

USMMA Battle Standard Dinner

Kings Point, NY April 7, 2014

Speaker: Thomas F. McCaffery, '79

Rear Admiral and Mrs. Helis, Rear Admiral Dunlap, Mr. Szabat, Captain DeStafney, the families of Chester Klein, Robert Lamac, and Francis Tone, members of the Donnelly family, faculty, guests and especially the class of 2014; on behalf of George Ryan, class of 57, Chairman of the American Maritime History Project; Elliott Lumbard, class of 45, its founder; and James Hoffman, class of 44, its guiding light, I thank you for granting me the opportunity to talk to you tonight.

The American Maritime History Project is the creation of Elliot Lumbard, our first Chairman. The project financed the writing of "The Way of the Ship" an academic history of the U.S. Merchant Marine, and "In Peace and War" a political history of the Academy. However, these were always intended to be the prelude to the Project's most meaningful task. This final task was to research and write a book honoring the lives and memory of the Cadet-Midshipmen and Alumni of the U.S. Merchant Marine Cadet Corps who gave their lives during World War II. Their sacrifice helped the Academy earn its Battle Standard.

This book, "Braving the Wartime Seas" will be published soon, hopefully in a few weeks. It began as a way for Jim Hoffman to make sure that the families of the One Hundred Forty Two received the medals and honors that they earned. Along the way George Ryan and his classmates Tom Schroeder, Roy Corsa, Bob Aimone and Tony Romano, along with many other Kings Pointers like myself, joined in Jim's mission. Unfortunately, neither Elliot Lumbard nor James Hoffman will be with us to ring down *Finished With Engines* when we bring the Project safely to home port.

My involvement in the project began roughly ten years ago when I received a fundraising letter from the Project asking for financial contributions to finish the research for the book. I looked at the letter several times and *then Acta Non Verba* kicked in. Since I already did this type of work, and have several other Kings Pointers working for me, I wrote to Elliott offering to do the work for free instead of just sending a check to help pay someone else to do it. I must say that had I known then just how much time and work this would involve – my wife is still wondering when I will be available to run errands and attend my daughter's sports events on the weekend – I would not have done anything differently.

So, roughly forty years after I last stood here, I am here tonight to tell you why Kings Point has a Battle Standard and what the Battle Standard means to all Kings Pointers. The number One Hundred Forty Two is enshrined here at Kings Point. Their names are cast in bronze on the War Memorial facing Long Island Sound. Their pictures have a place of honor in the Merchant Marine Museum. The number "142" is painted on the band's drums and sewn onto the Battle Standard itself. Every Plebe Candidate learns within days of reporting to Kings Point that One Hundred Forty Two Cadet-Midshipmen died in combat during World War II. In many ways, the

One Hundred Forty Two have become a legend, OUR legend. When I was a Plebe Candidate over forty years ago the first movie we saw as a Class was "Action in the North Atlantic". It is a typical World War II-era film starring Humphrey Bogart, Raymond Massey and . . . Kings Point. As I look back on it, that was a pretty good introduction to the One Hundred Forty Two. I urge you to find it, watch it, and contemplate its lessons.

While we are talking about old movies, in an old John Wayne movie, a newspaper reporter says, "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." However, our honor code doesn't work very well with this idea. So, the truth is that the hallowed number One Hundred Forty Two is hard to actually pin down. In fact, there is some confusion about how the number One Hundred Forty Two even came about. A New York Times article on March 16, 1946 mentions ". . . war memorial services for the One Hundred *Thirty* Two cadet-midshipmen who lost their lives in training at sea with the Cadet Corps." Other accounts indicate that Rear Admiral Gordon McClintock, the Academy's longest serving Superintendent, simply decreed that One Hundred Forty Two was the number and ordered his staff to make the number work.

Further, the One Hundred Forty Two Cadet-Midshipmen did not all die in combat. Several of them died by accident or illness, in the United States, far from the enemy. Others, even while overseas in combat areas, also died of disease or accidents. However, well over one hundred of them did die one way or another, as a result of enemy action. The others would not have been where they were, or doing what they were doing, if not for the war. The same is also true for the Academy's alumni who died during the war.

In addition, the record keeping in the 1940's created some anomalies. Two Merchant Marine Cadet Corps alumni whose names should have been listed on the War Memorial, weren't. One man whose death I was asked to research didn't die until the 1990's. You will have to read the book to find out exactly who they are. However, whether or not all One Hundred Forty Two Cadet-Midshipmen actually died in combat is irrelevant. The real point is that Kings Point is the only undergraduate institution in the United States that routinely sends its students into combat. Only Kings Point has the honor of having a Regimental Battle Standard. Yet, I believe that the Academy would still have its Regimental Battle Standard if *none* of its students had died in World War II combat.

