

Mess Hall Madness

- Or, the day the Cannonballs ate George

During my days as a Naval Academy Midshipman from July 1959 until June 1963, one of the central locations that played a big part of each Mid's life was the Naval Academy mess hall. It is nestled between the First Regimental and Second Regimental sides of Bancroft Hall and is capable of seating and feeding the entire Brigade of Midshipmen at once. In my day there were about 3,800 Mids in the Brigade. The mess hall is a "T" shaped edifice with two rows of mess tables running along every side of the "T". The galleys where the food is prepared run the length of the crossbar of the "T". In 1981 the hall was named after Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King who was the Chief of Naval Operations during World War II, but in my day it was simply known as "The Mess Hall". The only thing we knew about Admiral King was that he was our World War II CNO and that he was a crusty old bastard. When he was called to be CNO during the war he was alleged to have said, "When they get in trouble they send for the sons-of-bitches".

Midshipman companies were assigned specific blocks of tables, thus companies ate together. The tables themselves seated twelve people; two at each end and four per side. The ideal mix was two First Class at one end, two Second Class at the other end, with four Third Class and four Plebes along the sides, but there were variations.

Besides the fact that Midshipmen found themselves in the mess hall three times a day to eat, much more than just food consumption went on when the Brigade gathered for meals. It was a time of concentrated stress for Plebes as upperclassmen had their attention up close and personal with four Plebes being surrounded by eight upperclass. Plebes sat in their chairs in a brace, which meant that they ate at attention. They kept their mouths shut except when spoken to. It was during meals that Plebes were assigned professional questions on subjects that ranged from military to historical to geographical to current events. They were usually given until the next meal to find the answers. Only during come-arounds to upperclass rooms, when individual attention was given to Plebes, was the focus more intense.

And then there were the antics that went on before and during meals. So much was going on throughout the messhall that it is hard to describe the undercurrent of high jinks that occurred. I will attempt to describe some of what went on to give you a feel for the nuttiness that was always present. Some of the grab ass can't really be given a title, but there was the Great Pearl Harbor Day demonstration, the Ham Croquettes Food Fight, the Record Pending-Don't Flush episode, Wild Men, and George Webb versus the Cannonballs.

December 7, 1959...a day that continues to live in infamy. It was after our football victory over Army and before our highly anticipated Plebe Christmas leave. Plebes were able to carry on until after Christmas leave because we had beaten Army, which meant they were exempt from Plebe indoctrination, which was a Godsend although it only lasted a few weeks. During the evening meal the doors at one end of the mess hall crashed open and in came four Plebes carrying classmate Glenn Takabayashi, who was of Japanese extraction, on their shoulders. "Tak" had on a leather flight helmet, goggles, and was dressed as a Japanese aviator. Wrapped around his helmet was a white banner emblazoned with the Rising Sun emblem of Imperial Japan. The Plebes carrying Tak had a sign that simply said, "**NICE RAID**". They carried Tak the full length of the mess hall and ran out the door from which they had come before any officer could catch up with them. Upon graduation four years later Tak, like me, became a Marine, and ironically,

after The Basic School he went to Pensacola and became a Marine aviator. I'm not sure whether he ever served at Marine Corps Air Station, Kaneohe Bay and flew over Pearl Harbor.



Tak

One noon meal during either Second or First Class year involved a memorable food fight. The menu stated that the main course was to be "Ham Croquettes". After the Brigade had filed into the mess hall for lunch as was given the command "Brigade Seats!" the meal was served. The Filipino stewards brought the food to the tables and we got our first look at the Ham Croquettes. They were light brown in color and were the size and shape of...turds. This was noticed by the whole Brigade and a low rumble arose throughout the mess hall punctuated by laughs and guffaws. My company, the Sixth, was seated near the point where the cross of the "T" joined the vertical leg of the "T". Thus we could easily see down the full length of the messhall to the foot of the "T". Someone at the foot threw a Croquette across the aisle between the rows of tables. A few seconds later about three Croquettes were returned. Then about twenty flew back the other way. Fifty or so were returned, and the fight was on. Croquettes by the hundreds were flying through the air both ways. Finally the Officer of the Day got the Croquettes to stop flying by screaming into the P.A. system. The food fight never made it all the way to the intersection of the "T". It was mostly confined to the foot, but it threw the whole mess hall into chaos. I can't remember how it ended...whether we were run out of the mess hall before the meal was finished or what, but I'll never forget the sight of the barrage of flying Ham Croquettes. Maybe that's why they never again appeared on the menu.



