

A Fifty-Year Link in the Chain

Lessons from the Class of '81 as you begin your journey at the United States Naval Academy

“Welcome to the adventure of your life.”

Fifty years before you walked through the gates of the Naval Academy, the Class of 1981 was right where you are now, uncertain, determined, and about to be transformed. We are your Link in the Chain, and we wrote this for you.

What Plebe Summer Looked Like in 1977

Our I-Day was July 6, 1977. Bancroft Hall had no air conditioning, and the smell of sweaty white works was a constant companion through Plebe Summer. Firsties could make you brace up on the spot if you didn't know your rates—and running in place with a parade rifle held straight out was a highly effective memory aid.

We were the second coed class. You won't give it a second thought having women as classmates—but back then, it was genuinely new, and there were growing pains. First-semester finals came after Christmas break, which had a way of casting a shadow over the holidays. (We were glad that changed our Youngster year.)

The World We Graduated Into

The early 1980s were defined by Cold War tension—U.S.-Soviet competition spanning continents, oceans, and space. We watched the Space Shuttle Columbia make its first orbital flights. We graduated just as President Reagan pushed for a 600-ship Navy and a renewed focus on sea power. The world felt uncertain, and the stakes were high. Sound familiar?

We had no GPS, no internet, no cell phones. If you wanted to call home, you found a pay phone at Dahlgren Hall. If you wanted the news, you read a paper. We studied navigation with tools that look like museum pieces today. And yet the leadership challenges we faced were the same ones you will face: uncertainty, pressure, and the need to make good decisions quickly.

1981 IN BRIEF: MTV debuted. The IBM PC launched. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* topped the box office. Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'" was everywhere. The world was changing fast—just like yours.

What the Class of '81 Did Next

We don't say this to impress you—we say it to show you what's possible from right where you're standing:

- 31 retired Flag and General Officers, shaping naval strategy through the Gulf War, post-9/11 operations, and beyond

- Four recipients of the USNA Alumni Association Distinguished Graduate Award
- The first female Commandant of Midshipmen in Academy history
- Entrepreneurs, executives, and innovators across finance, technology, and government
- Three astronauts who supported the Space Shuttle missions

None of us knew on our I-Day what was ahead. You don't know either. That's the point.

What Has Never Changed

Although the technology of 1981 is unrecognizable today, the core of the Academy experience is the same. Plebe Summer will break you down and build you back up. You will form bonds forged through shared suffering and shared pride—bonds that hold across decades, careers, and continents. The Army-Navy game will matter enormously. (We lost only once in our four years. We're still not over it.)

The Lawrence Ethics Essay Award, presented each year to a 3/C Midshipman and sponsored by our class, reflects something we deeply believe: that the ethical foundation laid at Annapolis outlasts every rank, every posting, and every technological leap. Character is what remains.

Three Things We'd Tell Our Plebe-Year Selves

1. Adaptability is the skill that lasts.

We operated without GPS or internet and still navigated effectively. You will face technology that doesn't exist yet, threats no doctrine currently addresses, and situations no training manual covers. Leaders adapt. Tools are temporary.

2. Relationships are your most durable asset.

The people standing beside you in formation right now—you will call on them for the rest of your life. They will call on you. Invest in those relationships the same way you invest in your professional development. They will return more.

3. Excellence is a daily decision.

Not a goal you achieve once. Not a title. The habits you build here—how you treat a subordinate, how you handle failure, how you tell hard truths—become the automatic responses that define your leadership years from now. Build the right habits now, before the pressure is real.

Fifty years from now, a future class will look back at yours. The standard you set, the example you provide, and the impact you make will define how you are remembered.

Step forward with confidence. You are more ready than you know.

Welcome to the United States Naval Academy, Class of 2031.