Why do I say this? Very simply, dying in battle isn't necessarily courageous. In fact, some of the One Hundred Forty Two may have simply died in their sleep when their ship was torpedoed. What takes courage is going into battle knowing full well what may happen. It is the courage of both the One Hundred Forty Two, and their surviving classmates, who won the Academy its Battle Standard. For example, while one Cadet-Midshipman, Edwin O'Hara, was posthumously awarded the Merchant Marine Distinguished Service Medal, six other Cadet-Midshipmen were personally awarded the same medal during the war. By the fall of 1943, roughly halfway through the War, approximately 400 Cadet-Midshipmen had survived their ship being sunk. One, Romauld Holubowicz, who died just a year ago, survived three sinkings, including one in which his classmate and best friend died in his arms just hours before they were rescued. Fourteen other Cadet-Midshipmen survived the sinking of two ships.

Several Cadet-Midshipmen were wounded by enemy action, including John H. Scruggs, who was the only Kings Point Cadet-Midshipman to be awarded the Purple Heart during the War. Scruggs was wounded by shrapnel while manning a machine gun to defend his ship during the invasion of Sicily. His actions came to the attention of the Theater Commander, General Dwight Eisenhower, who ordered that Scruggs be awarded the medal.

The common thread is that this all happened during their Sea Year. Sea Year, where *Acta Non Verba* becomes real, because you can't fake it at sea. Let me tell you a few stories about Sea Year for the One Hundred Forty Two and their classmates. To begin with, Edwin O'Hara was not supposed to be aboard the *SS Stephen Hopkins* at all. He actually signed on aboard the troopship *SS Mariposa* for his Sea Year. During his first voyage on the *Mariposa* he developed a medical problem that required hospitalization ashore. When he was out of the hospital he signed on aboard the *Stephen Hopkins*, which then sailed off into history. So, a typical Sea Year sort of thing put Edwin O'Hara in the right place at the right time to become the ultimate symbol of the One Hundred Forty Two.

Gordon Baxter was the Engine Cadet aboard the *SS Cape Sable*. He had signed off the ship because it was being turned over to the Navy the following day. By good fortune he was staying in the same hotel as the ship's Chief Engineer, who was also named Baxter. However, when the Navy crew reported aboard, none of the Engineers, including Mr. Baxter, were aboard. So, the Navy paged Mr. Baxter at the hotel. But, Cadet-Midshipman Baxter answered the page. When the Chief did not show up, Gordon Baxter volunteered to show the Navy how to operate the plant. He spent the entire night showing each Navy watch section how to steam the plant. However, no one would have said anything if he had thought, "that's for the Chief, not me" and not answered the call.

William Coffey and George Small were Cadets aboard the *SS Independence Hall* when the ship broke in half during a storm. All but one of the ship's Deck Officers, including one of the first Cadet-Midshipmen, Oliver Jones, were lost in the forward section. The Third Mate, Walter Lee, another Cadet Corps alumnus, took command of the aft section and managed the situation so well that he was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal. After the survivors were rescued from their thirty hour long ordeal Walter Lee praised the two Cadets for "... demonstrating to one and all the caliber of the young men of the U.S. Merchant Marine Cadet Corps by requesting immediate reassignment to vessels." Coffey and Small didn't have to go back out again at all. They certainly didn't have to do so immediately, but they did.

Francis Dales was the Deck Cadet aboard the *SS Santa Elisa* on a vital convoy from Gibraltar to Malta in August 1942. Attacks by German and Italian forces inflicted serious losses on the convoy and its escorts. During an attack by Italian torpedo boats Dales, and others manning the *Santa Elisa*'s guns, managed to sink one torpedo boat before being sunk by another. Rescued by the destroyer *HMS Penn*, Dales volunteered to go aboard the tanker *SS Ohio* to help man its guns while the disabled ship, with its vital cargo of aviation gasoline, was towed into Malta. For the next three days the *Ohio* was under constant attack. In one of the attacks, a bomb hit just a few feet from Dales' gun. However, the *Ohio*, just barely afloat, but with cargo intact, arrived safely in Malta. The *Ohio*'s fuel kept the aircraft operating from Malta in the air.

Although the arrival of the *SS Ohio* at Malta was a turning point during World War II, no one would have thought less of Francis Dales if he had not volunteered to board the *SS Ohio*. But he didn't take the easy way. He went aboard the *SS Ohio* knowing exactly what could happen to him. For his actions during the convoy to Malta Cadet-Midshipman Francis A. Dales was personally awarded the Merchant Marine Distinguished Service Medal on May 22, 1943.

