

Day One- September 17, 2003.

Back to the Future

Twenty years from now, you'll be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the things you did. So throw off the bow lines, sail away from safe harbor, catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.

Mark Twain

1045 PDT, 21,000 ft, 325 knots. Over California

As the JetBlue Airbus 320 completed its climbout from Long Beach airport and turned east for the five hour flight to Washington Dulles airport, I began to reflect on the influence that four years at The Naval Academy had had on the ensuing 40 years of my life. While doing so, I turned on the television monitor on the back of the seat in front of me and tuned to the weather channel. The tiny screen showed a young, tense looking male reporter standing on a beach with the ocean at his back. He nervously proclaimed that Hurricane Isabel, which a few days ago had been labeled the “Storm of the Century” (we were, after all, only thirty-three months into the 21st century) was predicted to hit the East Coast of the United States near the Virginia Capes around midday tomorrow. He added, breathlessly, that hundreds -- make that thousands -- of residents in low-lying coastal areas in the storm’s path were evacuating to higher ground.

I thought *How appropriate. At a time when many Eastern seaboard residents are leaving their homes for safer areas away from the coast, my wife and I are headed straight for the shores of the Chesapeake Bay, which now appears to be directly in the path of the storm. Well, at least we weren't on a flight to Baghdad.*

2030 EDT, Marriott Residence Inn, Annapolis Maryland

We checked into The Residence Inn on Admiral Cochrane Drive in west Annapolis well after full dark. The hotel, which looked almost new, was located about two miles west of the Navy Marine Corps Memorial Stadium and about four miles from the Yard. Significantly, it was situated on relatively high ground, although the importance of this fact would not be apparent until Friday. Television weather reports for the eastern seaboard continued to sound ominous, but there was no sign of Hurricane Isabel just yet. Tomorrow, however, is another day.

Day Two- September 18, 2003

Blue fedoras and Phantom Dinner Cruises

“We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;”

William Shakespeare, Henry V.

1030 EDT, Country Inn and Suites, 2600 Housley Rd., Annapolis

Registration for the reunion was well underway and dozens of vaguely familiar looking men in their early 60s were milling about when we walked down the stairs into the basement conference area of the hotel. The first two people I encountered after stepping into line to register were Dave Thornhill and Bob Eastman, two 22nd Company classmates. Like all of us, they had both aged considerably since 1963, but were nonetheless easily recognizable. We exchanged pleasantries and lamented the fact that the approaching storm was clearly jeopardizing the events planned for the '63 Reunion.

After picking up our various event tickets, May and I were each given a dark blue fedora with a yellow hatband inscribed "USNA '63." The fedoras were reminiscent of the type of headwear almost all adult men wore during the 1940s and early '50s- felt hats with wide brims and creased crowns. I had a fleeting vision of myself in one, looking like Humphrey Bogart in the 1940s movie "Casablanca." ("Play it again, Sam."). Unfortunately, many classmates already wearing the hats looked more like Truman Capote than Bogey.

1145 EDT, the Midshipmen's Store

We parked our rental car on the sea wall road next to Dewey Field and walked about 200 yards to the outside entrance to the Midshipmens store adjacent to the first wing of Bancroft Hall. Passing the recently completed Navy Soccer Center, I was impressed by both its design and construction. In short, it appeared to be everything a modern college sports facility should be. Nonetheless, I wondered why a school like the Naval Academy would sink so much money into facility for a minor sport like soccer, which many in my generation view as a European game. I guess times simply have changed.

The Midstore itself had also been transformed in the 40 years since I left the Academy. My recollection of it back then was a small, rather stark facility which mainly dispensed uniform items, along with Brasso, Kiwi Shoe Polish and Spiffys (who, other than us, can remember Spiffys?). It is now a worthy rival to a medium-sized department store. Uniform items are nowhere to be seen, replaced by a bewildering variety of "Navy" merchandise, including logo shirts, caps, jackets and sweaters of virtually every type imaginable.

