

Set. Ensign. Post  
6/25/49



Graduate Brown attaches his ensign's shoulder boards to uniform—and makes American history.



As a midshipman, Brown roomed alone at Annapolis. But he wasn't lonesome, after the early days. An ardent platter bug, here he is entertaining clowning classmates in his Bancroft Hall quarters.

# The First Negro Graduate of Annapolis Tells His Story

By *ENSIGN WESLEY A. BROWN, U.S.N.*

What kind of hazing did he suffer? Is it true that Academy red tape and tradition conspire to maintain a racial boycott, insuring failure of Negro midshipmen? Here are the answers, from the best possible authority.



"Worked over" at first, Brown became discouraged. He conquered that. Above he is shown passing the famous statue of Chief Tecumseh in the Yard.





Classmate Milton Gossow, visiting the Brown home, samples Wesley's mom's fried chicken.

I AM the first Negro to be graduated from the United States Naval Academy, but I don't see why this should excite a lot of attention. Thousands of other Negroes have accomplished far more.

I wouldn't be writing this at all if there hadn't been so many queries and rumors. It seemed to me that if I wrote one article and personally gave all the facts—not hearsay and misinterpretations—it might make it easier for me to live a normal life in the Navy and enjoy being an anonymous cog in a big machine.

After all, I don't want my shipmates to know me as "Wesley Brown, the first Negro Annapolis graduate." It would make me much happier to hear them say, "Brown? Oh, yes, he's a darn good officer."

I hope I'll be a good naval officer. I've been thinking about the Navy since I was eight or ten—since the time I pinned the photograph of the old USS Lexington on my bedroom wall. Of course I had the usual youthful inclinations toward being a policeman, lawyer, cowboy and even West Pointer, but somehow the picture of the Lexington stayed up there on the wall when the rest of them were replaced by the latest fads.

Always, during the next ten years, the Annapolis idea remained in the back of my head. I arranged my high-school studies so as to get as much math and science as possible.

To keep myself in high school, I needed money; so I got a job after hours. At this time, mother worked in the War Department as a filing clerk. She worked during the day and I worked at night, so we didn't have much family life. But that was the only way to make ends meet. I worked from four P.M. until midnight, as a junior clerk in the Navy Department. The urge to go to Annapolis became stronger. Not only did I like the officers I met on my job but I learned that the Navy primarily is an engineering institution, and engineering has always been my dish.

After four years of high school, I wanted to brush up at a prep school. But I found that, with the exception of a few New England schools, I wasn't eligible, because of my race.

So I hoarded my money to attend Cornell Engineering School for a year. If I flunked Annapolis, I'd at least have something to fall back on. My bank roll didn't grow fast enough. Strangely, it was the Army which came to the rescue. I enlisted in the Army Reserve. They sent me to Howard University for a year to major in electrical engineering. I didn't realize then how much this training would help me.

As I look back on that year at Howard, the thing which impresses me is that most of my classmates—all Negroes—were better

