

The Four Years In-Between Naval Officer Candidate School - Six IFs

1962

My college class graduated in June of 1961. Had I graduated with my class and gone on to Law School as I planned, teaching would never have crossed my mind. However, my time from February through early September of 1962 was spent coaching an age-group swimming team. That coaching experience set me on a new career path.

Had I simply begun my teacher training at Stanford in the Fall of 1962, I am sure I would have become the same kind of teacher, teaching the same textbook lessons in the same middle-class schools, as the teachers I had as I was growing up.

Coaching was my main interest, not teaching. Teaching, to me, meant simply using the textbooks and workbooks the school provided to teach the lessons the provided materials prescribed. I expected to be a good teacher. I also assumed that being a good teacher would still leave me plenty of time after school to be a great coach, as well.

The Four Years - 1963 through 1966

I did not start my teacher training in 1962. I started it in 1966 instead. In response to the “try something different” challenge presented to Intern Teachers that I mentioned in [Chapter 1 - How Mary and Bob Ended Up as Teachers](#), I said, “If I had been given this same challenge back in 1961, I would have ended up like all the other intern teacher presenting the same failing curriculum to my student that the State had had adopted for our use. However, by 1966, my attitude was, “You want me to find new ways? Bring it in on. I’m ready for this!”

What changed my attitude was the four years in-between. The sections of this Chapter explain how and why the 1966 me became so different from who I was in 1961.

Naval Officer Candidate School (OCS)

To get my military obligation out of the way before beginning my teacher-training, my brother Jack, who was now also a recent graduate, and I applied to and were accepted by the Naval Officer Candidate School (OCS) in Newport, Rhode Island. In January of 1963, Jack and I traveled to Newport to begin our OCS training.

The training was advertised as taking sixteen weeks. However, we learned upon arrival that the sixteen weeks referred to sixteen weeks of classes. The week of orientation at the start and the week of getting ready to head to our assigned duty locations at the end meant OCS was an eighteen-week adventure.

Upon arrival, Jack and I were immediately split up. Our OCS name tags would consist of the letter designation of our company, our section number within that company, and our last name. Since we obviously shared the same last name, we could not be placed in the same Company. Jack was assigned to Section One in Charley Company – Name tag C-1 Lorton. I was assigned to Section One in Delta Company – Name tag D-1 Lorton.

A Third Will Not Make It

On the night of my arrival, I was assigned to a room with three other recent D-1 arrivals. The four of us began a getting-to-know-you process that would continue for the next eighteen weeks. We also discussed the elephant in the room. We all knew that the roll-out rate (the OCS term for flunking out) for OCS candidates was about one-third.

We stated the obvious. At least one of the four of us was likely not going to make it. As it turned out, although ten of the thirty-three candidates in our D-1 section did roll out, the four of us all made it.

We were at OCS at a time when military service was mandatory, so rolling out did not mean you were sent home. All OCS students had to enlist in the Navy before enrolling. If you made it through the process of becoming a Naval Officer, you would be discharged from the Navy and then be commissioned as an officer. If you rolled out, you were still enlisted in the Navy, so you would be sent to a Naval ship somewhere.

The Gig Game

Orientation began the next day. We were assigned to our dorm rooms alphabetically, four to a room. Uniforms were issued, the dreaded make-us-nearly-bald boot camp style haircuts were given, books were doled out, rules were explained, and graduation requirements were stated.

As part of learning the rules, Gigs (the OCS term for demerits) were explained to us. Gigs could be given to us at any time for just about any reason. For every five Gigs we received, we had to march an hour on Saturday before we could leave the base. The most Gigs that could be marched off each Saturday was ten. We could not leave the base that Saturday if we owed more than two hours of marching.

We were not allowed to leave the base at all for the first month because the dress uniforms we were required to wear off the base would not yet be ready. However, once it became okay to leave, many of my classmates were still not allowed off the base for several additional Saturdays because of the Gigs they had to march off.



You can see a cluster of students marching off their Gig hours in this picture taken of my brother Jack and me on a Saturday morning. What you cannot see is that the barrels of the rifles on the marcher's shoulders are just broomstick handles.