May was soon loaded down with clothing items, including a present for our as yet unborn grandchild, Michael James Pace (USNA Class of 2024, of course). She was delighted to learn that not only were the prices on the items she purchased quite reasonable, but there was no state or federal sales tax on any of her purchases. The final tab at checkout was on high side of \$500; fortunately, we only do this once every 40 years. As we left the Midstore at about 1315, light rain was beginning to fall and the wind was starting to pick up. It seemed that Isabel was not far off and coming fast.

1330 EDT, Dahlgren Hall

Rain was beginning to pelt the tennis courts next to Dahlgren as we joined the food line on the second deck of the Hall. The indoor "picnic," moved from the Naval Station across the Severn

River due to the anticipated storm, appeared to be somewhat lightly attended, with only about a hundred or so '63ers and an equal number of spouses lined up to eat when we walked in.

As anticipated, the food was forgettable (the usual overcooked chicken, dry hamburgers and cold beans); nonetheless, the company was good. May and I sat for a while with Jim DeFrancia and his wife, discussing the recent visit to my home in California by his and my former roommate, John Kallestad. I reported that John looked healthy, seemed happy, and appeared to be much the same delightful fellow we had both known at USNA. I indicated that John, like most of us, had put on a bit of weight around the middle and that I doubted that today he could run the hundred yard dash in much under 10 seconds.

I noted that my first class year roommate, Rich Omohundro, had originally signed up to attend the reunion, but apparently had not shown up. Craig Thrasher, a former member of the Navy Crew, came by to report that Omo had decided not to attend due to the anticipated inclement weather. Craig and Jim Fontana (another Crew member) were disappointed by Omo's absence, as the members of the '63 Varsity Crew had planned to dedicate a '63 shell at the boathouse on Friday, and hoped to have all eight oarsmen *and* the coxswain there for the ceremony.

May and I also renewed our acquaintance with Bill Penn and his friend Linda Thebo. Although I had not known Bill at the Academy, we met the couple during a visit to Rome in the late 1990's and dined with them at a local restaurant. Along with being a lawyer in the Midwest, Bill has become the point of distribution for internet jokes, some of which are outrageously funny. He is also the source of a numbingly long shaggy dog story, the punch line of which is "Rudolph the Red knows rain, dear."

I also chatted some more with "Thorny" Thornhill, who informed me that he was recently retired (involuntarily) from his position as a pilot with United Airlines (the FAA requires commercial pilots to retire at 60). Understandably, Thorny was rather critical of both the FAA and United, and less than bullish on the futures of several major domestic airlines as going businesses.

Toward the end of the afternoon, I talked at length with Joe Clancy, a '63 classmate whom I had not seen in 40 years. Joe had attended high school in Urbana, the twin city to Champaign, and had been commissioned as a 2nd Lt. in the Marine Corps following graduation. After leaving the service, Joe had gone into investment banking, and had worked briefly for Ross Perot in Texas. He now lives in Antwerp, Belgium with his Dutch wife.

Perhaps without meaning to do so, Joe gave us an interesting insight into the current European way of thinking. He opined that most Europeans professed to love Americans immediately after 9/11, when Islamic terrorists murdered more than 3,000 of our citizens. However, he added that two years after 9/11, most Euros now seemed to hate us (apparently because we decided to take aggressive military action against the terrorists and the rogue nations supporting them). The moral of his story appeared to be that Europeans love us as victims, but only so long as we *remain* victims.

1800 EDT, Harry Browne's Restaurant, 66 State Circle, Annapolis

Jim DeFrancia's group had planned an elegant dinner for the Sixth Battalion attendees on Thursday night, which was to have taken place on a chartered yacht, the *Christina Marie* while it

cruised the Chesapeake Bay. Then came Hurricane Isabel and the Coast Guard's cancellation of all commercial boating activities out of Annapolis Harbor from September 17th on.

In an effort to at least partially salvage the event, the organizers switched the dinner venue to a small restaurant in downtown Annapolis called Harry Browne's. By a happy coincidence, the establishment was owned by Rusty Romo, the son of the late "Red" Romo, the longtime Navy varsity athletic trainer. Because so many '63 varsity athletes had known and liked Red, Rusty was particularly accommodating to our group, essentially reserving the entire facility for our use the evening of the 18th.

