

**Twisdale:**  
**Conversations with the Colonel**  
by  
George W. Grider, Jr.

During the summer of 1959, young men from across the nation gathered in the bay side town of Annapolis, Maryland to begin their naval careers. While upperclassmen were away on cruises and vacations, we Plebes, members of the newly formed Class of 1963, found ourselves the virtually sole occupants of the Yard. A few Second-Class (junior) midshipmen had volunteered to stay behind and lead in daily drills and lessons in officer-like deportment. Our remaining hours were spent trying on uniforms and wondering about the future, particularly that day in early autumn when the upperclassmen would return to the Yard. According to all accounts, on that occasion, our genial days would be over and we'd be thrown into hell.

The rumors were not exaggerated. For most Plebes, the mass return proved a nightmare. Hazing was administered during the “come-around,” when upperclassmen ordered us to report to their rooms, where we were commanded to memorize and recite names, dates, and places of naval and national events. This, along with the academic workload, seemed an impossible task. To make matters worse, as the meals progressed along with the hazing, I realized I was being assigned more work than my classmates.<sup>1</sup>

My resentment showed. Upperclassmen reacted to my passive-aggressive attitude with hostility. Our fury—mine and theirs—reinforced each other in a climbing spiral. At the semester's halfway point I was placed on probation. Not for low academic grades, not for demerits, but for a failure in what was termed “aptitude for the military service”—also known as “grease.”

These formal assessments of the Plebes' military aptitude were made by upperclassmen. Questions on the forms included: “Does the man demonstrate quick thinking?” “How well does he stand up to punishment?” “Rank his neatness and military deportment.” High marks improved one's class standing, which provided choice billets in the fleet following graduation. Low grease,

really low, could get you thrown out.

In late October, the midterm grades were posted. I did well in the academics. My grades in Engineering, Science, History, and English put me in the upper-middle part of the class. Grease, however, was another story. Upperclassmen threw at me everything they had. At the dining table they worked themselves into a frenzy. “Does the underclassman show an aptitude for quick thinking in battle?” Grade: 1.0 (out of 4.0). “Could he stand up to punishment, and not crack?” Grade: 1.5. It was as if I smelled of mildew or worse, in need of a thorough cleaning. I’d expected my grease to fall short but had little idea just how far down it would go.

In contrast was my roommate John Dohrman, an all-around athlete and tough guy. He came from Montana, where he’d been expelled from high school for setting off a case of dynamite on the outskirts of town, primarily for the thrill of breaking nearby windows. He joined the Marine Corps and was later admitted to the Naval Prep School. Here, we became improbable roommates.

John’s name on the Academy’s freshman basketball roster provided a coveted seat at the athletic training tables, where hazing was not permitted. In the relaxed atmosphere, athletes were awarded high grease marks by default. Nevertheless, John displayed one singular weakness that put him in a harsh spotlight.

The semiannual signal contest was coming up, testing our ability to read Morse code and semaphore flags. The event was Brigade wide and took up an evening. Individual scores were tallied and averaged over each of the twenty-four companies. Competition was intense. Some companies worked hard. Most wanted simply to avoid disgrace. Was the Sixth Company squared away, or were we slackers? Excellence was not required, but woe be it to any man whose tepid score put a dip in his company’s average.

Drills were carried out for weeks. Despite his efforts, John was unable to master Morse code's rhythmic language. Following the formal competition, the results were tallied and published. His score placed him as one of the lowest ranked in the company and provided upperclassmen a handy index of those men whose military aptitude was suspect.

In the Sixth Company, John's near-bottom scores drew attention. Until then, only a few upperclassmen had known who he was. John's separation from most of his classmates at mealtimes meant that most Academy upperclassmen had never witnessed his charisma. Those unable to recall John's name naturally leaned toward giving him average marks. That is, until the publication of the signal scores.

Once the scores were posted, the upperclassmen's wrath placed John and me in a shadowy club. We were ordered to the company commander's office to explain why we should be allowed to continue wearing the uniform of a midshipman. Members of the school's academic board, a group of officers gathered to screen failing students, asked pointed questions. What was wrong with the supplicant? Was he officer material? Why couldn't he be squared away?