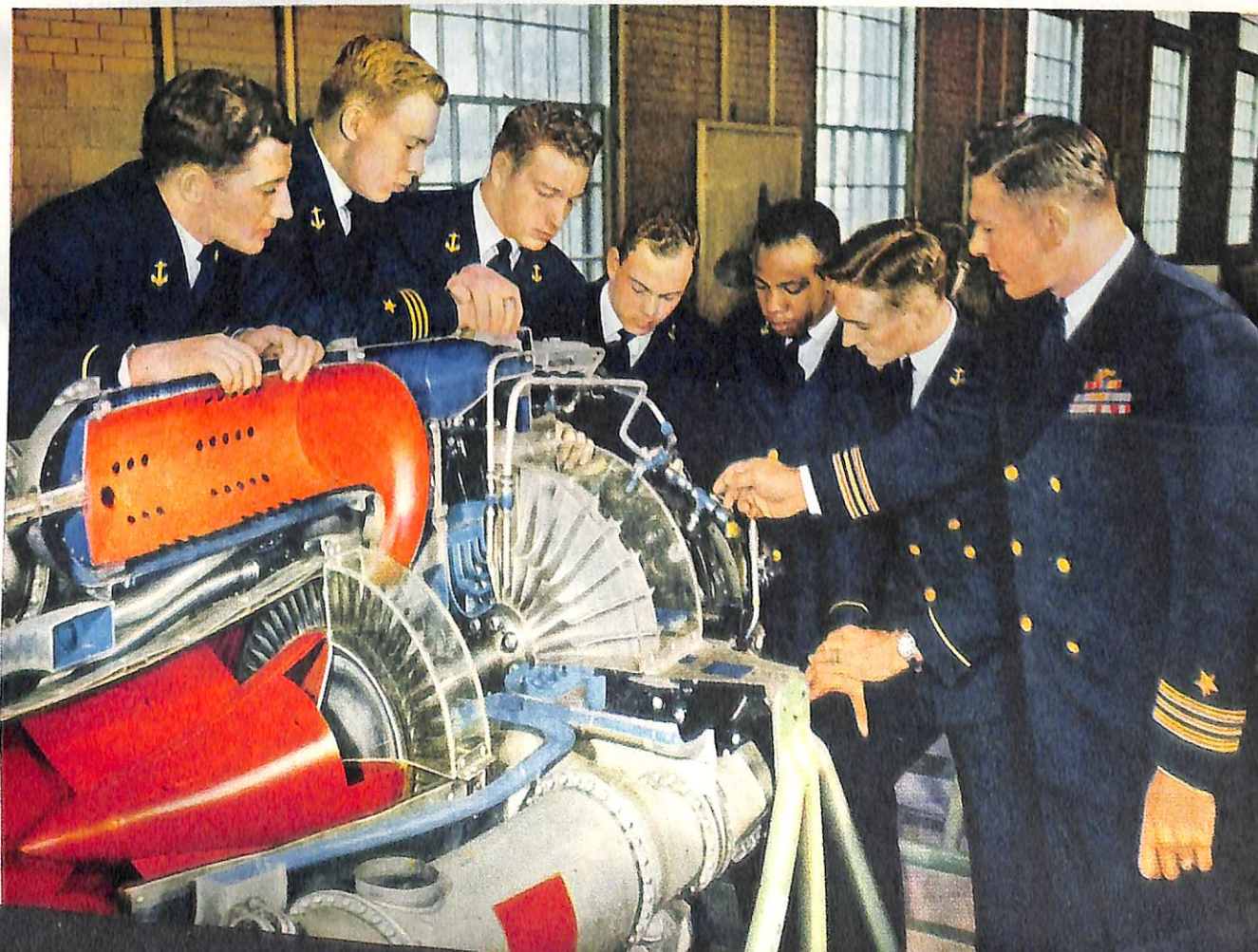
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PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANK ROSS



In service whites, holding prized diploma. Wesley's advice to other aspirants of his race is to remember that "while you are in the Navy you are an American naval officer first and a Negro second."

Engineering is Brown's forte. Lieut. Comdr. A. A. Bergner (right), former Annapolis football captain, teaches the operation of centrifugal-flow turbo-jet aircraft engine to Wesley and his classmates.





## THE FIRST NEGRO GRADUATE OF ANNAPOLIS TELLS HIS STORY

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qualified academically to become naval officers than I was. My class standing at Annapolis has been higher than it was during my year at Howard.

In the spring of 1945, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell appointed me to the Naval Academy. From April until June, I really burned the midnight oil reviewing the Plebe Year subjects and reading as much as I could about the Navy. When the time to report drew near, I could recite books like *Annapolis Today*, *School of the Sea*, and *The U. S. Naval Academy* by heart.

Reactions to my appointment varied from enthusiastic congratulations to dark pessimism. Most friends didn't think I'd get into Annapolis, let alone graduate. They told me that the Navy probably would find something wrong with me physically. Congressman Powell requested that I be given an unofficial preliminary physical examination at the Naval Dispensary. Sure enough, bad news. The dental officer noted a slight malocclusion—my upper and lower front teeth didn't quite touch. "Marked malocclusion," he commented. "Not qualified."

I went to a civilian dentist who wasn't quite so concerned. The telephones between Washington and Annapolis hummed for a few days over just how much tolerance there is in a malocclusion case. The Navy decided my case was within satisfactory limits.