OCS was hosting two classes during my stay there. The class ahead of us was at its halfway point. Our contact with that class was in the mess hall. It was there that we learned how to play the Gig game. We knew what Gigs were. What the class ahead of us taught us was how to avoid many of the Gig traps that would be set for us. What follows are three of many examples we were given and their solutions.

The thin mattresses on our bunk beds rested on cross-strips of wire. If even a single section of bed sheet poked through the cross-strips, we would be Gigged. If we actually slept between the sheets, it would take us too long in the morning to get the sheets back in position. Solution – Don't sleep between the sheets. Sleep on top of them, just covered by a blanket. Bed-making then only required the folding of the blanket.

We were issued a laundry bag that had to be tied in a very specific way at the foot of our beds. If an inspecting officer pulled on our bag and it was even the slightest bit loose, we would be Gigged. Solution – Once the bag was in position, apply soap and water to the bag's thin rope that was wrapped around the bed's frame. When the water dried, the bag would be tightly locked into position. This meant the bag would be unusable for laundry, but it would be Gig-proof. What to do with our laundry was a separate problem to be worked out.

We were all issued boots that frequently left scuff marks on the wooden floor of our barracks. If there were any scuff marks on our floor when

the inspecting officer came around, the entire crew assigned to do the cleaning that day would be Gigged. Solution – Everyone in the Section removed their boots before entering the barracks. While in the barracks, we were always shoeless. The one exception would be for any morning inspections that required us to be in full uniform. Boots on for the inspection and off again as soon as the inspecting officer was gone.

OCS Goal – No Gigs

I have always set goals for myself because having a goal gives me purpose. In high school, my goal was getting into Stanford. At Stanford, I made my two parallel goals: achieving an overall B average and never missing a class. For OCS, I now had my goal. If their game was finding ways to Gig us, then my game would be to never get a Gig. What I could not have known at the time was that this goal would move me halfway towards a prize I did not even know I wanted.

One of my many strategies for never being given a Gig was to aim for mediocrity. For the morning uniform inspections that occurred nearly every day, my plan was to look like a person who had been Gigged yesterday and would probably be Gigged again tomorrow, but for now, that person was at least passable.

Drum and Bugle Corps

Each class at OCS had its own Drum and Bugle Corps. The person picked as the drum major for our class's Drum and Bugle Corps was one of my brother Jack's four roommates. Jack's drum major roommate gave Jack one of the two Drum and Bugle Corps sets of symbols. The other set was owned by a member of the class ahead of us. The drum major put me in contact with that person, and I bought his symbols. Jack and I were now our Drum and Bugle Corps' two symbol players.

Drum and bugle practice in the mornings took place at the same time as our daily uniform inspections. Only once in the eight weeks of my drum and bugle tour of duty was the corps ever subject to a uniform inspection. In addition, when the five companies in our class passed in review as part of an inspection process, the Drum and Bugle Corps remained uninspected and simply played the marching music.

Apart from the side benefit of reducing Gig inspections, being in the Drum and Bugle Corps was definitely an enjoyable experience. Jack was into music and at one point even had his own set of drums. While I enjoyed music, I had always been content to be the audience. As the symbol players, we were allowed to decide when to bang our symbols in each song, with no sheet music required.

The corps' most requested song when we were engaging in occasional evenings serenading the five Companies in our OCS class, and even when we played at our graduation ceremony, was the theme song from the then-popular Mickey Mouse Club.

You can see the front row of our Drum and Bugle Corps in its playing position as a Company marches by.



More Gig Traps

OCS was constantly looking for ways to assign Gigs to us. One of many examples is when we show up in class and are immediately given a slip of paper on which to write the answers to the test we are about to be given. The slip of paper always has a line for our name and a separate line for our company and section number. One time, the slip of paper only had a line for our name. Anyone who forgot to write his company and section number on the test paper had just earned a Gig.

We had to be in bed every night at 10:30. Reveille was every morning at 5:30. The wake-up call meant that thirty or more of us rushed to line up behind six sinks each morning at 5:30. For some reason, my body has its own alarm system. Every morning at OCS, I woke up five minutes before reveille and claimed a sink. And every morning, four other people in my section with built-in alarms like mine also claimed their sinks.

