



# United States Naval Academy

## FACT SHEET

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### COMMISSIONING WEEK TRADITIONS

#### **History**

Although the U.S. Naval Academy was founded in 1845, it did not have a consecutive four year academic program until 1850. The first formal graduation was held on June 10, 1854. During war time, first class midshipmen (seniors) sometimes had no formal graduation ceremony or were simply given their diplomas; and for the two world wars, they received their commissions early. Adm. David Dixon Porter, the Academy's sixth superintendent from 1865 to 1869, began adding parades, dances, and athletics to graduation week, originally named June Week. It was not until 1912 that graduates were commissioned on graduation day. The week of festivities was renamed Commissioning week in 1979 when the academic calendar moved the events to May.

Since 1966, the graduation ceremonies have been held outside at Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium. Previously, the event was held at locations across the Academy grounds, and in the 19th century, it was held in the chapel. Between 1903 and 1956, ceremonies were held in the armory, now named Dahlgren Hall. From 1957 through 1965, graduations were held in what is now known as Halsey Field House.

#### **Parades**

Commissioning Week dress parades began in 1846. The first parade, held June 27, 1846, honored the Board of Examiners and consisted of exercises in the manual of arms and infantry tactics.

#### *Color Parade / Color Competition*

The oldest parade at the U.S. Naval Academy is the Color Parade, a tradition that began in 1867. The highlight of this parade is the formal presentation of the color company pennant by the "color honoree," the brigade commander, and the Superintendent to the company that has excelled in academics, athletics, and professional accomplishments.

#### **Naval Academy Class Rings and Ring Dance**

Since 1869, each Naval Academy class has selected its own committee to design their class crest. The crest is then incorporated, along with the coat-of-arms of the Academy, into the design of the class ring. A complete collection of the rings can be found in the U.S. Naval Academy Museum. Second class midshipmen (juniors) do not wear their rings until they are "baptized" at the Ring Dance during Commissioning Week, a tradition since 1925. Traditionally, the water for dipping the rings is acquired from the Seven Seas of the world by academy alumni who are members of the fleet.

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## **TRADITIONS (Cont.)**

### **Blue Angels**

The Blue Angels, known officially as the U.S. Navy Flight Demonstration Squadron, have performed their precision flying demonstrations for approximately 11 million spectators a year. They have performed during Commissioning Week since 1947.

The team was established in 1946 and became the epitome of aerial artistry. The original demonstration involved four Grumman F6F Hellcats in a tight diamond formation, which became the trademark of the Blue Angels. They currently fly the strike/fighter plane McDonnell Douglas F/A-18 Super Hornet and are stationed during the show season at Forrest Sherman Field, Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Florida.

### **Graduation Ceremony**

The commencement address to the graduating class of midshipmen may be given by the United States President, Vice President, Secretary of Defense, Secretary of the Navy, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Chief of Naval Operations, or another distinguished speaker. During the ceremony, the members of the graduating class are sworn into the Navy as ensigns or into the Marine Corps as second lieutenants. After the last group of diplomas is presented, the graduates sing the academy's alma mater, "Navy Blue and Gold." The new first class midshipmen lead three cheers for "those who are about to leave us," and the graduates, led by the class president, respond with three cheers "for those we leave behind." On the last "hooray" of the cheer, the graduates toss their midshipman caps into the air, to be recovered by children as mementos of the occasion. After graduation, family members and friends pin on the new ensign's shoulder boards or the second lieutenant's gold bars.

### **Graduation Hat Toss**

The "hat toss" is the traditional ending to graduation and commissioning ceremonies at all the service academies and originated at the Naval Academy in 1912. Before then, Naval Academy graduates had to serve two years in the fleet as naval cadets or midshipmen before being commissioned as officers in the Navy or Marine Corps, and they needed to retain their midshipman covers (hats) for their sea tour. Beginning with the Class of 1912, graduates were commissioned ensigns or second lieutenants following the reception of their diplomas and hence no longer needed their covers. In a spontaneous gesture, the new officers tossed their old hats into the air. This became the symbolic and visual end to their at the Naval Academy.

### **Silver Dollar Salute**

A long-honored tradition in all the United States armed services is for a newly commissioned officer to give a silver dollar to the first enlisted person or midshipman who salutes him or her. It is believed that the one dollar allotment given an officer for an aide in the early 19th century is the origin of this custom. The silver dollar signifies the deep sense of gratitude an officer has to the enlisted ranks for the knowledge they pass on and for the respect they give in providing a greeting by their salute.