

Chapter II: John Wayne McCain

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Annapolis, Md., 1955 - Midshipman John McCain and his roommate, Frank Gamboa, are eating lunch at the mess hall at the U.S. Naval Academy when a first classman, a "firstie" in Naval parlance, begins dressing down a Filipino steward.

"He was just being nasty to him," Gamboa recalls. "(The firstie) was obviously not in a happy mood."

Gamboa hardly notices this exchange, but young John McCain is paying close attention. Since the steward is an enlisted man, he cannot fight back. The firstie is being a bully, a no-no at the Naval Academy.

The man outranks everyone at the table. McCain and Gamboa are barely past being plebes, the school's lowest rank. Fearing trouble, other underclassmen eat quickly and leave. The browbeating continues.

Finally, McCain can take no more.

"Hey, why don't you pick on someone your own size?" McCain blurts out.

There is a moment of silent shock at the table.

"What did you say?" replies the firstie.

"Why don't you stop picking on him?" McCain says. "He's doing the best he can."

"What is your name, mister?" snaps the firstie, an open threat to put McCain on report.

"Midshipman John McCain the Third," McCain says, looking straight at the upperclassman. "What's yours?"

The firstie saw the look in McCain's eyes. And fled.

"The guy got so flustered he just got up and left the table," Gamboa recalls.

A FAMILY IN SERVICE

John McCain had plenty to live up to at the Naval Academy.

There was his grandfather, Admiral John "Slew" McCain, Class of 1906, a grizzled old sea dog who commanded aircraft carriers in the Pacific during World War II.

Slew McCain's peers at the Naval Academy were Chester Nimitz and William "Bull" Halsey, who would become major commanders during World War II. One of Slew McCain's first assignments was as executive officer on a gunboat in the Philippines commanded by Nimitz.

"They would hunt and fish, and every now and then they would stop in for their mail," the younger McCain said recently in a TV interview. "Can you imagine?"

In the 1930s, the military passed a regulation that aircraft carriers could be commanded only by aviators. Already in his 50s, McCain's grandfather went to flight school.

He crashed five airplanes but got his wings and went on to command a carrier. He eventually would rise to command all U.S. carriers in the Pacific, under Halsey. Planes under Slew McCain's command participated in a number of battles, including Leyte Gulf, and once sank 49 Japanese ships in a day.

According to his grandson, McCain was the quintessential combat officer - a throwback, a gregarious, beloved commander who didn't worry whether his uniform was pressed. But the war, and his lifestyle, taxed his health.

"He had a very hard life to start with," the younger McCain recalled recently. "He smoked and he drank and he didn't take care of himself. Also, the strain of operations in World War II was immense."

When the Japanese surrendered aboard the USS Missouri on Sept. 2, 1945, Slew McCain was there. He can be seen in the famous picture, standing in the front row of U.S. officers. He was 61 years old, but he looked 80.

In fact, he had been sick for two weeks, at least since a cease-fire was called on Aug. 15, 1945. Around that time, the elder McCain talked with John Thach, who recalled the conversation in the book *Carrier Warfare in the Pacific*.

McCain had been staying in his sea cabin, popping his head out only occasionally.

"Admiral, you don't feel very well, do you?" Thach asked.

"Well," McCain responded, "this surrender has come as kind of a shock to all of us. I feel lost. I don't know what to do. I know how to fight, but now I don't know whether I know how to relax or not. I am in an awful letdown. I do feel bad."

On the day of the surrender, the old man would see his son, John S. McCain Jr., a submarine commander. The younger McCain had been given the job of escorting Japanese submarines into Tokyo Bay. Father and son posed for a picture aboard the Proteus, a submarine tender.

It was the last time John McCain Jr. would see his father alive.

Four days after the surrender aboard the Missouri, the elder McCain flew back to Coronado, Calif. Thach went to visit him and noted that he looked even worse. A few minutes into the visit, McCain said he wanted to lie down.

Thach went to San Diego to visit his father-in-law. A short time later, he got a phone call.

John "Slew" McCain had died of a heart attack.

He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery, next to his brother, William Alexander McCain, a cavalry officer known as "Wild Bill."

Bill McCain, who graduated from West Point, chased Pancho Villa with Gen. Blackjack Pershing, served as an artillery officer during World War I and attained the rank of brigadier general.

In his new book, *Faith of My Fathers*, McCain details his Scotch-Irish roots, noting that his great-aunt was a descendant of Robert the Bruce, an early Scottish king.

On this continent, McCain's roots date to the American Revolution. An early ancestor, John Young, served on Gen. George Washington's staff. After the family moved to Mississippi, a number of McCain's ancestors fought in the Civil War on the side of the Confederacy.

McCain's grandfather grew up on the family plantation in Carroll County, Miss. He attended the University of Mississippi, then entered the Naval Academy.

'HE WAS A TOUGH GUY'

Like his grandfather, John McCain was no scrubbed angel when he reached the Naval Academy in 1954. At Episcopal High, a private boarding school in Alexandria, Va., McCain was a rebel, earning the nickname "McNasty" from classmates who didn't dare cross him.

At 5-9, McCain was an excellent lightweight wrestler in high school. One of

McCain's school friends, Malcolm Matheson, said McCain was no bully but took no guff.

"I always got along with him, but he was a tough guy," Matheson said. "He was small but feisty. He's always been that way. . . . If you messed with him, you probably would end up on the wrong side of it."

Despite his rebellious nature, McCain was destined to attend the Naval Academy, like his grandfather and his father (Class of '31) before him.

Ron Thunman, who commanded McCain's plebe, or first-year, class, said he had no idea that McCain came from an old Navy family but said the young man immediately impressed him. The plebe battalions competed in sports, McCain as a boxer.