You might think the temptation would be to sleep in for a few minutes more while waiting for a shorter line. But just lying on your bed at 5:31 is worth at least a Gig if caught and getting caught was common.

No Gigs - OCS Goal Realized

At the end of the sixteen weeks of training, I had managed never to get a single Gig. Of the more than five hundred candidates that were in my class at the start, I was the only one who ended up Gig-less.

No Gigs was a goal I had set for myself. I had no idea either that OCS would even notice or that it was the halfway marker towards that prize I did not know I wanted. However, that prize turned out to be an important IF that I would take with me from OCS.

Section Mail Orderly

Before I left for OCS, a classmate of mine who had recently completed his OCS training told me that he had been fourth in his class. He told me that it was something I could never do. After having the OCS graduation requirements explained to me during that first week, I could see that being fourth in my class of over five hundred candidates was not just something I could never do, it was something I did not even want to do.

What we learned was that two-thirds of our grade at graduation would come from our grades for the coursework in our academic classes. The remaining third would come from a military grade given to us by the Naval Officer assigned to our company. That grade would be based on the leadership roles for which we took responsibility.

There were a wide variety of leadership opportunities offered. Examples: Section Leaders, Company Commanders, Battalion Officers, Regimental Officers. There were five separate companies of over one hundred candidates each in my class. The Battalion Officers took leadership roles for our whole class. There were two classes at OCS at a time. The Regimental Officers took leadership roles for both classes.

I could see what my fourth-in-class friend must have done to become fourth, but I wanted no part of it. I wanted to focus on the academic side, not the military side. However, I knew I had to show that I was at least willing to take on some responsibility to keep my military grade from being a complete zero. My chosen position – Section Mail Orderly. The Company Mail Orderly would collect the mail for our three sections, sort it, and then give it to the Section Mail Orderlies for distribution. My responsibility was to deliver the mail to my section mates.

My Company Officer asked me why I was volunteering for that particular position. My verbal response was to get to know everyone in my section. My internal thought was that it was the least time-consuming job I could think of while still volunteering.

Why My Focus on Academics?

My friend who had already been to OCS told me that OCS would be like sixteen straight weeks of finals week at Stanford. We took six classes: Engineering, Navigation, Operations, Orientation, Seamanship, and Naval Weapons. We had about an hour's worth of homework each day for most of our classes. The only time each day set aside for studying was the three hours between 7:30 PM and 10:30 PM. There were days when we had free time that we could use for studying, but these study times were not known to us in advance.

The Sunday night before classes were to begin, we received our first homework assignments for our six classes. Roughly six hours of homework and only three hours of study time. Where to begin? I didn't worry too much about studying that night. I figured I could come up with an actual study plan once I had been to a few classes. As my section walked into our first class on Monday morning, we were handed the slip of paper we would use to record our answers to the test we were about to take on our Sunday night's homework assignment. The sixteen weeks of finals week started on day one.

Why my focus on academics? Failing a single class was all it took to roll you out. Rollouts were determined at the fourth, eighth, twelfth, and sixteenth weeks. One of my three roommates did so badly that he was no longer with us at the end of week four. At the eighth week, we received a new roommate, a roll-back from the class ahead of ours.

Of my section's ten students who were marked for rolling out, only one was rolled back to the class behind us instead. When we saw him in the mess hall that all the Companies shared, he told us that when he met with the administrative panel in charge of administering the roll-out decisions, he argued with their decision and said he absolutely knew he could do it if they rolled him back, instead. That made all the difference.

Initially, I had the rather snobbish opinion that Stanford grads would never be the ones who were rolled out or back. However, my new roommate, who rolled back from the class ahead of ours, was a Stanford grad, just like me. He had done quite well in all the classes but one. Failure in a single class was all it took to roll you out or roll you back.

Lying in Bed One Night

Lying in bed one night, I said to myself, "This is the single worst experience I have ever had in my life. I am saying this to myself right now so I can remember these words. I know that once I am no longer here, I won't remember why I felt this way." And, as soon as I was an OCS graduate, I really could not remember why I felt that way.