As a touch of humor, DeFrancia and his band had named the restaurant event the "Ghost Cruise" and provided attendees with nametags and menus which had been originally printed up for the *Christina Marie*. He also arranged for an open bar from 1800 until 1930 upstairs, which helped promote an impromptu social hour.

May and I had a splendid dinner in the downstairs restaurant, and I spoke briefly with Rusty about my fond memories of his dad, who, I noted, had been a father figure to several generations of Navy varsity athletes. Although I suspected that Rusty had heard that sort of testimonial many times before, he seemed particularly pleased to be hearing it from an ex-jock from our year group. He even showed me a letter, written by a former scrub on the JV football team, who thanked and praised Red for his support and encouragement. I couldn't help but smile as I read it, as I myself had similar memories of Red.

As we left Harry Browne's, rain was scouring the sidewalk around State Circle, and a driving, swirling wind was already beginning to blow small branches off the trees around the old Maryland State House across the street. During the drive back out Riva Road to our hotel, we encountered several areas of standing water -- a small sample of what was to come later that night.

Day Three- September 19, 2003

Hell and High Water

The weather- everybody talks about it, but nobody does anything about it.

Will Rogers

1000 EDT, King George Street, Annapolis

According to the "gouge" sent out by the reunion organizers, Friday was to be a "full day" for reunion attendees, with a class meeting at 1030 at Mahan Hall, a memorial service in the Naval Academy Chapel at 1330 and a black-tie dinner dance at the Marriott Waterfront at 6:30 PM. Friday indeed turned out to be a "full day," though not in the way the organizers had envisioned.

Hoping to find a parking place in the yard near the Mahan Hall meeting site, May and I drove into downtown Annapolis just before 1000, turning left on Maryland Avenue and then right down King George Street toward Gate 1. The weather at that point was sunny and clear. The first sign of the damage which Isabel left in its wake was an inexplicable traffic jam just past Maryland Avenue, about a quarter-mile from Gate 1.

King George Street slopes downward from that point, so we could see that the street was blocked off near its terminus at the entrance to the Academy grounds. We could also see that cars headed for Gate 1 were being turned around. As we moved closer, we saw why- the Gate 1 area was submerged under about three feet of water, as was the road in front of the Navy Field House just beyond.

We retreated up the street, parked next to the wall bordering Worden field, and walked to Gate 3, hoping to enter the Yard from there. The news from the Marine sentry at Gate 3 was not encouraging. He informed us that the Yard was on "condition red" (closed to everyone other than essential personnel) due to extensive flooding. He also indicated that the Academy was planning to let the three upper classes off for the day, as there was no electrical power to the academic buildings, and no hot food available in King Hall.

We were also informed that the '63 class meeting at Mahan Hall and the memorial service at the Chapel had both been canceled. From a pair of '63ers standing near Gate 3 we learned that it was rumored the '63 black tie dinner dance scheduled for that evening had also been canceled.

Having nothing better to do, May and I walked toward the town waterfront area to the east of Gate One. The flooding there, if possible, looked even worse than that on the Academy grounds. The entire waterfront area before us was flooded with brown seawater to a depth of 2-3 feet. The flooding encompassed the street bordering the waterfront, and extended about fifty feet up the street running through the town's waterfront commercial district.

One look at the Marriott Waterfront Hotel confirmed that the earlier report of the dinner dance having been cancelled was not merely a rumor. The waters of the Chesapeake Bay had apparently risen during the night to the level of the front entrance to the hotel, flooding the basement kitchen and shorting out the electrical power. Comically, people in canoes and small boats paddled about in the street in front of the hotel, while crowds of locals gawked at the damage from higher ground and small groups of teenagers waded in the shallows.