With the unfortunate exception of his low signal scores, John did well. He was the essence of a squared-away midshipman. He dressed neatly, and his words, though few, were purposeful, with an undertone of menace. (Think Clint Eastwood riding into a western town.) Friends called him Big John, borrowed from the song by Tennessee Ernie Ford about a tough coal miner who gives up his life for his crew. In the 1963 *Lucky Bag* yearbook, one can see him gliding low over a hurdle, a lean thigh nearly touching the beam. I recall him setting a Plebe track record.

The academic board was composed of a half-dozen officers, including the Academy commandant. The board's job was a grim one—deciding who would stay on and who wouldn't.

When it was my turn, I pointed to my better-than-average signal scores and academic grades. I promised to work harder on the upperclassmen's questions. The officers on the board heard my plea and saw the sweat on my brow. No doubt they considered the fact that my father, a World War II submarine captain and hero of the Pacific campaign, was an Academy graduate (Class of 1936). Afterward, while I waited in the hall, they considered the matter. They called me back and announced I'd be given another chance.

A few who underwent the ordeal failed, although exactly who was never mentioned. Being rated low in military aptitude was humiliating; the topic itself was regarded as taboo.

John, too, was called in to defend himself, though for different reasons. I wasn't there to see it, but knowing him as I did, I can imagine his defense. To his interrogators, he'd have given his patented I-dare-you stare. In his gruff voice, he'd have explained that the only reason he was standing before them was his low signal score. Between the lines, he would have conveyed that their method of training and selecting officers was seriously flawed. Why did they think that someone expert in Morse code automatically possessed qualities of leadership? Didn't the Navy have specialists to carry out such tasks? And besides, John wasn't in the Navy. He was a Marine.

The results were astonishing. For John, all was forgiven and forgotten. Six months later when the signal competition was repeated, he failed again. This time, the upperclassmen had learned their lesson. John's signal scores were ignored, and his grease grades were raised to exemplary.

At this point, one might ask: What exactly was it about my personality that motivated upperclassmen to wish me gone? I puzzled this question for years before I realized that my tormentors had recognized something in me that I was unaware of myself: I was an imposter, plain and simple. I had no business being an officer in the United States Navy. My reason for

swearing in as an enlisted man in 1958 was to graduate from the Academy and enter flight school. My grandfather had piloted British fighter planes in the First World War. My cousin, a 1940 Academy graduate, flew Corsairs in World War II. There was nothing I wanted to do more than to fly airplanes, especially ones operating off aircraft carriers. Getting through the Academy—the top ride—seemed the best route to that goal.

That’s why the upperclassmen distrusted me. They saw the dreamer in me, and, nearly to a man, said this guy has got to go.

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One night after lights-out, everyone asleep, the mate of the deck (the night watchman, a classmate) entered the room. “George,” he whispered. “Colonel Twisdale wants to see you.” All was quiet. No foot traffic.

Lt. Col. Robert Twisdale, United States Marine Corps, was a man to be feared. In a feature film he’d have been played by George C. Scott. He was in his late thirties, stocky, pure business. As officer in charge of the Third Battalion, Twisdale was responsible for the military upbringing of one-sixth of the institution’s student population.

During the day he would often appear in the halls. He might stop a hapless midshipman, look him over, and demand that before he left his room next time he’d best attend to his smudged shoes or lint-covered uniform. More important than the text of his remarks was the tone. Anyone unfortunate enough to be stopped by Twizzy—a nickname meant to lighten the severity of his very presence—was in for an ass-chewing.

His toughness wasn’t wasted on schoolboys. Four years later he would take command of the Marine Corps’ Seventh Battalion, preparing it to be the first American unit to storm the beaches of Vietnam.

Neither I nor anyone I knew had ever received a private summons to Twisdale's office. It seemed fitting that such a bizarre event would occur in the middle of the night.

Underlying my dread was a tinge of curiosity. Was this how they delivered the coup de grâce? Discharged midshipmen normally disappeared, without a sign, save for an empty locker discovered by roommates just back from classes.

The sentry stood quietly holding a flashlight, sympathetically giving me time to absorb the shock. John and Dick, my other roommate, lay on their sides, eyes open, not even pretending to be asleep.

Our room was on the third floor. The sentry and I slowly descended the dark stairwell. A light shone beneath Twisdale's door. I knocked three times. "Enter," came the gravelly voice. He was sitting at his desk, leafing through a file. I saluted. "At ease," he muttered.