What OCS Knew About Each and Every One of Us

I was impressed with the amount of knowledge the staff at OCS had about each student there. As part of the application process, we had been asked to provide all kinds of information about ourselves. I even had to write a complete list of every job I ever had and each employer's name. The staff had reviewed every bit of information for every student. I, for example, was told that my college minor had been mathematics. Stanford did not require its students to declare a minor. OCS had determined my minor was math by reviewing my entire college transcript.

Because I was a math minor, I was offered the opportunity upon graduation to be a math instructor at the Mare Island Naval Station in Vallejo, California. I declined because I was looking forward to being on a ship and traveling to as many foreign ports as that ship would take me.

The companies in each class at OCS were to compete against one another in team sports. For my class, the three sports in which our five companies would compete were basketball, volleyball, and swimming. Just as the OCS staff knew Jack's roommate was qualified to be our class's drum major, the staff knew I was the one to assign as coach and captain of Delta Company's swimming team.

Swimming Team – Captain and Coach

Coaching swimming was my life's goal. The team I planned to coach eventually was much younger than the one I would be coaching now. But coaching is coaching, and I really loved doing it, regardless of the swimmers' ages.

While the OCS staff selected me as coach based on my job history, the members of my team selected themselves. My team consisted of fifteen students who chose swimming over the other two sports and over the fourth option of just being the audience. While there actually were audiences for the volleyball and basketball competitions, the OCS swimming pool had no bleachers, so our only spectators were the swimmers on each team.

Third Place Wins the Meet

At our first training session, I explained the importance of winning third place to all my swimmers. I said that the swimmers who take first or second place get the glory, but the swimmers who take third place are the ones who determine which team wins the meet. First place gets 5 points. Second place gets 3 points. Third place gets 1 point. A team that takes first and third place earns 6 points, 3 points more than the second-place team earns. A team that wins second and third gets 4 points, only 1 point less than the team taking first.

None of the five companies would have a large number of swimmers and an even smaller number of really good swimmers. So, in nearly every race, each company will have one good swimmer to match against the other company's good swimmer. Those good swimmers will finish first and second. If we take all the third places, then every time we also win a first place, we have a 3-point advantage. And if we take second instead of first, we are only 1 point down. So, the key to winning is winning as many third places as possible.

Training For the Meets

We had weekly training sessions. A once-a-week workout is not going to get anyone in shape. So, we did not work on conditioning. Rather than have any of my swimmers swim the length of the pool, we only swam widths. I would have my swimmers sprint across the pool as fast as they could. Then we would rest for a while and then sprint back across again. Sprinting the width, resting, sprinting back, resting, then back across again. We would do this for half an hour and then call it a day.

I explained to my swimmers that I had them swim widths and not lengths because I wanted their muscles conditioned to sprinting. There was no way they could maintain any kind of sprinting speed in practice if they had to swim the length of the pool. When the actual race came, they were to start their swim at the speed they raced the width of the pool and see how long they could keep it up.

The Other Swimmer's State of Mind

On race days, I would talk about what it feels like to be in a race and seeing the faster swimmers' bodies in the water so far ahead of yours. Being so far behind can leave you discouraged and wanting to give up. When you feel that way, look across the pool and see that other slower swimmer who will feel discouraged, just like you.

Your race is not with the faster swimmers who have left you in their wake. Your race is with that other swimmer who is probably ready to give up. So, no matter how tired you might feel at that point, he feels the same way, too. And if you can battle through your tiredness and discouragement and beat that other swimmer, we will win the meet, thanks to you.

The Day of The Meet

I did have one of my swimmers decide his swimming level was just not good enough, so he felt he should quit the team. I said, "We need a team manager, are you available?" He took the job. So, every swimmer who had signed up was still on our team. On the day of the meet, our manager took care of entering our swimmers in their race and giving us a running total of the score.

At the conclusion of each race, the first person I congratulated at the race's end was our third-place finisher. And in the quite rare event, where we earned a fourth instead of third, I made sure he knew how close he had come and how much I appreciated the effort he had put in.

Undefeated

We competed against each team twice. We beat each company by more at our second meeting than at our first because each team we competed against had fewer swimmers the second time around. As I said above, our team had not lost a single one. As I also said above, coaching is coaching, and I really love doing it.

