

Escapes

Meet the Mids

Now's the Time to Watch the Navy's Next Crew of Leaders

By MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN
Special to The Washington Post

There I was at the U.S. Naval Academy, and I wanted to see some action. Specifically, I wanted to see chow. After watching midshipmen walk around the Yard (as the campus is known) in their reserved and rigid manner, I imagined them lined up at table in similar martial dignity. So at the end of my recent morning tour, I walked over to a mess hall to confirm my preconceptions. Boy, was I wrong. Before I saw it, I heard it. Utensils and plates clattered, and the roar of voices sounded more like an Army-Navy football game than the disciplined eating drill I'd imagined.

The 4,300 midshipmen, I learned, consume 2,000 pounds of meat, 2,000 pounds of potatoes, 7,000 quarts of milk and 300 gallons of ice cream in a typical day. Lots of food; lots of noise. I was glad to know there was a short time in the middle of the day when these straight-and-narrow young men and women, with their shined shoes and pressed slacks, could howl like any other college student.

The body language of the guards at the academy gate may suggest otherwise, but the Navy's hallowed



DINING HALL AND YOUTH BOOT CAMP PHOTOS: U.S. NAVAL ACADEMY

campus is open to the public, 365 days a year. And this is a prime time to visit the 338-acre compound between the south bank of the Severn River and downtown Annapolis: You beat the crowded tours of the summer high season and, best of all, you get to see the formations, activities and games of the academic year. The academy comes across as peaceful, picturesque and, yes, hardcore. But what surprised me was how much fun it looked. I'm sure many a mid would beg to differ, but it struck me as a very demanding, mentally and physically grueling,

impossibly exclusive summer camp. "This is where they swim and learn boxing, wrestling and judo," said Jim Minderlein, our tour guide and a 1960 graduate, as we entered Lejeune Hall. "By the time they are second-class [juniors] they have to jump off a three-story tower, fully clothed, then swim a half-mile in 40 minutes." (Okay, not many summer camps require that.)

The tour went up to the second-floor hallway, lined with observation windows, and we looked down at male swimmers on one side, male and female martial arts students on the other (in tiny swim trunks and short shorts, respectively). Down the hall, Minderlein pointed out the school's two Heisman trophies for outstanding college football player of the year, for Joe Bellino (1960) and Roger Staubach (1963), and carried on about Staubach as if he were personally responsible for every Navy victory, on the field or on the water.

The tour covers a lot of the school's — and the Navy's — history, including the Battle of Midway monument and the crypt of Revolutionary War naval hero John Paul Jones, located below the chapel (where, as Minderlein pointed out, Staubach went to Mass every day). We stopped at Bancroft Hall (one of the largest dormitories in the world, housing all the midshipmen) and Memorial Hall, which has balcony views of Kent Island across the



TOUR GROUP AND TECUMSEH PHOTOS BY DENNIS DRENNER FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Guide Joan Grieco speaks to a tour group outside the academy chapel, built atop the crypt of naval hero John Paul Jones. At left, there's lots of food and lots of noise at mess time for the 4,300 midshipmen.

Chesapeake Bay. At the U.S. Naval Academy Museum, which includes the Gallery of Ship Models, you can watch a model builder at work. (Some buildings are open to the public but are not on the tour, including the new Commodore Uriah P. Levy Center and Jewish Chapel.)

There is so much to see that it's worth spending the better chunk of

the day on the Yard, revisiting places you rush through on the 75-minute tour. In general, you have a better chance of seeing midshipmen during the week than on the weekend. If you're there on a weekday, don't miss the 12:05 formation before chow (weather and schedule permitting). Watching the midshipmen line up in their working blues

(which are actually black) and hearing them yell "All present and accounted for!" seemed like a privileged behind-the-scenes glimpse of academy tradition.

But a second-year swiftly cleared that up for me on his way to lunch. "It's important for us to be at formation," he said, "but it's all for the tourists."

ESCAPE KEYS

TOURING THE ACADEMY: The U.S. Naval Academy's **Armel-Leftwich Visitor Center** (52 King George St., Annapolis, 410-263-6933, www.navyonline.com) offers daily 75-minute tours year-round. Cost is \$8 for adults, \$7 for seniors and \$6 for students. A 13-minute film about plebe summer and academy life is shown every 15 minutes. Pick up the weekly newspaper, Trident, for a schedule of swim meets, wrestling matches and basketball games, or click on www.navysports.com. Visitors enter through Gate 1 (King George Street); everyone 16 and older must show a photo ID. Coolers and alcoholic beverages are prohibited, and all bags are subject to search. Cars with a Department of Defense decal or handicapped tags are allowed on the Yard, but everyone else must park in the neighborhood. There is two-hour street parking outside Gate 1 and at City Dock, and there is longer-term parking at a garage on Main Street and during the summer at the Navy-Marine Corps Stadium, with round-trip shuttle service for 75 cents.

EATING AT THE ACADEMY: The Yard offers two lunch options for the public: **Drydock Restaurant**, Dahlgren Hall (410-293-2873), open 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., has a rec room/sports bar feel and serves sandwiches on pretzel rolls, burgers and pizza. The **Officers' and Faculty Club**, 2 Truxtun Rd. (410-293-2632), is open for lunch during the week and offers a more upscale menu.

FOR LITTLE-SHIPMEN: Children ages 6 to 12 can participate

in the **Navy Way Boot Camp** on Saturdays July 21 and Aug. 18 from 10 a.m. to noon. Kids learn to tell military time, communicate in Navy-speak, take orders, march, chant and eat in a simulated mess. Morning graduates can continue for the advanced program from 1 to 3:30 p.m. to learn knot-tying and advanced marching. Each program is \$30; advance registration required. Call the visitor center or e-mail jopp@usna.edu for information.

EATING AND SLEEPING IN ANNAPOLIS: **Yin Yankee Cafe** (105 Main St., 410-268-8703, www.yinyankee.com) is more Yin than Yankee and offers excellent sushi and such unexpected dishes as shrimp and veggie beignets. Cozy up with a book and a cuppa joe at **Hard Bean Coffee & Booksellers** (36 Market Space, 410-263-8770, www.beansandbooks.com). And then go to **49 West Coffeehouse Winebar & Gallery** (49 West St., 410-626-9796, www.49westcoffeehouse.com) for the soups and salads, but stay for the live music and the always-changing wine list. **Chez Amis Bed & Breakfast** (85 East St., 410-263-6631, www.chezamis.com) is hidden on a quiet side street half a block from the state capitol and steps from the harbor. The building was a grocery at the turn of the 20th century and now has four guest rooms, from \$150 to \$180 a night. **Historic Inns of Annapolis** has three lodging options near the historic downtown (410-263-2641, www.historicinnsofannapolis.com). Rooms start at \$139 during the off-season, but can shoot up to the mid-\$300s for Navy football games in the fall and for graduation in May.



The Navy Way Boot Camp, left, offers youngsters a taste of academy life. Above, the figure known as Tecumseh is also called "the God of 2.0" by midshipmen who offer prayers that they maintain passing grades.