

“Anchormen”

by James S. Robbins, “The National Review”

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The legends of Annapolis.

A recent Washington Post profile of John McCain’s years at the Naval Academy portrayed him as an unruly, fun-loving, under-achieving Midshipman struggling with his obligation to live up to his family’s brilliant military legacy. It was “a four-year course of insubordination and rebellion,” McCain later wrote. McCain graduated 894th out of 899 in 1958, five spots above the “Anchorman,” the lowest-ranking midshipman. In this respect he did uphold one family tradition; his similarly rebellious father Jack, who would rise to the rank of Admiral and was the Pacific Command CINC while his son was being held prisoner in Hanoi, had graduated 424th of 441. Some have suggested that McCain’s low class ranking reflects negatively on his fitness to lead the country. But there is no clear relationship between Academy class rank and leadership qualities. For example, Jimmy Carter, the only Naval Academy graduate to serve as president to date, graduated 59th out of a class of 820, so draw your own conclusions. Seventeen class anchors have attained flag rank, and many low-ranking graduates have gone on to brilliant careers. This tracks with the thesis I developed in my book *Last in Their Class*; the bottom of the class tends to produce a different kind of leader than the top. Those who wind up at the foot are often there by choice. They could do better if they studied, but they would rather trade class ranking for other pursuits. They tend to be the risk takers, the innovators, usually very well liked and in their own way driven. They know how to get into trouble, and more importantly how to get out of it. They also tend to have more than their share of luck. The “Anchormen” of Annapolis are of the same breed as the “Goats” of West Point, and both

can appreciate the humor in the comment, “There, but for the grace of God, walks a civilian.”

Charles William “Savez” Read was one such officer, the anchor of the USNA Class of 1860. A Mississippian, Read took a commission in the Confederate Navy when the Civil War broke out, and quickly established himself as a daring and resourceful sailor. Read seized so many Federal vessels (twenty two in three weeks) that a special task force was assembled just to find him.

One of his most noteworthy exploits took place on June 27, 1863, when he slipped into the harbor at Portland, Maine aboard the prize schooner Archer, and seized the U.S. revenue cutter Caleb Cushing. Read had planned to set fire to the other Union ships in port but his plan unraveled, and Read had to flee to open waters. He was apprehended and imprisoned at Fort Warren in Boston Harbor (coincidentally along with Major Harold Borland, the West Point Goat of 1860). Read tried to escape many times before he was finally exchanged, and the end of the war found him still trying to ply his trade as a Confederate raider two weeks after Lee surrendered at Appomattox. He fully earned his nickname “The Sea Wolf of the Confederacy.”

Commander Aeneas Armstrong of Georgia, anchorman of 1856, also served with the Confederate Navy. He was on a patrol on the James River on the picket boat Hornet January 26, 1865, when his vessel was accidentally rammed by the flag of truce steamer “William Allison.” The Hornet was split in tow and immediately sank, throwing the crew into the icy waters of the James. The crew of the Allison immediately rendered assistance, and had picked up four of the six men in the river when they heard the voice of one of the crew. “For God’s sake,

captain, let me go, or both of us will be lost!" the man cried. "Well if either is to be drowned, let it be me," Armstrong said. "Save yourself if you can." The rescuers made their way towards the sound of the voices, managed to locate the fifth sailor and bring him aboard. Commander Armstrong's voice rose from the darkness, "I'm numb, for God's sake, be quick." Armstrong went under as the rescuers neared him. He surfaced again briefly a few yards distant, muttered, "It is too late, I'm gone," and sank a final time. The rescue party searched for his body but could not find it, and the James froze over that night. Other searches also proved fruitless. Armstrong's body was discovered months later in the ocean near Bermuda, hundreds of miles out to sea.

William Barker Cushing was well on his way to being the anchor of the class of 1861 when he was "bilged" (expelled) for failing a Spanish exam. But when war broke out he pled his case personally to the secretary of the Navy, was reinstated, and managed to graduate, like John McCain, fifth from the foot. During the war he was known for his daring, and was described by a later biographer as "Lincoln's Commando."

His greatest feat was the sinking of the ironclad CSS Albemarle in a night time raid during which he rammed the ship with a 30-foot picket boat armed with an explosive charge. (The ironclad concept had been pioneered by John Randolph Hamilton, anchorman of 1851.) The explosion destroyed Cushing's small vessel, but blew a huge hole in the Albemarle, sending her to the bottom. Cushing survived and saw action in many other engagements, and in 1872 became the youngest commander in the history of the U.S. Navy up to that time.

