

"I recall well the scene laid in the examination room on the top floor of the Honolulu Post Office on a spring morning in 1936. Except for the roof, the room was entirely open, cooled by a gentle breeze wafting through the porticos. Eight tense young men were seated at desks, having been given terse instructions on test procedure by the administrator.

"Are there any questions, gentlemen?" There were none.

"You have two hours to complete this section of the examination. Begin!"

Entrance examinations for appointments to the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis were on. The morning exam was in mathematics; in the afternoon it would be English. I was one of the examinees.

Earlier in my life, being a naval officer had not been a goal. It was my mother's dream that I was to be a chemical engineer, ultimately to work for Proctor and Gamble in Cincinnati where she grew up. Struggling in calculus, second year chemistry, and scientific German as a sophomore at the University of Hawaii, I was not entirely sure of success in that career, not sure at all.

"Why don't you try for an appointment to Annapolis, Bob?" asked a chum I had known since high school, Fred Cooke. Fred himself would like to have tried but could not qualify due to poor eyesight. His father, a Captain in the navy Civil Engineer Corps, was the Public Works Officer at Pearl Harbor. I had been invited several times to the Cooke quarters there and was awed by its size and elegance, complete with a pretty Portuguese maid, a nearby swimming pool, and an ever-available sailboat. Somewhere I had heard that a

Navy Captain governed the island of Samoa. That was certainly an intriguing possibility. Also I had been captivated by Dick Powell's heroic exploits in the movie, 'Annapolis Farewell'. I decided to try for an appointment.

My only avenue was through the then Territory of Hawaii's lone Delegate to Congress, Samuel Wilder King. I arranged to see him in his downtown Honolulu office. King, himself a Naval Academy graduate, was sympathetic.

"Sorry, all appointments have been filled." he said, adding dubiously, "We'll let you know if anyone drops out."

Well, that was it. I had tried. Back to conjugating German words again with Frau Hoermann. At nineteen, this was the last year I could apply. Forget Annapolis.

A telephone call from Delegate King's secretary in February: "Would Mr. Newcomb accept a Third Alternate appointment to the Naval Academy?"

"Yes! Of course, yes!" One of the appointees was found to have a disqualifying physical defect.

Reality sank in. A third alternate, for God's sake. In taking the entrance examinations, ahead of me would be a principal appointee. No matter how well I did, if he passed he would get the ultimate appointment. Furthermore, if he failed a first alternate was next in line, then a second alternate, finally me. It seemed a hopeless situation. I would study only as much as I thought necessary to pass. I went over exams given in previous years; I engaged a math tutor; and I studied, all the while struggling to keep afloat in German.

"Stop writing!"

The bout with sines and cosines, exponents and radicals was over. I felt that I had passed, but certainly not with flying colors.

At the break for lunch I met my principal, a tall, good-looking, likeable guy from Maui, Jack Boyum. He seemed intelligent and confident. What chance would I have against him? It so happened that year that there were two appointments (each congressman was allowed four appointees in the academy at the same time, normally admitting one each year. However, if one left prematurely an additional appointment would then be available). The other principal appointee was a fellow I knew only as "Airdale" McPherson. I had surfed with him on occasion and saw him as a bully and a braggart and not very smart. Why could not he have been my principal instead of Boyum?

The afternoon English exam did not go well. I had expected that it would be mostly on English Literature, and was chagrined to find it principally on unfamiliar American writings. The examination room became sultry. I glanced at Boyum. He was writing away, cool as a cucumber. Near the end of the examination we were asked to paraphrase a poem by A.E. Housman, "To an Athlete Dying Young" ---explain its meaning. At this point, I was becoming panicky. Time was running out. Let's see. He's an athlete. What kind of an athlete? Probably a runner. Anyway, he died. Too bad. Why did he die? (My mind now clutching at any logical straw). I finally put down something to the effect that the poor fellow died because he overexerted himself, like the messenger who brought the news of the great victory at Marathon to Athens.

In the closing minutes of the examination I reviewed my efforts. I came upon To an Athlete, etc. Suddenly the true meaning became clear: How fortunate you were young man to die when you were still in your glory, the bitter realities of life yet untasted! Hurriedly I crossed out my original interpretation and put down essentially the correct answer.

Weeks went by, and my Annapolis digression was all but forgotten. Then in May I received a cablegram from the Navy Department. I passed the exams! I was going to the Naval Academy! I ran around our house, yelling, "I made it! I made it!

Poor Boyum. I wondered who got the other appointment. Shortly I found out: John H. Boyum! How could that be? He was my principal! Eventually the mystery unraveled; for me a true miracle. Not only did Boyum's first and second alternates fail, but also Airdale McPherson and all three of his alternates. As I was the only one besides Jack who passed, I got the other appointment.

I received a 2.7 on the math exam and a 2.5 in English. 2.5 was the minimum passing grade. I just skinned through. Jack and I graduated from the Naval Academy in 1940 and became career naval aviators. Our first assignments were to the same ship, the cruiser Northampton, where we were roommates. Fred Cooke went on to MIT, eventually retiring as a Navy Civil Corps Captain. Both remained lifelong friends until their deaths. Sam King was Hawaii's first governor when Hawaii became a state. Airdale McPherson eventually made it to the Academy, but flunked out in six months.

I have often pondered the thought: what if I had not gotten that last minute inspiration on Housman's poem? Failing the entrance exams, would I have wound up a Proctor and Gamble

engineer? Or was it fate that decreed I should become a sailor?"