What he lacked in skill, he made up for in ferocity, Thunman said.

"I got a real kick out of him," Thunman said. "It was clear that nobody was going to take him down without a hell of an effort."

Thunman said he noticed McCain had a quick mind and a good sense of humor. He quickly emerged as a leader in his group.

"He stood out because he was just one of those people that you liked and you got a chuckle out of," Thunman said. "He was somebody who was always moving at top speed in one direction or another. He was never one to hang back."

A free spirit, McCain chafed under the strict rules of the academy. Each year, he was always in the "Century Club," students with more than 100 demerits.

It was mostly small stuff - messy quarters, unshined shoes, reporting late to formation, things like that, recalls Gamboa, who roomed with McCain for three years.

"He and I, we got a lot of demerits," Gamboa said. "It was almost impossible not to."

McCain's grades were good in the subjects he enjoyed, such as literature and history. Gamboa said McCain would rather read a history book than do his math homework. He did just enough to pass the classes he didn't find stimulating.

"He stood low in his class," Gamboa said. "But that was by choice, not design."

On weekends, everyone wanted to hang out with McCain, who grew up around Washington and knew all the best parties. And with his good looks, McCain attracted plenty of women.

"We used to call him John Wayne McCain," Gamboa said. "He was graying at the temples, and it made him more dashing. . . . It was a real adventure living with John."

McCain's bio in the academy yearbook said it all:

"Sturdy conversationalist and party man. John's quick wit and clever sarcasm made him a welcome man at any gathering. His bouts with the academic and executive departments contributed much to the stockpiles of legends within the hall."

One such bout almost ended in disaster.

The further cadets rose in the academy, the fewer demerits they were allowed. Naturally, McCain was pushing the limit as his senior year neared an end.

McCain already had been skirting the rules. He and some friends had bought a television, which was prohibited. They would gather in their rooms on weekends, watching boxing on Friday nights and a Western, *Maverick*, on Sundays. The men kept the TV hidden in a "pipe locker," a space between the dormitory rooms that housed plumbing, heating and ventilation.

"One day, the company officer got to crawling around in there, and he found the TV," Gamboa said.

Normally, all the men involved would play a game similar to "paper, rock, scissors" to determine who would get the demerits. But Gamboa and the others wouldn't let McCain take the chance - the 30 demerits from the TV would get him kicked out.

"He wanted to, but we just insisted," Gamboa said. "The guy who took the demerits (a model midshipman named Henry Vargo) had none."

McCain also offered advice to the lovelorn. More than one midshipman made his way to McCain's room to ask for advice on a romantic relationship.

One evening, Gamboa was writing a thank-you letter to a date (a custom in those days), when McCain came up and snatched the letter away.

"This is a terrible letter," McCain said. "Did you have fun with her? Do you want to see her again? Here, I'll tell you what to say."

Gamboa and McCain remain close to this day. The friendship says something about McCain, notes Gamboa, a first-generation Mexican-American.

When the two met at the Naval Academy, they had nothing in common. Gamboa was the son of immigrant parents from a little town in the foothills of the Sierra

was the son of immigrant parents from a little town in the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas. McCain was the son and grandson of naval officers and attended private schools in Virginia.

But to McCain, race and status meant nothing, Gamboa said.

"I don't think John McCain had even been associated with Hispanics or any minorities, given where he lived and the school he went to, but yet he picked me, a Mexican-American, to be his roommate," Gamboa said.

"I've heard the comment that he has always done well with minorities. He's the most colorblind person I've ever met in my life.

"He treats me like a brother."

CHOOSING A CAREER

As the men graduated from the Naval Academy, they had to make a choice as to what branch of service they would enter, the Navy or the Marines.

Gamboa said he always knew what McCain would pick.

"There was never any question in our minds that he was going to be flier," Gamboa said. "He was an adventurous spirit, and that's what he would do."

For McCain's roommates - Gamboa, Keith Bunting and Jack Dittrick - it was still an open question. Until they met Jack McCain, John's father.

During World War II, the elder McCain won the Silver Star while commanding two submarines: the USS Gunnel, which sunk freighters and battled Japanese destroyers in the Pacific; and the USS Dentuda, which was on hand at the Japanese surrender in Tokyo Bay.

While his son attended the Naval Academy, Jack McCain was living in nearby Washington, working as the Navy's senior liaison officer to Congress.

On weekends, John McCain and his roommates would go to his father's house, where the elder McCain would chomp cigars and tell them about the Navy.

"Every time we went to John's house, we would get a blue and gold pep talk from Jack McCain," Gamboa said.

Jack McCain was not subtle. To his friends, he was known as "Good Goddamn McCain."

Speaking to the Annapolis Class of 1970, Jack McCain made light of the antiwar slogan "make love, not war," by noting that naval officers "were men enough to do both," according to Faith of My Fathers.

"He was the best naval officer I ever met in my life," Gamboa said. "I think that's where John got his love of history, from his father. His father's den was filled ceiling to floor with books, and the majority were on history."

Jack McCain made a big impression on the midshipmen. McCain and his roommates joined the Navy, and all reached the rank of captain - Bunting as a submariner, Dittrick as an aviator and Gamboa on surface ships. John McCain went to flight school.

During training, McCain had several close calls, including a crash in Corpus Christi Bay and a collision with power lines in Spain. In both cases, he emerged virtually unscathed.

In 1964, while stationed in Pensacola, Fla., McCain started a relationship with Carol Shepp, a tall Philadelphia model he met while at Annapolis.

The next year, the two were married in Philadelphia. John soon adopted Carol's two sons from a previous marriage. In 1966, they had a daughter, Sydney.

A year later, McCain was sent to Vietnam as a bomber pilot on an aircraft carrier. Carol would not see her husband again for almost six years.