"Mr. Grider," he continued, "I've been looking over these reports." He glanced up. "They don't look good; I suppose you know." He closed the folder and turned toward me. So this was how it happened.

"I've been watching you. I see what the upperclassmen are saying. The trouble with you is your attitude. Whenever I see you walking through the hall, you look morose."

"Yes sir," I said. He wasn't shouting or growling. No hint of rebuke.

"My advice to you is to start thinking positively."

"Yes sir." Was he implying I had a future?

"There must be good things in your life, Mr. Grider. If there weren't, you wouldn't have gotten here. From now on, I want to see some energy, some enthusiasm. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir," I said.

"I want to see you smiling."

“Yes sir.” I nodded, awkwardly, and tried to smile, so unfamiliar was the feeling. I was alive. I practiced smiling in the darkness all the way to my room. It felt strange.

A week later, the axe fell. The Academy’s Chapel Choir, of which I was a member, was bused to a nearby women’s college. There we joined its all-female choir in a performance of Handel’s *Messiah*. More exciting than the exotic company was the opportunity to join women’s voices in song. Our own choir was composed of four sections: bass, baritone, and first and second tenor. I sang with the basses. Accompanied by organ, our limited version of *Messiah* was fulfilling, but nothing like what was about to come.

The moment had arrived. We stood on bleachers with female vocalists. Students and faculty filled the auditorium. The conductor stepped onto the podium. First, the organist played the *Pastoral* Symphony. Next, the conductor raised his baton. The organ began with the opening bars of the first chorus of *Messiah*, and then came a sound I can still remember.

“And the glory, the glory of the Lord,” came the sounds of women’s voices. I felt reborn, lifted into God’s embrace.

In my sixth-grade choir at a private boy’s school in Memphis, we were led by Miss Neal, a dark-haired woman in her early twenties. She entranced us with her soprano voice and lovely smile. I remember the Christmas concert, performed in a dark loft, wrapping us in womb-like security. I carried this feeling throughout high school. Acceptance into the Academy’s Chapel Choir and its offshoot, the prestigious Glee Club, provided me with a sustaining and reliable state of grace.

The concert continued with glorious exhilaration, followed by hearty applause.

The college was hosting a post-concert dance. Girls stood across the room in formal gowns, looking like candles. One caught my eye.



At the Academy and throughout the town of Annapolis, midshipmen were governed as strictly as nuns. A lengthy list of infractions filled a three-ring binder. We were required to be in bed no later than 10 p.m., seven days a week. For the first three years, we were not permitted to drive cars. (During Plebe year we were forbidden even to ride.) Alcohol was forbidden on- and off-campus. Regulations were enforced within the twenty-mile jurisdictional radius of the Yard, measured from the apex of the chapel dome.

During a two-week Christmas vacation and most of the summer, we left the Yard and lived as civilians, or sailors on shore leave. During the academic year, members of the varsity athletic teams and choir traveling outside the twenty-mile zone also enjoyed relaxed standards. At the women's college in Maryland, hazing was suspended. Plebes were allowed to "carry on," enjoying ordinary pleasures.

Anticipating the first human touch felt in months, I crossed the room and asked the girl to dance. She was from Brooklyn. Her speech sounded Southern. In the confines of her arms, I could feel my guard dropping, my mouth sliding toward hers. A kiss, then another, longer. Ordinarily this would have been a serious disciplinary offense. At Annapolis, holding hands was illegal. Here, I felt safe, at least for the evening.

There was a tap on my shoulder. A voice ordered me to sit down. It was a fellow choir member, a senior. I was mortified. Realizing that my partner would be implicated, I recovered, leading her to a nearby table. Alone in a dim corner, we resumed making out. She told me she was engaged to be married. We never communicated afterward, and to this day I'm grateful she selected me for her brief time-out.

On the bus ride home, my oppressor, whom I'll call Higginbottom, gave me a come-around for the next morning. It was Sunday, ordinarily a time for catching up on sleep. I climbed

the steps to his room on the fourth deck. There he continued with his rant: that I was a disgrace to the Academy and to the naval service. For my punishment he offered a choice: either be placed on report or elect to “call chow” every morning until the end of the year.

