



WWW.USNA.EDU

United States Naval Academy

FACT SHEET

Public Affairs Office
121 Blake Road Annapolis, MD 21402
mediarelations@usna.edu
Phone: (410) 293-2292

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 called 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 changes in the academic calendar moved the events to May.

Commissioning week features a variety of long-standing traditions culminating in the conferral of diplomas and awarding of commissions to graduating midshipmen. 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 Academy chapel. Between 1903 and 1956, ceremonies were held in the armory, now named Dahlgren Hall. From 1957 through 1965, graduations were held in what was later known as Halsey Field House.

Parades

Commissioning Week dress parades at the U.S. Naval Academy 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 which began in 1867. Midshipmen anticipate this parade as their last full dress parade while at the Academy. The highlight of the Color Parade is the formal presentation of the color company pennant to the company that has excelled in academics, athletics and professional accomplishments by the "color honoree," the brigade commander and the Superintendent.

Naval Academy Class Rings/Ring Dance

Since 1869, each Naval Academy class selects its own committee to design its 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.

MORE

TRADITIONS (Cont.)

Blue Angels

The Blue Angels, known officially as the U.S. Navy Flight Demonstration Squadron, have performed their precision flying demonstrations for more than 414 million spectators. They have performed during Commissioning Week for more than 70 years.

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. The Blue Angels 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. As 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 this cheer, the graduates toss their midshipman caps into the air, to be recovered by spectators 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's 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 Midshipman's hats. In a spontaneous gesture, the new officers tossed their old hats into the air. This "hat toss" became the symbolic and visual end to the four-year program 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.

USNA