complacent. The habits and discipline our midshipmen establish today will have a long-term impact on their ability to lead Sailors and Marines effectively. No one has the luxury of waiting until tomorrow to start preparing. We must all have a sense of urgency to execute this vision so that our graduates will be fully prepared to lead Sailors and Marines when the nation calls.

There is a book I like, *Leading at the Edge of Chaos*, by Daryl Connor, that describes the challenge of leading change in the dynamic world our military faces today.



SEA TRIALS Midshipmen fourth class (plebes) row as a team in Sea Trials, a culminating training exercise conducted in May as the mids' first year at the Academy is all but complete. The entire class participates in the day-long evolution.



U.S. NAVY (DANIEL ARIZPE)

LONG TIME GONE The *Nimitz*-class aircraft carrier USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* (CVN-69) and embarked Carrier Air Wing-7 returned to Norfolk in May after a 233-day deployment to the Arabian Gulf that allowed for only 15 days in port. Naval Academy training must prepare midshipmen to lead effectively on similarly lengthy, rigorous deployments.

In the book, he talks about a disaster on an oil-drilling platform in the North Sea, in which only a few survived. One survivor recovering in the hospital was asked how he managed to live when most others perished. He responded that there were two choices—he could stay on the burning oil platform and die, or he could take action

in the face of an uncertain future by jumping 15 stories in the dark into freezing cold, oil-slicked burning water. Given this choice, he jumped into almost certain death and survived.²

In a way, our midshipmen face a similar choice. They can continue on a steady-state course, remaining on the burning platform and focused on their own interests, or they can jump to meet head-on the challenge of leading our nation's finest. The clock is ticking . . . not just for our midshipmen, but also for all of us responsible for their development and success. ❄️

1. ADM Mike Mullen, USN, Speech for Assumption of Duties as Chief of Naval Operations, U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis MD, Friday, July 22, 2005, <http://www.navy.mil/navydata/cno/mullen/speeches/mullen050722-coc.txt>

2. Connor, Daryl, *Leading at the Edge of Chaos* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998), 118.

Vice Admiral Fowler, a submarine officer, is the 60th Superintendent of the U.S. Naval Academy and a graduate from the class of 1978.

Back to the Future

In support of Admiral Fowler's vision for the Naval Academy, the Commandant of Midshipmen has directed several initial operational changes in order to focus on the mission of developing midshipmen into junior officers.

Mandatory study hour will be reinstated Sunday night through Thursday night for all classes and Sunday night through Friday night for third class and fourth class midshipmen.

Summer training will be more focused on Fleet exposure to better prepare midshipmen for service as commissioned officers in the Naval Service. As such, all summer training programs will be reviewed and adjusted as appropriate with the goal of maximizing time with and exposure to the Fleet.

Midshipmen uniforms will be reviewed to ensure alignment with the Fleet. First

class midshipmen will now wear the summer khaki uniform to better highlight and recognize their class distinction as leaders of the Brigade and to bring them in line with the Fleet they will enter in nine months.

Beginning with Sunday evening meal and ending with Friday noon meal, all meals are mandatory for all midshipmen. Midshipmen will sit at tables with their squads to provide an opportunity for and to facilitate military and professional training and personal interaction with the midshipmen's chain of command. This environment lends itself to developing small unit leadership skills and furthers the development of midshipmen of all classes.

Midshipmen watch and duty requirements will be reviewed and changes will be made to better prepare midshipmen for the Fleet.

Midshipmen participation in extra-curricular activities (ECAs) has been limited both in the number of activities they may participate in and when they may participate. For ECAs that do not directly contribute to the development of midshipmen, participation is limited to standard liberty periods.

There will be no weeknight liberty. Later in the fall semester, first class midshipmen may have an opportunity to earn limited weeknight liberty for outstanding performance. This supports the implementation of mandatory study hour.

Weekend liberty will not commence until after evening meal formation Friday night for first class midshipmen, after evening meal for second class midshipmen and after Saturday noon meal formation for third and fourth class midshipmen. This is to promote unit accountability.