

Dear Firstie Parents and those who will, before you know it, be Firstie Parents,

While scanning the parents' list on this cold winter day, I quickly noted the theme for Firstie parents is focused on the rapidly approaching light at the end of the USNA tunnel aka GCW. I wrote the original portion of my "treatise to GCW" right after we returned home from our daughter's in 2009, while everything was fresh in my mind. I first posted this in January, 2010, and by 2011 was receiving requests from several USNA Parent Clubs to include it in their newsletters. The same was true in 2012, even with the mid-week, Blue Angel "less" version of GC. I just reread the original and see no good reason to reinvent the wheel, especially since it is also another Presidential year. I have however, reorganized the week into days and categories for your convenience. So here it is again. I hope you find it informative, if not, that's what the delete button is for.

First, and most importantly, we came up with our Firstie's GCW game plan by consulting with her - and if nothing else comes out of this, the key point is "It is their week! They've earned it!! Honor their wishes!!!"

Congratulations to you and your mid for planning ahead! Enjoy the rest of your mid's Firstie year, it's a fast moving train that won't slow down. For 2nd and 3rd class and plebe parents, your GCW will come . . . a whole lot faster than you think.

Navy Blue and Gold Forever!

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Suggestions for Graduation/Commissioning Week

I was motivated to write this for three reasons: Using the GCW schedule our Firstie and I had customized specifically for us, I made notes throughout the week and when we got home as I was organizing her USNA scrapbooks, I was totally amazed at what all we had done and what a truly great week it had been. Remembering the parent list emails I had filed as "CGW" over the past three years, I thought it would be a perfect time to organize this information for future classes. And I was further prompted to do this because of an '09 grad who visited us a week after GCW. While looking at her scrapbooks and listening to GCW stories, he said he wished his parents would have honored his wishes. It came down to his mom insisted he be with family all the time, and not with any of his friends, unless all the family was included. The elderly grandparents needed naps, medications, meals at certain times, etc. He wanted his siblings to be seated in the family section at GC, his mother wanted the grandparents. The week became about everyone except him.

In my opinion, GCW is about one person - your graduating midshipman - no one else matters! They have worked and endured - academically, physically, mentally, emotionally - for the past four years, no doubt wondering some days if they would ever see that light at the end of the tunnel. Now that day is finally here and they are one week (plus basket leave, or not) from stepping on board a ship as a DIVO and assuming leadership of their own crew in some instances, or heading to TBS, Pensacola, Charleston, BUDS or grad school. They are one week from literally being scattered to the seven seas from those with whom they have forged bonds in the fiery furnace of USNA that turns out Navy and Marine Corps officers. Only God - and whoever is in charge of deployments, leaves, advanced schools and duty station assignments - knows when they will meet again. They are the leaders now, follow their lead.

ONE YEAR BEFORE GCW

Yes! One year before, you should start looking at accommodations. This is the biggest weekend of the year in Annapolis, and since you already know what I-Day, Plebe Parent, 2nd Class and football weekends are like, none of them can compare to GCW.

HOUSING

After reading posts on the list during our mid's first three years, and every year since, on renting a house versus staying in a hotel, we looked at both but chose hotel. This is strictly a matter of choice on what works best for each family - there is no right or wrong way as long as your choice meets the needs of your Firstie and family. But now is the time to start looking, especially if you are interested in renting a house.

As much as I love to cook, and each suite had a full kitchen that we used - but only for snacks and drinks, I wanted to enjoy the week and not spend it cooking, so after talking with our soo-to-be-Firstie, we decided maid service and prepared breakfast were the way to go. So the day after the '08 Graduation, I reserved two suites on the same floor of the Hampton Inn - one for us and one for our mid and her sister. We stayed from Friday to the following Saturday which also got us the discounted weekly rate. In addition, the "frequent flyer points" we earned "paid" for five night's accommodations when we drove her car out to San Diego later that summer. And that extra suite we got for our Firstie and her sister was full (3 in the king bed, 2 in the queen sleeper sofa, and at least one on the floor) on the first two nights because Firsties were officially checked out of Mother B even though many of their families had not yet arrived, and some sponsors were not available to house them. There were 3 or 4 every night after that as Firstie's friends from home arrived for graduation. I filled their kitchen with healthy snack bars, juices and milk. Coffee was available in the suite and always in the breakfast area in the lobby. Plus they all enjoyed the breakfast.