In the meanwhile Captain Elijah J. Reynolds and other friends at Dunbar High gave my morale a working over. They kept beating into me that if I were on the ball I could make it. They arranged for me to meet George Trivers—a Negro who had been a plebe at Annapolis briefly in 1936; he talked to me about the customs so important in a military organization. It was a big help to know that plebes may not enter Smoke Hall, that at reveille the linen must be pulled back on your bunk and that you must stand in front of your room until the reveille inspector makes his rounds.

They told me that other midshipmen might stare at me a little at first, but that this was only natural curiosity on their part and would soon wear off. Another high-school teacher told me about a Negro who had failed at Annapolis—how his personality had been impaired, how he had lost his sparkle

and ambition. If I once entered, she said, I'd have to forget all the foolishness about being self-conscious about my race and concentrate on doing a good job.

I was still in the Army the day I reported to Annapolis, dressed in khaki, my orders in one hand and an overnight bag in the other. About fifteen other men arrived at the same time, many in uniform too. We waited at the Administration Building, asking one another questions and speculating about the future.

It comforted me to see that not all these fellows were tall and handsome like the midshipmen you see in the movies. Some were short and fat, others gawky and skinny, some as homely as a bos'n's fist. One of the men was pretty much bald-headed. Perhaps I wouldn't be such an oddity, after all. I thought to myself, *Wesley, if you can keep your big mouth shut and not let on how dumb you are, you'll get along O.K.*

Then we went to the sick bay for our physical. When it came time for the urinalysis, the corpsman handed me a bottle and said, "Go to the head with this." I didn't know what the "head" was.

Going into the passageway I stalled for a moment. I didn't want to admit my ignorance at this early stage. Finally a couple of other men walked by.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"To the head," they said, holding up their bottles.

I tagged along and ended up in the men's room. *So this is what they mean by "head" in the Navy.* To make certain everyone knew I was an old hand, I looked about and said, "This is one of the nicest heads I've ever seen."

That physical exam lasted three days. They measured us, weighed us, thumped us, listened, looked and prodded. I felt like a prize bull at an animal fair. But I passed.

The next day we assembled for swearing in. Just before the ceremony, a commander called me to one side and asked, "You have your Army discharge papers?"

I didn't. The commander told me that I couldn't be sworn in until I was out of the Army. Rushing back to Washington, I made frantic inquiries. The officials at the Pentagon referred me to Fort Meade. There, they told me that they'd give me my discharge papers after I'd completed a two months' rehabilitation program. Two months! I nearly cried. After much persuasion, the officer at Meade said he'd make a special case. He'd let me through in three weeks! This didn't help. I'd enter Annapolis late in Plebe Summer and from the start be extra conspicuous.

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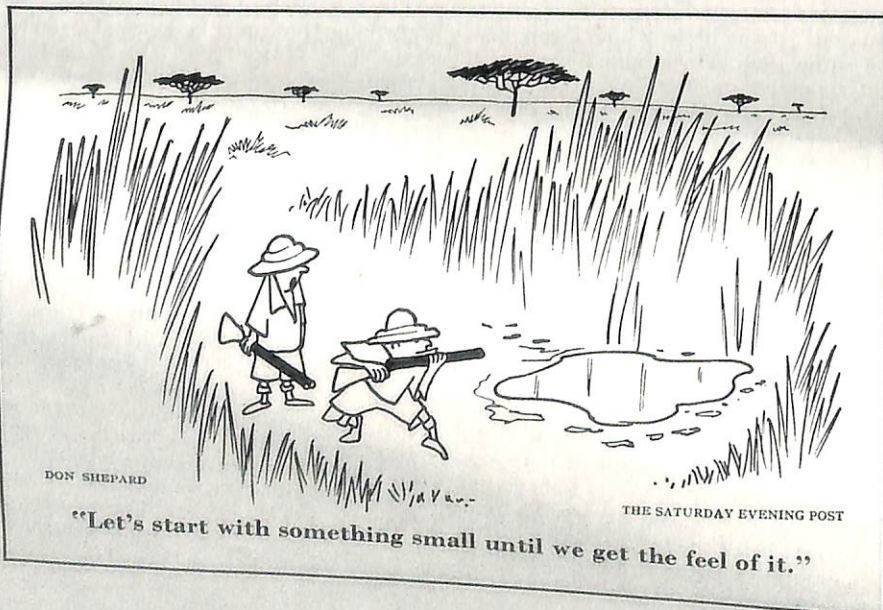
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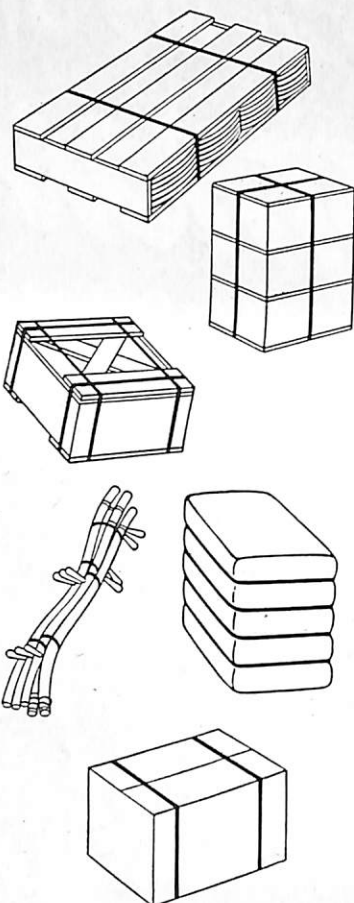
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DON SHEPARD