1230 EDT, O'Brien's Pub, Annapolis

At loose ends due to the cancelled events, May and I walked up to O'Brien's, a restaurant and bar located about 50 feet from the high water mark on the flooded waterfront. There we encountered classmate Steve Coester and his wife, whom we joined for lunch. Steve and I discussed the subject *du jour* (old times in Bancroft Hall), while our wives pretended to be interested.

It turned out that Steve had been a Fourth Battalion striper (Midshipman officer) who, along with his roommate, had his stripes taken away after being caught drinking in Bancroft Hall the night before Christmas leave first class year. Listening to his story, I recalled that my roommate and I (along with several other firsties in the 22nd Company area) had also broken out some contraband liquor that particular night in 1962, more out of defiance for the system than because of any fondness for alcohol (neither of us was much of a drinker). However, unlike Coester and his

roommate, we were able to throw down a shot or two each of cheap bourbon mixed with warm Pepsi without being caught by the Executive Department. Thus, I was able to retain my lofty (yeah, right) striper rank- midshipman petty officer 1/C- for the entire second semester.

1800 EDT, the Radisson Hotel, west Annapolis

Lacking a venue for the planned Friday night dinner party, the '63 organizers hastily arranged for an informal, no-host cocktail party at the Radisson Hotel, which, thankfully, was located on high ground off Riva Road in west Annapolis. May and I arrived in time to walk into the party with Joe Strasser, another classmate from the 22nd Company and varsity basketball teammate whom I had not seen in two decades. Joe told us that he is now the president of the Naval War College, and is enjoying his new role.

As I remember him from the Academy, Joe was one of those rare young men who were somehow more than the sum of their parts. As a basketball player, he was less than physically imposing, being only a bit over six feet tall and slight of build; moreover, he possessed neither great speed nor unusual quickness. Yet, he was a starter on the plebe team and played extensively for the varsity as an upperclassman. Apparently, those personal qualities which enabled him to excel as an athlete despite his modest physical gifts also served him well on active duty -- he retired as a Rear Admiral, one of only a handful of our classmates to reach flag rank.

Unfortunately, the cocktail party organizers did not make any provision for dinner, so small groups of classmates began gathering near the hotel lobby to go out to eat together at various restaurants nearby. May and I wound up going to dinner with three other classmates and their wives -- former Marines Dick Ellsworth and Len Eaton, and former Civil Engineering Corps officer Bill Palafox.

I barely knew Bill and Len at the Academy, and I did not recall having previously met Dick Ellsworth at all. Nonetheless, we four conversed amiably over dinner and wine for nearly three hours like old, dear friends. Although we had each followed disparate paths in our lives, both in the service and as civilians, we seemed to still share many common values and a similar worldview. As May and I drove back to our hotel, I mulled over the question as to why.

Although I reminded myself that it was tempting to engage in hyperbole regarding the fellowship we each share with our Naval Academy classmates, I couldn't help but conclude that there *was* something special about being a member of this group. I also realized that to graduate from the Naval Academy is more than to just add a BS after one's name or a degree to the wall of one's den. It is to join a self-contained, rather idealistic society, which, even after four decades, is largely uncorrupted by the world at large.

Day Four- September 20, 2003

For Auld Lang Syne

Harry: "What does the song line 'should old acquaintances be forgot' mean? Does it mean that we should remember old friends we've forgot? After all, if we forgot them, how could we remember them?"

Sally: "Anyway, it's about old friends."

When Harry Met Sally

1030 EDT, the Naval Academy Chapel

Built in the shape of a Roman Cross, with a soaring central dome and stunning stained-glass windows, the Naval Academy Chapel is easily the most striking building in the Yard. While sitting in its capacious interior waiting for the '63 class meeting to begin, it occurred to me that calling this beautifully designed and magnificently executed church a "chapel" was inadequate, as it is clearly the architectural and aesthetic equal of many cathedrals in Europe and North America. Still, the label "USNA Cathedral" might seem a bit pretentious for a place of worship at a government supported military college, so perhaps the current name is better left alone.