Keep in mind, wherever you choose to stay, that Firsties have many commitments that week. Many are as early as 0700 for Graduation rehearsals – and there are several of them. There are also parade practices on the Yard. Being late for any of these carry consequences that could easily ruin their week. They will also need their car. So keep in mind travel time from where you are staying, especially during morning rush hour.

LAST SEMESTER "TO DO" LIST

We made a trip to the Yard over Easter. While at the Mid Store we used that opportunity to have our Firstie personally select the frame she wanted for her diploma and commission. These impressive frames are somewhat expensive and there are so many to choose from that we wanted her to choose exactly what she wanted.

On previous trips over the past three years I had purchased both the USNA gold embossed scrapbook and the one with the three dimensional Academy seal on the front, as well as filler pages for both. During those years at USNA, I had also collected various scrapbooking pages, packages (available for both Navy and Marine) and other items so that all I had to add were the collection of pictures from I-Day, GCW and the four years in between to complete the project. She and I had a great time compiling the scrapbooks in time for her party the weekend following GCW.

It's also a good time to stock up on any USNA or Navy or Marine paraphernalia – clothing wise, or for parties and entertaining during GCW or for graduation parties back home.

I also bought several USNA 2-pocket folios for friends and family who would be attending GCW.

Then we hit the tourist booth at City Dock for maps and brochures on Annapolis sites. We also gathered some Washington D.C. info - it was the Cherry Blossom festival so we were in D.C. as well.

Using the USNA GCW schedule, our Firstie and I edited that down to activities/events that guests could attend, printed it out and placed it in each folder along with sightseeing/restaurant suggestions, maps for Annapolis, Washington D.C. and the Eastern Shore. Most of them spent a day in D.C. and really enjoyed it. We had mapped out all the Memorials, the National Archives (Declaration of Independence, Constitution and Bill of Rights), White House, Capitol where the new Visitor's Center is finally open - and a couple of restaurants. That's about all you can work into one day. To get to D.C. we also suggested they drive to the New Carrollton station, park and take the Metro in. It's very convenient, reasonably priced and hassle-free. I also suggested the Eastern Shore, but did warn about bridge delays.

NOTE: I highly recommend you add the Cherry Blossom Festival to your USNA "bucket list." We went out her 2C year, with 1C year as a backup, and caught the blooms at their peak both times. But you never know because it is so weather dependent. Our nation's capital is so beautiful, and certainly never more fragrant than during Cherry Blossom time. We actually tried to add at least one day to each trip out to the Yard to add one or two more museums in D.C., another Civil War battlefield, the historic sites of Philadelphia before Army/Navy football, the list goes on. But if you're already going out and can add an extra day or two, do it!

If you are not going to be in Annapolis before GCW, perhaps your mid could gather some brochures and maps at the City Dock tourist info booth. The high cost of postage has cut down on having this information mailed to you but the internet sites are extremely helpful. With a little web surfing, you could include links to the sites you found most informative.

The Annapolis City Center had just opened, so we went to Brio for dinner with our Firstie on Easter Eve. She liked it, so we also made reservations for late lunch after GC. Graduation starts at 1000 and was over promptly at noon.

IT'S FINALLY HERE!

We actually arrived the Friday before GCW started because that was the date our Firstie and her sponsors chose for the party they hosted for her and her friends. That date worked out perfectly before all the hoopla began.

We also hit the Mid Store first thing so we could purchase the "Class of 2009 shirts – polo and T" - before sizes were picked over. These shirts are, to my knowledge, only available for each year's graduating class during their actual GCW until the supply runs out. The last time you saw any shirts with their class year on it was Plebe Summer and Plebe Parent's Weekend. The graduating class shirts were available in navy or white with "Class of 2009" and their class crest embroidered on them. Those shirts were a priority on our "to-do" list, plus any other items we just could not leave Annapolis without! Who knows how long before we have the opportunity to return the Yard again. But remember, your Mid Store pass expires on graduation day, as does your ability to make purchases in the Mid Store unless you have your "old grad" (your Ensign or 2nd Lt.) with you or have joined the USNA Alumni Association, which we did.