Beginning in August 1941 about 150 Cadet-Midshipmen were placed on Active Duty as Naval Reserve Midshipmen during their Sea Year. By December 15, 1941, a week after Pearl Harbor, forty-six Cadet-Midshipmen, *just like you*, were on Active Duty as Midshipmen aboard commissioned ships of the United States Navy. As far as I can tell they were the first Midshipmen assigned to the crew of a U.S. Navy ship going in harms way since the days of fighting sail. Two of these Midshipmen were Edward Davis and Robert Dudley. They were assigned to the troop transport *USS George F. Elliott* as Junior Deck Division Officers. Each of them were assigned duties normally carried out by commissioned officers.

On August 7, 1942 the *USS George F. Elliott* landed its Marines, and some of their equipment and supplies, on Guadalcanal. The next day Japanese aircraft found and attacked the *George Elliott* and the other transports, several of which also had Kings Point Midshipmen aboard. During the attack a damaged plane crashed into the *George Elliott*, starting fires throughout the ship. Despite their best efforts the crew could not get the fires under control and, seven hours later, had to abandon ship. That night, during the Battle of Savo Island, the U.S. Navy suffered one of its greatest defeats. Unable to protect the transports, the fleet retreated to the fleet base at Noumea, New Caledonia where the *Elliott's* unwounded crew were distributed to the other transports. However, the Marines on Guadalcanal desperately needed food and ammunition. While the transports couldn't go back to Guadalcanal without a strong escorting force, a single small freighter, like the *M/V Lakatoi*, might be able to slip in and out of Guadalcanal at night.

So the *M/V Lakatoi* became the *USS Lakatoi*. Amongst the *USS Lakatoi's* hand picked crew of volunteers were Midshipmen Dudley and Davis, the ship's only deck watchstanders. Unfortunately, due to the concrete slabs placed around the ship's wheelhouse as armor, its stability in any kind of sea was questionable. So, it was no real surprise when the overloaded ship capsized in heavy seas about a week later while on its way to Guadalcanal. What is important here is that Dudley and Davis, just like Baxter, Coffey, Small and Dales did what needed to be done when they didn't *have* to. Dudley and Davis volunteered to sail on a ship with impaired stability on a desperate mission into enemy controlled waters. No one would have thought less of either of them if they had said, "No thanks, I've done enough already, and besides, I'm really just a student." But, they went back, knowing the danger.

What happened to Dudley & Davis? They spent two weeks in an open boat with only a few cans of peaches and lifeboat rations to keep them alive while they and the other survivors of the *USS Lakatoi* sailed, rowed and drifted to New Caledonia and rescue. In each case the Cadets, and thousands of others like them, demonstrated what *Acta Non Verba* really means.

So who were the One Hundred Forty Two and their classmates? Were they “supermen” that were somehow imbued with heroic attributes? Not in the least. I found that they were a bunch of average young men in their late teens and early twenties. They came from cities, towns and farms from one end of the country to the other. Some came from wealthy families, some came from poverty, but most came from families who were just trying to make ends meet.

When I look at their photographs I am reminded of some of my classmates who will remain forever young, like another Kings Pointer that we honor tonight, William Donnelly. In fact, the men of the One Hundred Forty Two look very much like you. Don’t believe me? Walk across Steamboat Road and look them in the eye. If you look past the differences in uniform you will find the resemblance to your classmates somewhat eerie. However, age, social status and so forth are not what links you, me and every other Kings Pointer to the One Hundred Forty Two. The common link between all Kings Pointers is the Sea Year experience. No one’s Sea Year is the same, but every Kings Pointer must complete Sea Year to graduate. There is no way to skip it, do a deal, or get out of it. On the other hand, no one *forces* you to go either.

This is the experience that really differentiates Kings Point from the other Service Academies, the other Maritime Academies and every other college in the country. The real difference between Kings Point and the others is Sea Year, not the Battle Standard itself. However, in a very real way each and every class of Kings Pointers must re-win the Battle Standard through their Sea Year.

You won yours by shouldering your seabag and stepping up the gangway on your first ship even though the butterflies in your stomach threatened to fly you up. You won yours by doing the crummy little jobs that every “Gadget” seems to get, and *learning* your trade from every one of those crummy little jobs. You learned that KPS is just our shorthand for, “The only easy day was yesterday.” You won your Battle Standard by learning what ***Acta Non Verba*** really means, in the toughest school of all; just like the One Hundred Forty Two and their classmates did.

Finally, you won your Battle Standard by going to sea even though you *knew* you might be asked to give your life at any time, just like the One Hundred Forty Two did. Doing what is necessary, even though you are aware of the danger involved, is the definition of courage. In your Sea Year you demonstrated that you have the courage of the One Hundred Forty Two and their classmates.

So, I charge you tonight with a sacred responsibility; to teach the Second, Third and, most important, the Fourth Class how to earn their Battle Standard. It is YOUR responsibility to show them how to be Kings Pointers, so they can pass it on to those who will come after them.

Thank you and good night.

As of: April 13, 2014