The Class of '63 meeting planned for Mahan Hall on Friday morning had been rescheduled for today and moved to the Chapel, where the current absence of reliable electrical power was not as much of an issue. Our class officers spoke briefly, mostly about the class gift of over \$1 million for a Center for Academic Excellence in Mahan. Vice Admiral Rodney Rempt, the Academy's new Superintendent, followed with a brief "State of the Academy" presentation which was apparently intended to bring classes like ours (i.e., from the Jurassic Period) up to speed as to what was going on at the "new" Naval Academy. He began with a brief attempt at humor, noting that if he did not have a "real" plebe year, he knew who to blame. (Rempt was a member of the Class of '66, the year group whose members were plebes when we in '63 were first classmen).

Most of Rempt's talk dealt with improvements to the physical facilities throughout the Yard, such as the construction of Rickover and Michelson Halls, the new soccer and sailing centers, and the remodeling of Navy-Marine Corp Memorial Stadium. He also noted, however, that the Academy had recently introduced a new "kinder, gentler" plebe year which was designed to meet the needs and expectations of a new generation of young people.

Based on what I have heard, it now appears that plebe year is more like six weeks of annoyance to be tolerated, rather than a nine-month ordeal to be survived. Whether this will be good or bad for the Academy and/or the naval service in the long run remains to be seen.

1230 EDT, In Front of the USNA Chapel

Following the adjournment of the class of '63 meeting, May and I mounted a final assault on the Midstore, intending to pick up those few gifts and souvenirs which had eluded us during our initial foray on Thursday. Unfortunately, we greatly underestimated the time it would take to check out with our purchases, and thus found ourselves standing in a seemingly endless line at the cash register at 1230, with the kickoff of the football game at Navy-Marine Corps Stadium

just an hour away. As our rental car was back at the hotel, we had no means of getting to the game other than walking.

Luckily, Chris Munger, a '63 classmate who was also trapped in the Midstore checkout line, graciously offered to give us a ride to the stadium in his SUV. Unfortunately, his vehicle was parked along the road fronting the Chapel, which was part of the Brigade's parade route to the game site. Unable to drive off until all the Midshipmen marched past, Chris and I stood on the curb watching them stream by, a long line of trim young men (and a few trim young women) all dressed in their game day tropical white longs. A few of them glanced at us from ranks and smiled faintly.

As I stood there, my mind drifted back to fall of 1959, when, as a newly minted plebe, I first noticed groupings of old grads in the Yard during football weekends, many of whom wore nametags identifying them as members of classes from decades past. Thinking of the high ratio of misery to pleasure I was then experiencing in Bancroft Hall, I remember wondering to myself why anyone who had endured four years at the Naval Academy would want to relive the experience, even for a weekend. I also wondered how people so old and tired looking could ever have been a part of a robust group of young men like those with whom I matriculated. I concluded that at least some of the Mids in ranks who noticed us standing there on the curb were probably having similar thoughts.

1300 EDT, Navy- Marine Corps Memorial Stadium

Despite a brief pit stop at the '63 tailgate tent to have a couple of beers, we were able to get to our seats on the "Gold" side of Navy Navy-Marine Corps Stadium in time to watch the Brigade march on. The recently remodeled facility looked incredibly good -- so different from the one I recall from my Midshipmen days that it almost seemed to be a different venue.

The basic shape of the Stadium has, of course, remained the same, although seats with backs and arms have replaced the old aluminum bleachers throughout. However, both ends of the Stadium now have seats installed where there was once only grass. A huge, glass press box dominated the West ("Blue") side of the Stadium, and state-of-the-art scoreboards featuring enormous video screens towered over both end zones.

In sharp contrast to the two previous days, the weather at game time was glorious -- sunny, about 78 degrees, with no wind to speak of. The stadium seats appeared to be about 60% filled, mostly with Navy fans. A small contingent from Eastern Michigan sat near the south end zone.

The class of 63 had set up its tailgate tent -- a huge white canvas structure which would have done justice to a small circus-- adjacent to the class of '48 Pavilion area which overlooks the south end zone. The proximity of our tent to this large patio area allowed those '63ers who wished to do so to watch the game from just above the end zone while mixing with classmates and sampling the tailgate food provided for us. As a bonus, this area was only a short walk from the beer truck leased by our group, so keeping our cups filled with Bud or Bud Lite throughout the game was no problem.