The Notorious Ham Croquettes

Throughout the academic year there is competition between all companies of the Brigade of Midshipmen in academics, military and professional drills, and sports. The winning company is announced during June Week, and is designated as the Color Company. It holds that title during the following academic year and its gold company guidon is emblazoned with a blue border. Midshipmen from the Color Company are entitled to wear a gold "E" on their Service Dress Blue uniform. Thus anything that has to do with competition is referred to by the "Color" designator.

When meatloaf appeared as the main dish for evening meals in the mess hall, it was served with two loaves on a platter per table. Each loaf was about 12 to 14 inches long and about 2 to 3 inches in diameter. After one evening meal of meatloaf during Second Class year we were slowly strolling back to the company area of Bancroft Hall when we came upon a commotion outside one of the heads. A number of Mids were looking into one of the stalls, so my roommate Dick Williams and I took our turn. Floating in the pot was one of the meat loaves, and attached to the bulkhead behind the pot was a sign which said, "**COLOR TURD. RECORD PENDING. DON'T FLUSH**". So the mess hall hi jinx had migrated to the company area.

Another mess hall phenomenon was known as the "Wild Man". This evolution was done to an upperclassman by a Plebe. Of course the Plebe had to be directed by another upperclass to inflict a Wild Man on his buddy. The basic Wild Man consisted of a Plebe sneaking up behind an upperclass and roughly mussing his hair with both hands while yelling, "Wild Man! Wild Man! Wild Man!", and then running for his life. There were variations of the basic maneuver, such as "The Spaghetti Wild Man" or "The Blueberry Pie Wild Man" which were a little harder to pull off and a bit messier, but I don't think they require further explanation. You can imagine the results.

And finally there was the "George Webb versus the Cannonballs" episode. Before I can proceed I need to tell you what "Cannonballs" were. They were basically an apple-based pastry. An apple was cored and wrapped in pie dough, slathered in butter and cinnamon, and the whole concoction baked until the apple was soft and the dough was semi-crispy. Then the pastry was slathered in Hard Sauce. Each Cannonball was about the size of a softball. I suspect that they were served for dessert at evening meal about four or five times an academic year.

There was a tradition...I don't know if it still exists at USNA...that if a Plebe could eat his entire evening meal, and then consume all twelve Cannonballs served to his table, then he would be granted "carry on" privileges for some extended period of time. I can't remember exactly how long. I only saw it attempted once. During Second Class year a Sixth Company Plebe from the Class of 1965 named George Webb declared that he wanted to give it a try. The word spread around the company like wildfire that George was going for it. We all gathered around his table as he started to consume the Cannonballs. The first six or seven went down quickly. Then it started to get rough on George. We all started cheering and shouting encouragement. He bravely continued and started to sweat and make strange noises. I think he got ten or eleven Cannonballs down, before they started to come back up. It was the strangest case of vomiting I have ever seen, before or since. The Cannonballs came back up slowly at first, and maintained a somewhat solid consistency. It almost looked like a long turd coming out of George's mouth. Our cheers turned to statements of amazement and dismay. Then finally most of the Cannonballs were out, and everything else he had eaten followed as well, and the solid consistency was no more. What a mess! Poor George was done for the night. I think he was given a short period of "carry on" for his efforts. He had tried to eat the Cannonballs, but they had eaten him instead. And I'm sure the stewards were real happy with the mess left for them to clean up. They should have made George do it.

So now you have a fair idea of the craziness that went on in the Naval Academy mess hall when Midshipmen were purportedly eating their meals. These episodes just scratch the surface of the mayhem that was ongoing morning, noon and night. You'd have to see it to believe it. Generally, we ate pretty well at USNA, although there were aberrations like the episode of the powdered eggs, and the occasional mystery meat. However, like military men through the ages, we bitched about the food. Like that anonymous Marine embarked on an Attack Transport crossing the Pacific for Okinawa famously said, "The food is lousy, and there's not enough of it."