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST





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Back to the Pentagon. More telephone calls. Finally the Army said they'd discharge me after I'd been sworn in by the Navy. I called Annapolis. The Navy reiterated that they wouldn't swear me in until after I'd been discharged by the Army. More telephone calls between Washington and Annapolis. The services compromised. The Army mailed my discharge to the Commandant of Midshipmen. I was to receive my Army discharge after I legally entered the Navy.

I departed from the Pentagon at midnight. Then came the final blow. At two A.M., the military police arrested me for jaywalking. Early the next morning, nervous and shaking, I stuttered the story to the colonel. Smiling, he tore up the charge. "But you won't get away so easy if you jaywalk in a sailor suit!"

En route to Annapolis I got jittery. Many people said I'd never become a midshipman, and now that the day was here... I hoped. Not wishing to take a chance, I went to Memorial Hall almost an hour early.

During my four years at Annapolis I've often been moved emotionally. But nothing compared to the feeling I had that morning. All around me hung the most sacred trophies of the Navy—busts of famous Navy men, pictures of sea fights and mementoes of naval victories. However, I couldn't remove my eyes from the battle flag flown by Perry at Lake Erie. It's a large blue flag with Lawrence's dying words sewed on it, "Don't give up the ship." That bit of bunting convinced me that at last I was a real part of the Navy.

After swearing us in, Admiral Stuart H. Ingersoll, the Commandant of Midshipmen, delivered a short talk about the traditions of the Navy. He told us he expected us to uphold and enlarge these traditions—just as much as the men in the fleet who were at that moment fighting the Japs.

After this inspiring period came the maddest, most helter-skelter time a Navy man runs into—drawing gear and stenciling it. That sticky black ink and clumsy little stenciling brush made me feel as if I were standing in the middle of a giant piece of flypaper with everyone in the world throwing inky sponges at me. As I said, I've always had a love of engineering. Well, the first thing I'll do when I have some spare time is to invent an easy method of stenciling clothes. I'll be the patron saint of all Navy men.

Most of the plebes picked their roommates or had them assigned at this time. Several men came to me and said they'd like to room with me. I didn't know if they felt sorry for me or genuinely believed me to be a good prospect. However, I decided to room alone, figuring that I could study better by myself. Also, later, when the upper classes came back—they were away on a summer cruise—I didn't want my roommate to take a shellacking should I get into excess trouble. But it encouraged me to have my classmates make me feel so welcome.

During those first few weeks we had more to do than there were hours in the day. We ran to formation, learned customs and regulations, memorized "can's and can't's" until our eyes popped. We shot on the rifle range, sailed, rowed, tied knots, practiced semaphore and blinker, and soaked up salt from the seamanship chiefs. We drilled, drilled, drilled until the bottoms of our feet had half-inch calluses. It seemed that every five minutes officers with microscopes inspected our rooms for dust, and that the doctors constantly called

us to the sick bay to jab us with needles the size of crowbars.