Calling chow involved standing in the hall and yelling out the time of day from 6:15 a.m. until meal formation fifteen minutes later. Normally, this practice began the day. Recently, however, lebes had been enjoying an amnesty because of Navy’s recent win over Army in the annual football game. This provided extra minutes of sleep, and the chance to enjoy a meal without interruption.

I elected the second choice: to call chow. Being placed on report could spell the end. I’d already earned nearly the number of demerits to have me expelled; another misconduct report could push me over the limit.

That Monday morning, at 6:15, the big hand on the hallway clock clicked to the three, my signal to begin. “Sir, you now have fifteen minutes until morning meal formation,” I called. “The menu for breakfast is scrambled eggs, grits, grilled pork sausage....” I added weather forecasts and the required uniform. At 6:25, I left to join meal formation.

The ritual was not altogether unpleasant. I was the only person in the hall doing it, instilling mixed feelings of importance and humiliation. For the remainder of the day, like my classmates, I enjoyed the relaxed, no-hazing dining. The next morning, as I stood waiting outside Higginbottom’s room, he called me in and informed me that he’d been chastised by his superiors for violating the amnesty. Hence, he had no choice but to write me up. Which he did.

As I saw it, he was renegeing on the agreement. I had honored my end, obligating him, I felt, to honor his. Of course, I kept this opinion to myself.

It was my first look at how power uses betrayal to achieve its means.<sup>2</sup>

The official report read: “Public Display of Affection—GROSS.” I was called into an office and questioned by a midshipman first class specially appointed to investigate my crime. He began by asking for an explanation. In a good-old-boy manner he egged me on. Naively thinking him a sympathizer, I reported the night’s events with a tinge of pride, even a touch of exaggeration.

Shortly afterward, I received a copy of the formal report. My interrogator had upgraded the offense to a Class A category, so severe that it might by itself lead to expulsion.

During the next few days, I existed in the eerie silence often described as preceding an approaching tornado. I was sure I was living out my last days. Thoughts of Col. Twisdale’s order to smile were forgotten.

A few nights later there came another wake-up. “George,” the sentry whispered. “George!” I had no idea of what was coming. “Twizzy wants to see you.”

Another trip down the stairs and a knock on the door. “Enter,” Col. Twisdale commanded. So this was how it worked.

“Mr. Grider, is this true? About kissing the girl on the dance floor?”

“Yes sir.” I was numb with fear.

“Hmm,” he said, studying the report. “It says here: ‘Mr. Grider admitted that he kissed the girl more than once, that it lasted throughout the period of an entire dance.’” He glanced up, then back to the form. “‘Mr. Grider confessed that had Mr. Higginbottom not interrupted, he would have kept going. He reports that he attempted to talk the girl into stepping outside, and she refused—on account of the cold weather.’ Is that right, Mr. Grider?”

“Yes sir,” I said. I thought I could see a mischievous look. I felt one side of my mouth moving upward.

“You’re not looking morose now, and I’ll bet you weren’t feeling morose back then.”

“No sir.” I felt the start of a real smile.

“That’s the spirit! I want to see that expression every time you walk down the hall.

Understand?”

“Yes sir.”

“Try not to get any more demerits, but as for this report, I wouldn’t worry about it.

Dismissed. Oh, and Mr. Grider, keep up that smile.”

I left Twisdale’s office with a wide, steady grin, my shoulders back and my head held high. I hoped no one would catch me smiling.

Weeks later, the winter days unseasonably warm, we formed outside for noon meal. Guthrie, standing next to me, whispered the word “Twizzy.” Moving toward us down the ranks was the man in green with his swagger stick, inspecting shoes and glancing up at the faces. We stood frozen, knowing that a spot on a uniform could wreck one’s day.

Reaching me, Twizzy stopped. Lord, had I shined my shoes?

He stood stock still. “Been kissing any more girls, Mr. Grider?” The Marine officer’s commanding voice echoed off the courtyard.

“No sir,” I said, feeling confused but somehow protected.

He moved on. Later, on two occasions, he repeated the question in broad daylight. Everyone could hear. There was no question as to whether the colonel’s words constituted a commendation.

I’ve often wondered what factors contributed to Col. Twisdale’s publicizing my crime, using an ironic tone likely aimed at my accusers. In those days, midshipmen were formally judged for their prowess in academics, military bearing, and athletics. An unofficial category was

the Department of Romance. No formal evaluations were made, no remarks uttered. Informal impressions, however, were traditionally recorded in the midshipmen's yearbook biographies, such as the following samples pulled from the Class of 1963 *Lucky Bag*:

HE RECEIVED VOLUMES OF MAIL FROM FEMALES.