Anchorman Richard Zullinger was diving officer and XO on the World War II submarine USS Pollack. Zullinger was notorious

in the Pacific Theater for his antics between missions. “Zully was one of those guys you knew was a bad influence but was too much fun not to be around” his crewmate Kenneth C. Ruiz wrote. “He was a free spirit on a perpetual search for a good woman and a good time.” Yet Zully worked as hard as he played, and was a highly competent submariner. “He may have been last in his class,” Ruiz recalled, “but he became a first rate officer and a great presence in combat. One thing for sure, he always had the respect and trust of the men.”

Colonel Joseph Zachary Taylor, USMC, did well academically but graduated 890 out of 890 in conduct in 1949. “Brains and irreverence,” as his son described him. In the 1950s Taylor was one of the organizers of the much revered and justly feared Marine Force Recon. One of his men remembered him: “Joe Taylor was a man who was comfortable with himself. He never seemed to feel a need to prove himself to or impress anyone. Whatever he did, I am convinced, he did for the satisfaction of knowing he had given his best and the intrinsic reward of a job well done. He was what he seemed to be and more; without pretension, affectation or artifice. . . . He was smart, imaginative, resourceful and creative. . . . He did it all with an unflinching, puckish sense of humor. He was, in my opinion, an exemplary human being.”

Amon Bronson was anchorman of 1896. His first assignment after graduation was aboard the USS Maine, and he was asleep in his bunk on February 15, 1898 when the ship blew up in Havana Harbor. Bronson survived, and went on to command the U.S.S. Denver and U.S.S. St. Louis during World War I. For his service he was awarded the Navy Cross. Amon’s friend and frequent partner in misbehavior at Annapolis was Henry Mustin, who graduated one slot above Bronson. Henry earned 12 varsity letters at the Naval Academy, a record at the time,

and was decorated for bravery in the Philippine insurrection. Most notably he was the first man to fly an aircraft catapulted from a ship at sea. He established the Naval Aeronautic Station at Pensacola and commanded the first naval air squadron. Henry Mustin was not only the Father of Naval Aviation but also the patriarch of a Navy family tradition which has continued through four generations to the present day. One member of Mustin's command at Pensacola was Marc Andrew "Pete" Mitscher, who graduated 107th of 130 in 1910. In 1942 Mitscher commanded the USS Hornet during the daring Doolittle Raid on the Japanese home islands. He later commanded the Fast Carrier Task Force, which wreaked havoc on the Japanese fleet, merchant shipping, and ground installations. His pilots won the decisive Battle of the Philippine Sea, also known as the Marianas Turkey Shoot, the largest aircraft carrier battle in history. Admiral Arleigh Burke later said of Mitscher that he was "a bulldog of a fighter, a strategist blessed with an uncanny ability to foresee his enemy's next move, and a lifelong searcher after truth and trout streams, he was above all else — perhaps above all other — a Naval Aviator."

The spirits of the aviator and the anchorman often resonated together. Renowned pilot Joe "Hoser" Satrapa entered the Class of 1964 with the expressed goal of graduating as the anchorman and winning the bounty to which each Mid contributed a dollar. He frequently found himself before disciplinary boards, and told one of them "I'm just waiting to get the hell out of here so I can go to flight training and get over to the goddamn war and kill gomers!" After four years of carefully planned underachievement and misbehavior he was within sight of his goal, but in the final examinations he got a few too many questions correct and wound up graduating slightly above the anchorman. Hoser went on to become a

legend in Naval Aviation, a fearless hunter in the skies over Vietnam who was a tireless advocate of guns over missiles, of close-in dog-fighting over long range engagement. "There's no kill like a guns kill" was his motto. He later was a Top Gun trainer and a revered figure in the F-14 community. His commitment to flying was demonstrated after a bizarre accident. Hoser had crafted a single-shot rifle out of a surplus 20 millimeter cannon from an F-14. But one day while cocking the weapon the breech exploded and the firing bolt blew backwards, taking off his right thumb. Knowing he could not fly thumbless, Joe prevailed on a surgeon to replace the missing digit with a big toe. Today Hoser still uses his flying skills, to put out forest fires. His entire life has been driven by a central rationale: "The purpose of life is to matter," he wrote in his Vietnam War diary, "to count, to stand for something, to have it make some difference that we lived at all."

I thought of these men, these and others I have read about, heard about, or had the privilege to meet, when listening to the end of John McCain's acceptance speech, his entreaty to fight, fight for what's right, for the ideals and character of a free people, for the future. To stand up and fight, for "beautiful, blessed, bountiful America." It was the most honest, impassioned and inspiring call to arms I have heard in many years. I heard in it the sum of his years, his wisdom, lessons hard and painfully learned. Character will always be more important in a leader than charisma, and not all virtues are acquired in classrooms.

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