Company Commander?

I had volunteered as Section Mail Orderly to take on as little responsibility as possible. I had not volunteered to be the swimming coach. I was simply appointed based on my job history. However, it was definitely something I enjoyed doing.

It did not occur to me that my Company Officer would be paying any attention to what I was doing. I did know that during his one-year tour of duty serving as Company Officer for successive classes of OCS candidates, none of his other companies had ever been an overall winner in any of the team competitions. This time, both his swimming team and his basketball team were the overall winners, so he had double bragging rights among the other Company Officers.

Unknown to me, the Company Officer was getting favorable feedback from some of my swimmers. About halfway through the swimming competition season, he invited me to his office and asked me if I would like to be the Company Commander for Delta Company. The offer did not mean the current commander was doing a bad job. To give leadership opportunities to as many students as possible, a new commander was assigned every month. In fact, the current commander was one of my swimmers, so I assumed he must have suggested me as his successor.

I politely declined, saying that if I took over as commander, I would have to give up coaching. I knew he would rather have bragging rights among the other Company Officers than have me as his next Company Commander, so I remained secure in my Section Mail Orderly position.

Fourth in The Class

My Company Officer called me into his office in the final week of our sixteen weeks of officer training. He said he had been trying to figure out what to do about me. I didn't have any idea what he was talking about, but I knew it wasn't anything scary. I knew my grades were quite good,

since my focus had been on academics, and not leadership opportunities, like Company Commander, and there weren't any other problem areas I had to be concerned about. He said his dilemma had been the combination of my having zero Gigs and of what he knew about how I had coached the swimming team. He had finally decided what to do. He said, "I have given you a 4.0 as your military grade." I was completely shocked. I thanked him very much and left his office, bewildered. What was a Section Mail Orderly like me doing with a 4.0 military grade?

At the end of the sixteen weeks of OCS training, academic grades were combined with military grades, and class rankings were assigned. While each person in the class was ranked numerically from top to bottom, only the rankings of the top four students were published, and only the top four students were honored at graduation. My name was published as having finished my OCS training as fourth in my class.

I Had Misjudged the Navy

After the graduation requirements were explained to me in the first week of orientation, my thought was that being fourth in my class was not just something I could never do, it was something I did not even want to do.

I knew that my military grade would be based on the leadership roles for which we took responsibility. I assumed that the Navy would measure leadership roles by the title of the position and the power associated with that title. What I learned was that rank didn't matter. It was leadership ability that was being evaluated, not the rank of the leader.

The Purpose of The Gig Game

I described the Gig Game as OCS looking to give us demerits at any time for just about anything. What I left out of that description was the purpose of the Gigs. Why Gigs were given was not a concern to me. My goal was not to get a single one. The purpose of the Gigs was to measure every OCS student's ability to pay attention to detail. An example of this was the slip of paper for writing the answers to the test that always had a line for our name and a separate line for our company and section number. Paying attention to detail meant noticing that missing line.

I did not know this while I was at OCS, but paying attention to detail is an essential skill for Naval officers, particularly for officers standing Officer of the Deck (OOD) watches while their ship is at sea. Paying attention to detail is critical. That is why any OCS student who reaches the one-hundred-gig mark is rolled out.

Gigs were the OCS measure of our ability to pay attention to detail. The fewer the Gigs we were given, the better we were at paying attention to

detail. Since I was the only student in my class without a single Gig, I had the only perfect mark for paying attention to detail. A perfect mark equals 4.0.

Swimming Team Interviewed

I was unaware of how much my Company Officer was paying attention to my swimming team. I knew he was pleased that we ended up undefeated. I also knew that he had heard enough about what I was doing to offer me a turn at Company Commander. What I was unaware of was that he was casually and informally interviewing every member of my team and asking them how they felt about their time with me.

What he heard and then passed on to me later in that sixteenth week meeting was that, to a man, each person on the team felt that he was an important part of that team, regardless of how good or not-so-good he was as a swimmer. Every person felt that he had made a significant contribution to the team's success. Everyone, even the first-place finishers, appreciated that I always congratulated the third-place finishers first. The men also appreciated the swimming-the-width-of-the-pool workouts, which were focused on speed and not physical conditioning. They never left a workout feeling tired. They liked that being on the team never felt like a burden, given all the other activities already filling their OCS days.