Believe me, people who haven't been to Annapolis don't know what the word "rush" means. I recall getting particularly tired after a tough tennis match and having a desire to sleep. Determined to have my snooze—despite the fact that plebes are forbidden to lie abed during daytime—I put a blanket on the floor in the closet, locked myself in and lay down. I corked off.

The next thing I knew, the dinner bell rang. That meant exactly three minutes to shine my shoes, dress and run a fourth of a mile to dinner formation. I made it! Honest, that Annapolis training turns you into a fast man. Jesse Owens had nothing on me that evening!

Some of the old-timers in my class—turn-backs from the previous year—gave me hints and short cuts. I learned how to stow my locker and how to get a brilliant shoeshine by mixing the spit with the shoe polish and then applying the gook with a special circular motion. Plebe Summer passed quickly. As a member of the battalion tennis team, I made many good friends among my teammates.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

One place you never find a man giving a woman his seat without a fight is in Congress.

—HOMER PHILLIPS.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

The return of the upperclassmen in September filled most plebes with dread. For two months we had envisioned them as two-headed ogres who ate plebes on the hoof. Boning our Reef Points—the midshipmen's handbook—we prepared for the occasion. I can still recite most of the chapter on Plebe Rates: "... the system of rates has been established to instill proper subordination in future officers. This system is based on seniority... Plebes must walk in the center of the corridors... Plebes will attend athletic events... In the Mess Hall, sit erect on the outer four inches of your chair while eating... Learn all songs and yells," and so on. The 220 pages of Reef Points are crammed with facts and figures. I got panicky trying to memorize everything.

I started the first day of the academic year on the wrong foot. Partially, I guess because I was scared—it seemed to me that every one of the returned upperclassmen glared in my direction. The works exploded bright and early—a first-classman stopped me in the corridor and reported me for "Hat not squared." In a little while I ran into the same man. He stopped me again and reported me for "Wearing dirty hat." Just before lunch he tripped me for "Room in disorder."

For weeks a small group of upperclassmen really worked me over. I thought this treatment would never stop, and it discouraged me. I developed a feeling that maybe they were trying to run me out of the place.

During my first month the demerits rained on me in bucketfuls. I guess the fact that I could be so easily identified in a crowd made my breaking of regulations stand out. Fearful of being expelled for bad conduct, I brooded, which greatly reduced my general efficiency. At this time my battalion officer sent for me. Several other midshipmen with excess demerits also received the

summons. He took us into his office one at a time.

Very tactfully, he explained that fairness is the key to discipline and that no system can operate successfully where a special individual is "let off lightly" while others receive full measure.

"You don't want special treatment, do you?" he asked. I assured him I didn't.

"Then pull yourself together; you'll get punishment whenever you deserve it... just like your classmates. But," he added, "should you ever feel there are extenuating circumstances which excuse you, give me the facts in a written statement, as provided by Naval Academy Regulations."

I hesitated to use the statement, lest I get the reputation of being a sea lawyer. But a few times I did. Once mother sent me some chow from home. She thought it would cheer me up. It included canned peaches. Midshipmen can't have canned goods in their rooms, and I knew it, so I disposed of the peaches by putting them in the wastepaper basket. I then went to class.

Upon returning, I learned that the inspector had reported me for possessing canned food. I submitted a statement to the battalion officer, indicating that mother didn't know about the food regulation—and that I had placed the peaches in the wastepaper basket for disposal, not for future use. He accepted the explanation—for this offense I didn't have to walk extra duty.

Each plebe is assigned to an upperclassman who acts as his guide. Mine took a particular interest in my welfare and ordered me to sing out should I get into excess trouble. With many years in the Navy ahead of me, I felt that I'd have to stand on my own two legs sometime. This was as good a time as any. Sometimes I was tempted to ask his help, but I never did. However, I must say that the many hours of personal advice he kindly gave me helped tremendously.

Jeepers! By Christmas I stood almost last in my class in conduct. True, at the beginning, a small clique of upperclassmen tried to work me over by reporting me for minor offenses.

