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Class 05-84

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I yell, "Class Zero Five Eight Four marching in to chow!"

Thirty fellow Aviation Officer Candidates join in: "One!" "Two!" "Three!"

Each candidate strikes the brass threshold leading into the chow hall as he calls out his position in line, a chorus of sounding brass and deep baritone. We listen closely to the candidate in front of us because our number is not always the same. Our numbers change when one of us is absent due to standing watch, being sick in the infirmary, completing extra duty, or any number of tasks which deny us the pleasure of eating in formation.

Our chow gathering begins with our class in formation, on the veranda, three-abreast, eyes forward, nose only inches away from the neck in front.

Is it our own sweat we smell as we await Gunnery Sergeant Hawks' command to sound off, or is it the odor of the candidates invading our personal space to our fore, aft, port, and starboard? We no longer know how to say left and right, our new world is nautical. No matter the direction, I/we stink.

I approach the threshold, "Six!" I am tall, so I line up near the front of the class. My number doesn't change often. I am glad to not be near the rear where someday's number is 22 and next it may be 25.

Our number count is vitally important. The class announcement, Class 05-84 and the candidate count inform the cashier what to enter in the master chow hall tally. Being off by one or two numbers can cost the Navy from three to six dollars per class per meal. We can't afford that.

Entering the chow hall in single file, nose to neck, we proceed to the line. There are no difficult tasks such as stomping and counting here; one only need execute a left face, lift one's tray and silverware with two hands until parallel to the deck, elbows close beside one's body to form a perfect right angle, upper arm parallel with one's back, lower arm parallel to the deck, hands in alignment with one's lower arm, execute a right face, and proceed to the chow line.

The ladies in knit caps and white dresses prepare their predetermined portions for us on our perfectly round divided plates: one-half for protein, one-quarter for vegetables, one-quarter for starches. They are not as talkative as the ladies I remember from high school, but they look at us with sympathy as at circus beasts. A roll is placed in the middle of the plate.

My plate is handed to me by one with a remorseful look of: "I feel so sorry for you but know what you are doing is worth it." I lower my tray to the rail, accept my plate with my right hand, place it dead center on my tray, say "Thank you ma'am," and proceed to the next station, drinks.

I am allowed two drinks: water and the soft drink of my choice. Yes! My choice. One half cup of chopped ice for each glass, topped off with water and soft drink. Once filled, these are strategically positioned in the upper port and upper starboard corners of my tray.

I exit the chow line with a crisp about-face and scan the chow hall for the candidates who stood before me, neck in my nose. I cannot march directly to his table. Tray again parallel to the deck I must be sure to march squarely. I may only navigate the chow hall by executing crisp turns right or left, and precise forward marches.

Arriving at the next empty seat I check to see if the table is full. It is not so we await the cadet who will complete the table and shout the command.

"Ready! Seats!" We sit in unison. "Adjust!" We all pull our seats to the table, six inches between chest and table. "Eat!"

We have either until five minutes after the last candidate in our class has adjusted or until Gunnery Seargent Hawks calls an end to the meal.

Today we get our full allotment of time, so we wait until the final candidate has had his five minutes and await our next command.

"Class Zero Five Eight Four! Ready! Stand!" sounds the class leader for the day.

We stand in unison and begin to file out, tray to back, no space between us.

It is here, having sufficiently dined, that we are vulnerable to the whims of Gunnery Seargent Hawks and his fellow drill instructors.

Gunnery Seargent Hawks bellows, Aviation Officer Candidate Ward."

"Sir, yes Sir."

"Aviation Officer Candidate Ward, aren't you one of those band bodies?"

Band bodies is a term of endearment given to candidates who play in the Naval Aviation School's Command Regimental Band. We are the official band for all candidate graduations. It is an honor to be a member, or so we say. Why do we play in the band? Because we get to go to band practice in the morning instead of going on the morning run. The morning run is led by

Gunnery Sergeant Hawks. Band practice is led by a retired Chief Musician, who is not a drill instructor.

"Aviation Officer Candidate Ward, aren't you one of those band bodies?"

"Sir, yes Sir!"

"Well, what type of band body are you? Are you a beater or a blower?"

Innuendo and challenges to manhood are an integral part of Aviation Officer Candidate School.

I think. I reply.

"Sir, this Aviation Officer Candidate is neither a beater nor a blower, Sir."

Will he take the bait?

"Then what type of band body are you, Ward?"

"Sir, this Aviation Officer Candidate is a sliiiider, Sir."

Somedays, like this day, it's good to be a trombonist.

Gunnery Sergeant Hawks turns from my direction with a crisp about face. I can tell by the up and down movement of his shoulders that he is laughing privately at the relief, even for him, of the routine.