

## **The West Point Tests**

### **A Journey to Fort Leavenworth**

My quest for an appointment to one of our nation's military academies started during my last two years of high school and, being unsuccessful after graduation, continued during my two years at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas. I had received alternate appointments to West Point and Annapolis, but was so far down the list of applicants that my chances for getting an appointment were slim. But being an alternate qualified me to receive physical examinations and to be tested academically, so during my time at K-State I travelled to Naval Air Station, Olathe, Kansas for Naval Academy testing, to Offutt Air Force Base near Omaha, Nebraska for the Air Force Academy, and to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas for the U.S. Military Academy. Schedules for these examinations were published and candidates were on their own to show up at the various bases for the tests.

The trips to Offutt and Olathe were routine as groups of candidates were tested, usually in one day, and sent home. I passed all the Air Force Academy tests, but was surprised to learn that I had failed the Navy physical because of needed dental work. All I needed for passage was to get the work done and send documentation to Olathe to become qualified, which I quickly did.

The sojourn to Fort Leavenworth was more interesting. It preceded the Olathe and Offutt trips and required us to be there for two days. It occurred sometime after New Years 1958, because I remember that it was winter, and I was a freshman at K-State. I took a bus from Manhattan to Leavenworth for the 100 mile trip. I had been at K-State long enough to adjust to the requirements of college student life having had a hard time with academics initially. I didn't know how to study or manage my time because high school had been a breeze for me. I seldom had homework being able to complete most assignments during class or study hall. My introduction to the college level engineering curriculum was a profound shock. It took me a month or two to learn the ropes of studying and managing my time, but I finally got the hang of it and started doing well in my classes. In retrospect I'm glad I had some college before entering the Naval Academy because I would have had a terrible time there surviving Plebe Year as well as simultaneously taking college courses.

So I had learned how to handle college academics, but in my mind I was still a shit-kicking farm boy from Claflin, Kansas, which was little more than a wide place in the road. This thought preyed on me as the bus travelled east toward Fort

Leavenworth. How was I going to compete with all these hot shots from Kansas City and Wichita that had their principal appointments to West Point and knew that they were going the next summer? I envisioned them all sitting around the barracks at the fort studying highly technical text books and working with slide rules (this was before the advent of the electronic calculator). The closer we got to Fort Leavenworth, the more inferior I felt. By the time we arrived at the barracks where we were to live for the next two days I was almost ready to slink back to Manhattan.

I walked into the squad bay and there they were, but they weren't studying. Most of them were sitting around playing cards and smoking cigars. I thought to myself..."Maybe this won't be so hard after all." It didn't take me long to fit in with the crowd, and we had a good time going through the physical exams and academic testing over the next two days. By the time we left at the end of the second day, I had made some good friends.

The next step was to wait and hope I lucked out with an appointment. You know the story about how I learned of my appointment to the Naval Academy during the early summer of 1959 just a few weeks before the entrance date. I had made three attempts for an appointment and finally my patience paid off. But in spite of the fact that I had two years of college behind me when I entered Navy, I was still a shit-kicking farm boy. I suppose I still am after all these years. In fact I was the only farm kid in my USNA company, and I suspect that I was in a small minority for the entire Class of '63. A number of classmates visited the farm I grew up on during leaves and after graduation, but I was the only true shit-kicker.

To add a little perspective, when I was a defense contractor after retirement from the Marines, I worked with an Army officer, Lieutenant Colonel Kent Guffy, who graduated from West Point in the late 1980s-early 1990s. He came from the small town of Byron, Oklahoma which is just a few miles from the central Kansas border. He had grown up on a farm and we shared stories of our childhood experiences. He told me that after almost 20 years in the Army and 4 years at West Point that I was the only one who really understood what he was talking about when he related stories of farm life. As I thought about that, it occurred to me that this was true for me as well. In effect it took a complete military career, and then a second life as a defense contractor before I was able to find a real shit-kicker who knew what I was talking about when the subject of farming came up. Pretty amazing when you think about it.

So that is the story of part of my convoluted path from the farm to the U.S. Naval Academy. Good memories of times past.

---

Steve Coester added this:

I could almost have taken your story and just changed your name to mine other than I was a poor city kid not a farm boy. I also had two Missouri second alternate appointments behind Ron Schowalter and Mike Bracy and only found out I was admitted a week or two before induction. I had my USAF Academy physical at Scott AFB in Illinois and it was a fun two days of physical aptitude and medical testing. I flunked the eye test and the EKG. While there I was wandering around and went in a hanger where I was promptly "Arrested". It was the home of the top secret U-2 spy plane. They gently shoed me on my way told to forget anything I had seen. My USNA medical was also at Olathe and I also flunked teeth and had to get a bad mouth repaired. Plebe year they pulled out all that work and redid everything. Navy didn't take an EKG and after the four grueling years at the Academy with no trouble it was the problem Air force had found that almost killed me and got me kicked out of the navy.

I lived outside of St. Louis and had to get to Olathe outside Kansas city in January. My parents just said If I wanted it I'd get there. So I took the train from St. Louis to KC and got out on the road to Olathe and stuck out my thumb. some farmer stopped and had me jump in the bed of his pickup. I about froze to death by the time he dropped me off at Olathe. I have no remembrance of how I got back home after the physical.

My only entrance exam was the SAT for Air force and Navy. for the Coast Guard Academy I took a 16 hour killer of a test in St. Louis. Afterwards I couldn't remember where my car was or how to get home. It was a killer but I did well and had an appointment to CGA.