In addition to the "can's and can't's," we received a hectic indoctrination. There's a lot of misunderstanding about this which I'd like to clear up. The so-called hazing consists of asking the plebe hundreds of questions. If he doesn't answer correctly in a reasonably short time, the plebe "goes around to the upperclassman's room." Most of the questions are professional in nature, such as: "What's the displacement of the Essex-type carrier?" "What's the armament on the USS Iowa?" "What's the range of the F4U?"

There's such a terrific volume of knowledge that must be learned quickly about the Navy that the so-called "hazing" system is about the only effective way to accomplish it. Even though I wasn't always smart enough to have the right answers—and "went around" often—I approved of the method.

People often ask, "What happened once you got to the upperclassman's room?" It all depended on his frame of mind—but the plebe could expect anything from a verbal blast to physical exercise—say, being ordered to do forty-nine push-ups. In previous years plebes might have been swatted with a broom, but this practice has been abolished.

After about six months of Plebe Year, I got oriented, and the novelty of having a Negro midshipman around

(Continued on Page 114)



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was forgotten by the others. Life became more pleasant. Gradually my class standing in conduct improved. Which brings to mind the subject of my alma mater, Dunbar High School. That's a wonderful school and it certainly helped me intellectually and morally. However, it had the enormous disadvantage of being segregated. Going to school for four years with Negroes burdened me, later at Annapolis, with the problem of social readjustment. It's like stepping into a new world. Unless you've had the experience, you have no idea what an impediment it is. It often makes you imagine nonexistent troubles and persecutions.

Most of the demerits I received as a midshipman I got because I deserved them. I was no angel and broke my share of the regulations. When I got into hot water I kept reminding myself, *Brown, you're in trouble because you're a dumb cluck and have made a mistake. You're getting the same treatment as your classmates, and that's how it should be.*

As to my studies, I had a tough time at first under the "quiz-every-day" program used at the academy. It was new to me and, at that time, struck me as a most inefficient grading system from the student's point of view. It works this way: The students receive a lesson assignment which they study before coming to class. In class, they draw question slips and write the answers. The marks made from this quiz are the student's grade for the day. Flunking one question, which might represent only a twentieth of the day's lesson, terrified me.

I wanted so desperately to make passing grades that I tensed and became a "clutcher." "To clutch" is academy slang to describe the writhing, pained look on the faces of some men when the instructor says, "Draw slips and man the boards." I became known as a "super-clutcher" because I worried so over the prospects of failing. Often I missed easy questions because of anxiety. By the end of Plebe Year I learned how to relax. Also, as time passed, the educational advantage which most of the men had over me grew smaller.

The daily-quiz system makes more sense to me now. One tiny mistake in battle may sink your ship. The Navy tries to prepare its academy graduates for battle in every way—emotionally as well as intellectually.

Many people have asked if the professors made things extra hard and tried to bilge me. No. All through my years at the Naval Academy my instructors treated me impartially. I never received special attention, either positive or negative. It was a lesson in democracy which many institutions could imitate.

I've also been asked why it is that West Point has had eleven Negro graduates, and that before I was gradu-

ated, Annapolis had none. Most of the early West Point appointments of Negroes came during the late Reconstruction days. Then there weren't any more for more than fifty years, until 1936. Even then, the Army had Negro regiments. Officials posed the question, "But what can we do with a Negro officer in the Navy?"

Apparently not knowing that in 1945 there were about sixty Negro naval officers in the fleet, several first-classmen asked me, "What do you expect to do after you graduate?"

"Be a regular naval officer," I said.

Often they walked off shaking their heads.

My first taste of going to sea came on the midshipmen's summer cruises. I loved them. We worked hard, but we learned a lot about the Navy. Also we visited new ports. Youngster (sophomore) Summer we went to Norfolk, but I didn't leave the naval base. In the first place, the idea of wandering around Norfolk didn't appeal to me. In the second place, the round-trip taxi fare into town was eight dollars. At that time our spending allowance amounted to four dollars a month. I couldn't see spending two months' salary simply to see Norfolk.

On other cruises we went to such places as Casablanca, Lisbon, Göteborg, London, Nice, Villefranche. The thing I remember about Lisbon is being taken out with several friends of mine by a hospitable Portuguese. We consumed some marvelous wine. That we took in stride. But when dinner started and the first course consisted of French pastry followed by ice cream—that was too much for me.