I knew that my military grade would be based on the leadership roles for which we took responsibility. I assumed that the Navy would measure leadership roles by the title of the position and the power associated with that title. However, what I learned was that rank didn't matter. It was performance that was being evaluated. The Company Officer said what the Navy was looking for was leadership, and leadership was what I had shown in my coaching and captaining of the swim team. For that leadership, he gave me a grade of 4.0. Zero Gigs = 4.0. Swimming team = 4.0. Combined Military = 4.0.

My New View of The Navy

As I said, I learned that rank didn't matter. What the Navy was looking for was performance, and performance was not something an officer could accomplish on his own. My Company Officer had not interviewed me to assess my leadership capabilities. He had interviewed the men on my team, instead. I was not judged by what I might have thought of what I was doing. I was judged by how the men I was leading felt about me and about themselves. What I carried with me from OCS to my eventual duty assignment was that my success or failure as an officer would be determined by the men in my division and my ability to lead them. The measure of my effectiveness was not how I felt about the job I was doing, it was how my men felt about the job we were doing.

Navy Times

Navy Times is and was the official newspaper of the U.S. Navy. It is distributed on every Naval base throughout the world. Navy Times sent a reporter to interview my brother Jack and me during our time at OCS. Having two non-twin brothers in the same class at OCS was not a common occurrence. The reporter wanted to write about us, but he said he needed an attention-grabber for his article besides the fact that we were brothers. I suggested that he include the fact that during our time in the Navy, we would be rejoining our water polo team so that we could participate in the 1964 Olympic Trials.



The picture above of Jack and me preparing to dive into the OCS pool appeared on the front page of the Navy Times along with the reporter's article about the two brothers at OCS. Our Olympic aspirations were now universally known throughout the Navy.

My Roommate's Orders

During our first week of orientation at OCS, we were told to write out our preferred duty assignments. We were also told that the top 10% of students would receive the orders of their choice. My written preference was to be assigned to an aircraft carrier based in Alameda, California, with no additional schooling after OCS.

The eighteenth and final week at OCS began with our receiving our duty assignments. My assignment was to the U.S.S. Oriskany CVA-34, based in San Diego, and a two-week stint at a Naval Communications School in New Jersey. Except for the aircraft carrier part, it was not at all what I had asked for. I was, to say the least, disappointed.

One of my three roommates received orders to the U.S.S. Midway, CVA-41, based in Alameda, with no additional schooling. Exactly what I had asked for. I asked him if he would mind trading orders with me. He said he would actually prefer my orders because he was from the East Coast, and he liked the two weeks he would get to spend in New Jersey. San Diego? Alameda? All the same to him. Just two places in California, a State he'd never been to before.

With my roommate's permission, I took his and my orders to the office at OCS responsible for issuing our assignments and asked that they be switched. The Chief in charge refused to make the switch. He said I had a carrier on the West Coast, so I had two out of three of the things I had requested. I said we were told the top 10% will get the orders we asked for, and I was fourth in my class. He still refused to make the switch. As I was leaving, I turned to him and said, "You are hurting my chance to go to the Olympics!" His immediate response was, "Give me your orders, I'll make the switch." New orders: U.S.S. Midway, CVA-41.

The Six IFs From OCS

IF I had not set and then achieved my goal of zero Gigs at OCS, and IF I had not been named the coach of my company's swimming team, then I would not have ended up fourth in my class. While being fourth was an honor in itself, being fourth also had a direct impact on my view of what the Navy valued as leadership. It would also directly impact my assignment on the USS Midway. Both my view of leadership and my Midway assignment would end up having a major impact on how I would approach being a teacher.

IF my brother Jack and I had not been interviewed for the Navy Times article. IF I had not said to include in that article that Jack and I would be trying out for the Olympics with our water polo team during our time in the Navy. IF my roommate had not received orders to the Midway and accepted my request that he go to the Oriskany instead. IF the person in charge of OCS orders had not agreed to switch my orders because he was aware of the Navy Times article. Then the life-changing events that I was to encounter on the Midway would never have happened.