HE BEGAN THE WEEKENDS WITH NOT LESS THAN THREE YOUNG LADIES.

HE COULD USUALLY BE FOUND WITH A GOOD-LOOKING GIRL ON HIS ARM.

Customarily penned by one's roommates, biographies concentrated on struggles with academics and grease—not with romance. Today's reader can search the yearbooks of that day for mention of anyone lacking in that department. No such defamation will be found.

Col. Twisdale's public exhortations tapped into this sacred if hypocritical standard of excellence. His public voice gave black eyes to those upperclassmen who had dredged up a Victorian standard to mask their jealous revenge. According to Higginbottom and his cadre of officialdom, the Plebe who'd scored with the ball's beauty had to go, and Twisdale didn't like it. The odd thing is that it had nearly worked. Only by a miracle was I redeemed. I never told John about it, so severe was the crime and so inexplicable Twizzy's public remembrance.

By spring the hazing had diminished: fewer come-arounds and less yelling. My aptitude grades improved. Following two more appearances before the academic board, I was allowed to stay. The next year we all watched Alan Shepard, an Annapolis alumnus, rocket into space. I was making progress, confident I would one day graduate with my classmates and wear the uniform of a commissioned officer.

And I did. Following three-plus years at Annapolis of struggle and risk-taking, I managed to graduate with my classmates, and in June 1963, I accepted a commission in the United States Navy. Nothing would improve my marginal eyesight, however, so I failed the flight physical. I

was assigned to shipboard duty and sent to sea.

My ineffective shipboard performance over the next four years bore out the suspicions of the Academy skeptics, although in the long run, the at-sea rigors and work under pressure would lead me in later decades to prove myself a trusted and productive citizen. In addition, during my time at sea I had sufficient in-port time to earn a pilot's license. After four years of sea duty, I resigned my commission and later bought my own airplane. It was then that I began experiencing the pleasures of private piloting, such as setting off on a Friday afternoon to camp in the southwest desert or on a deserted beach in Baja, accessible only by a two-seat airplane. Or flying alone above a dark, mountainous terrain, steering by prominent stars.

Today, I offer my deepest gratitude to the late Lt. Col. Twisdale.<sup>3</sup> From that gallant officer came a ray of light in an otherwise dark world. A single human trait explains his wanting to help this young man, an outcast, someone who would never be of use to him. That trait was human kindness. This gift from Twisdale would allow my friendship with John to last for the duration of our brief time together and beyond.

The End

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<sup>1</sup> Hazing practices had changed little during the prewar decades. Here's a portion of a letter penned in the fall of 1934 by Midshipman John Moyer, USNA Class of 1939, to his grandmother. The upperclassmen had just returned to campus. "Dear Gram, The reign of terror is on now. With all the upper classmen back, we Plebes really have to step lively. And, of course, the academic year has started, and following the usual rule, Plebes don't know whether they're coming or going.... The upper classmen don't bother us much except at meals where they submerge us (literally forcing us to sit under the table) for not knowing answers to their questions. They make us sit on air (infinity) [Note: in later years, this painful posture was known as "shoving out"] or eat a square meal [every movement of hand must follow a horizontal or perpendicular line]." *From the archives of Marsha Moyer, J.M.'s granddaughter.*

<sup>2</sup> Betrayals often occur at the highest levels. For example, the aerial attack on the USS Liberty by Israeli bombers—our allies—on June 8, 1967, during the Six-Day War, killing thirty-four American sailors, including USNA classmate Steve Toth. The attack was covered up by the U.S. government, many believe to protect the Israeli government from embarrassment. (See Phillip F. Nelson. *Remember the Liberty! Almost Sunk by Treason on the High Seas.* [Walterville, OR: Trine Day LLC, 2017].)

<sup>3</sup> Robert H. Twisdale, USNA Class of 1942, was an aircraft carrier fighter pilot during World War II. He was born in 1921 in Sackets Harbor, New York, and died in February 1996 outside Arlington, Virginia. He is buried nearby in the National Cemetery. He was seventy-four years old. (*Watertown Daily Times*, NY, March 9, 1996.)

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