From the viewpoint of the old grads, the game itself couldn't have been better scripted by Hollywood. After a shaky start, which saw Eastern Michigan march nearly the entire length of the field before a Navy interception ended the drive, Navy then went to work on what was obviously a soft Eastern Michigan defense, running up huge chunks of rushing yardage and – surprise-- completing several long passes.

The Midshipmen went on to thrash the visitors 37 - 7, with the Eastern Michigan quarterback contributing to the rout by fumbling twice and throwing several interceptions. For Navy, there were circus catches on offense and long interception returns on defense--just what the old grads had hoped for. By the time the last strains of *Navy Blue and Gold* drifted over the end zone, all in attendance from our group appeared thoroughly satisfied with the outcome. Eastern Michigan, of course, was not Ohio State (or even San Diego State), but the end result was a win for Navy. And, given the recent history of Navy football, it was enough.

Several classmates whom I had known from the old days on the Severn River materialized during the game to chat briefly. Paul Saake, a 6'6" former varsity soccer player who always seemed to be lined up next to me in formation during plebe summer, approached to say hello. Paul now sports a full beard, and, like so many of us, has put on a few pounds about the midriff. Ollie Donlan, a varsity basketball teammate, also stopped briefly to chat. (Ollie, who was about 6'6" back then but now appears shorter, had a great jump shot for someone who really couldn't jump at all). Miller Dietrich, the co-captain of the track team, also recognized me and said hello – somewhat surprisingly, as my role on the varsity track team was a minor one.

Perhaps the most interesting encounter was with a classmate whose name escapes me, who, while standing next to me looked at one of the Navy linemen and said that the fellow reminded him of a very clever cartoon he had seen in the Trident Calendar forty years ago. As he described the drawing, I slowly came to the realization that I had been the artist (I had contributed several cartoons to the 1962 Trident), and the classmate was quoting my own punch line back to me. We both had a good laugh over this odd coincidence.

Of the classmates I talked to during the reunion, one stands out as having aged the most gracefully -- Pete Optekar, who had been a smallish (185 lb.) guard on the football team, and who, at 64, looked like he could have suited up and played that afternoon. I suppose 25 years in Marine Recon would tend to get you in decent shape for civilian life.

As the afternoon (and the reunion) wound down, I had more than a few thoughts about the fleeting nature of youth. In fact, as I watched the Navy players walk off the field after the game, my initial thought for them was "Enjoy your life as a sports hero while you can. Ten years from now, few will remember what you did on the football field today, and fewer still will care."

But then I caught hold of myself. This reunion was not about faded athletic glory or lost youth. It was about old friends, about fellowship with a group of once young, now aging men who shared a common experience unlike that of any other college group. Friends who, as graduates in 1963, had far more noble aspirations – duty, honor, country – than the vast majority of college men of that era. I was glad to be among them once again.

Forty Years Later- Reflections on 96 hours In Annapolis.

What impressions did I form of my '63 classmates after 40 years? Most of them seemed to be pretty much the same people I remembered from the early 60s –bright, personable, decent people who, for the most part, were pleasant to be around. Each was much older, to be sure, but also far more relaxed and considerably more thoughtful. Perhaps best of all, there did not appear to be a certifiable jerk in the entire group -- at least not one who was showing his true colors during this brief four-day reunion.

The realities associated with the passage of four decades were sometimes jarring. A few classmates looked old beyond their years; a few more appeared to be in poor health. And, although most of the classmates I met would probably be classified by society at large as achievers, one or two seemed bitter that their lives had not unfolded in the way they had hoped. But the overall impression was of men who, by and large, were proud of what they had accomplished in the years following graduation. Despite the sometimes sad stories, despite the graphic reminders that youth was but a distant memory for all of us, I was happy to have attended.

Richard R. Pace, USNA Class of 1963, Long Beach California