Many of the subjects we studied so hard in class proved useful on the cruises. All those complicated ordnance formulas at last made sense—even though my gun crew did shoot down our own life raft instead of the target.

During my second-class cruise we made flights from the U. S. S. Randolph. I noticed that one enlisted plane captain and some of the mechanics were Negro personnel—which gratified me.

A year later, another thing which gave me much pleasure was the Ring Dance at the end of Second Class—junior—year. This was the first hop I ever attended, and it marked an important step. Receiving my class ring, I at last felt I was on the homestretch and could accept with a free conscience the social life and recreation of the Naval Academy.

That Ring Dance! Tradition has it that after the midshipman's date places the class ring on his finger, the middy hangs a big kiss on her. I always did like Navy traditions.

When First Class—senior—Year came, we were permitted regular week ends away from Annapolis. Often some of my classmates stopped at my home in Washington. One of them, who comes from California and who had never been East before, said that mom's cooking impressed him more than the

Washington Monument. I've been telling her for years that she should start a restaurant.

During my entire time at the academy, my mother visited me about twice a month. You have no idea how I looked forward to her coming to Annapolis! It must have been a lot of trouble for her, but, believe me, her presence cheered me up. Her confidence in me probably raised my marks more than all my studying. When I mounted the platform to receive my diploma, I could not keep my eyes from hers, and I do not have the words to tell you what that meeting of our glances meant to both of us.

Mother stayed with friends in Annapolis, but I'm often asked, "Were you allowed to enter restaurants and hotels in Annapolis?"

That answer is easy. I don't know. I never tried. During my stay at the Naval Academy I felt I owed it to myself to pass my studies and get through. Studies took most of my time—including evenings and week ends. It was my duty to be graduated, not to root around making social experiments. I went to receptions at the superintendent's home a couple of times. This posed no problem. We received an invitation which said, "Admiral and Mrs. Holloway will be at home this afternoon for the First Battalion." I was a member of the First Battalion, and that was that.

With the spring of our last year we stated our choices for duty. I picked the Civil Engineer Corps of the Navy because it offers more engineering duties than other activities. Maybe I won't be officering men-o'-war, but I'll be building and repairing them. I'm not avoiding shipboard duties because of any possible racial problem. Negro officers currently serve on carriers and cruisers—they get along famously with all hands, as their shipmates can tell you.

Many Negroes have written me, asking advice for entering the Naval Academy. I'd like to tell them this: The most important thing is fervently to desire a naval career. If you have any other reason, you'll find the going tough. This applies to all midshipman candidates. Academic background is important. Go to college or prep school for a year. Major in math and English. You should have plenty of practice in expressing yourself quickly and clearly under pressure or you'll surely end up "clutching."

Attend a school which is nonsegregated, if possible, so that your only problems at Annapolis will be academic and your energies won't be dissipated in social readjustments. Read all the books you can about the Navy and get training in a Naval Reserve unit. Know so much about the history of the Navy that entering Annapolis will be no shock to you. And after you arrive, remember that while you are in the Navy you are an American naval officer first and a Negro second.

## WHAT DID THE AIRLIFT REALLY PROVE?

(Continued from Page 29)

the American-sponsored radio station induced Doctor Reuter to let him announce the date and hour of the rally and to keep on plugging it. So the rally was held—and the turnout exceeded 500,000 Germans. Soviet sympathizers who tried to stage a counterdemonstration were roughly handled, but no seri-

ous riots occurred. German support for the airlift was convincingly shown.

Meanwhile, the airlift was doubling its capacity. Its daily load approached 4000 tons before cold weather set in. A more-or-less planned economy became possible for Western Berlin. Enough air-borne coal arrived to serve some factories, theaters and movie houses, and to provide four hours of electricity daily to German homes. But the electric power load had to be spread over different hours. Some German house-

holds got two hours of their electricity in the middle of the night, from two A.M. to four A.M.—housewives had to get up at these hours to do some of their cooking. In order to spread the inconvenience, the load was shifted every week.

When the blockade started, Western Berlin had only three months' reserves of food, coal and raw materials for industry, figured on a subsistence basis. For example, 400 tons of candles per month were allotted to provide two