Also in your GCW package you receive from USNA you will receive several Mid Store passes for your family and friends so they may shop there. I'm sure you have all regaled people with stories about this awesome store, but seeing is believing, and our guests all left with big bags of treasures. Allow at least an hour or two when taking your guests the first time. After that they are on their own.

PARKING

Parking is available at the Stadium with buses continually shuttling families to and from the Yard. This is very convenient for those not up to walking. However, we parked early every day at the downtown Annapolis parking ramp. What a time saver!! And it was just a short hike through downtown to the Yard and then to wherever on the Yard we needed to be. Gate 3 was also open for the parade.

Don't forget! Everyone, except children, need picture ID's to enter the Yard.

G/C WEEK

There are lots of events - on the Yard and off. Firsties are in whites almost all day, every day. Only evening parties are civie clothes for them and the Ball was their Mess Dress. Lots of practices too, so don't plan on using their vehicle. They will need their own car to get to several very early morning rehearsals at the Stadium and the parade grounds,

There are parties (multiple locations every single night - some of which we were invited to and others not - or just too tired to go to), not to mention receptions, the Ball, concerts, awards ceremonies, etc (look at your schedule). And even though the Firsties were booted out of Mother B. - officially checked out of their rooms - they were still required to spend one other night before graduation in their room. Please note that is one of those things that could change depending on the current Supe and/or Dant. So have them hold on to a blanket and pillow and put it in their trunk just in case.

SEVERAL EVENTS WE ESPECIALLY ENJOYED

The Baccalaureate Service is very poignant. At the conclusion of the service, the soon-to-be Ensigns and 2nd Lt's dedicate their commission to God by signing "The Book." Our mid, her roommates and friends went up to the Altar together and stood and waited as each one signed - definitely a Kodak moment. This is also a wonderful opportunity to take a picture of your mids and their friends standing together under the Midshipman stained glass window. We have always attended services when visiting, but singing "Eternal Father" this time had even more meaning.

The Superintendent's Garden party – this is probably the premier social event of the week and a great opportunity to meet your Firstie's chain of command and also take pictures. It takes place over three different days, but your Firstie will know which one they are assigned to attend and also how many guests they can bring. This is a dressy event, but I do not suggest high heels on grass.

If you and your Firstie USNA athlete are invited to the Athletic Director's Varsity Letter Reception be sure to go. It is a very nice and relaxed event to honor the graduating USNA athletes and receive their "N star" blanket. This is also the perfect time to take pictures of your Firstie with the Supe and Dant. The receiving line/photo opportunity for those two officers at the Supe's Reception is extremely long. For us it was back to back with the Supe's Reception on Sunday. Oh, and we used the time between Chapel and the AD's reception to walk around the Yard and take pictures of our Firstie at various locations. They looked great in her scrapbooks.

In addition to the AD's Reception, each athletic team usually has a lunch, dinner, reception or gathering of some sort for their team to honor the members who are graduating and their immediate family. This is usually a bit more emotional as they have trained, traveled, won and lost together over the course of their USNA playing careers.

There are also awards ceremonies for the various majors. You don't want to miss the opportunity to see your Firstie's academic accomplishments recognized. In some instances, this is also an opportunity to see what they built or did to earn the award.

Glee Club concerts were a nice relaxing break and great entertainment. "Blue and Gold" still leaves goose bumps. And don't forget the talented and dynamic Monty Maxwell's organ concert at the Chapel.

Graduation Ball was a wonderful black tie/formal event with all mids in Mess Dress. Captain Klunder (now Rear Admiral-Upper Half ie 2 stars in less than 4 years!) was Dant at the time and definitely the star of the evening. The guy is a dynamo of energy! Jeff did wear his tux and her sister and I also wore long gowns (great pictures) but there were some in business suits and cocktail length dresses, too. Those dance classes they took Plebe year are put to good use. And of course as we have seen on UTube they know a lot of other dances too. A fun evening.

BLUE ANGELS - practice and performance . . . AWESOME!! Lots of room to sit and watch.

OTHER IDEAS TO CONSIDER

Alexa's sponsors helped organize a great picnic for our family and friends at the Blue Angels performance. After that she gave what I called "the Midshipman's Tour" of USNA, complete with stories of life on the Yard to family and friends. Lots of questions and even more laughter. In 2009, the USNA Museum was closed for remodeling. However, I would not include that as part of the mid tour, but rather suggest guests visit it on their own time.

The weather was absolutely spectacular that week, so after the last parade on Thursday (there were 2 that week) our Firstie met up with her roommates and other close friends at Tecumseh for a photo op both with the statue painted in honor of their GC and then turning around with T Court and Mother B as the background. Stunning formal pictures, followed by some equally goofy ones, too. Then she ran into her now empty room in Mother B and changed out of her Parade Dress Uniform into the civies I had carried in my tote bag and rejoined our group of family and friends as we all walked into town and had lunch outside at Middleton's. Over the four years, we tried and liked most all of the downtown restaurants - Phillips, Pusser's, McGeary's. And we could easily have driven over to Eastport for all the fun places if there had been a long wait, or even taken the water taxi to the Chart House on the other side of the harbor. Here is the link for restaurants - I used waterside, crabs and seafood and pubs. <http://www.visitannapolis.org/dine/waterside-dining/index.aspx>

After the parade and lunch, the pace had slowed down considerably, and since we were all downtown I suggested, after "oking" it with our soon-to-be Ensign, that our family and friends would enjoy the harbor boat ride to just relax. I admit that I had a mental list of things to suggest if there was any down time and this fit in perfectly after an on-the-go week. The red double decker boat is right at the end of the City Dock. I think it's about an hour cruise. This was the second time we had taken this cruise. The first time was on a very warm June afternoon in 2005, as our soon-to-be plebe, her sister, dad and I viewed USNA from the outside looking in with nervous anticipation about I-Day, Plebe summer, Plebe year and the three years to follow. And now it was May, 2009, her last day as a Midshipman before saying farewell to Mother B and the Yard. It was a cruise down memory lane reminiscing about those four years spent looking out on the Severn, reflecting on friends made, challenges accepted and achieved, honors earned, knowing she had succeeded and was indeed ready as the door closed on her four years on the Severn and another opened to the upcoming adventures of the Fleet. This was indeed a sentimental journey for her and we all thoroughly enjoyed it. <http://www.watermarkcruises.com/cruises40min.htm>

Speaking of boat rides, the Navy sometimes brings a ship up from Norfolk for the week (also 2nd class weekend) to give tours. If they do, allow at least 4 hours - by the time you are shuttled out to the ship (maybe even a sub), take the tour and come back. PLEASE NOTE: Wear shorts or pants and closed toe shoes. Ships are not for the unfit - ladderwells are very steep, going through hatches you have to duck and step very high - at the same time. Double that information for subs, because of even closer quarters. The tours are not for everyone, but oh so much fun if you are up to it. Our first tour of a guided missile cruiser in Oct. '07, ended up to be quite an adventure, complete with an unexpected storm, lunch in the ward room, and coming down over the side of the ship on a rope ladder into a "rhib" rigid hulled inflatable boat being tossed around on six foot waves. Who says we're too old for an adventure!!! Also we have since enjoyed a great family day cruise on the Pacific.

AND FINALLY - THE EVENT YOU'VE ALL BEEN WAITING FOR IS HERE!!!

Our mid's awesome sponsor family was included in everything - because they were her family for four whole years in our book. Our Firstie asked the three of them to sit with us (mid's sister, dad and me) in the family section and have our relatives and friends sit in the upper level - which turned out to be a great idea, we have great pictures from both levels. Her sponsors were very honored.

Because '09 was the President's year in the speaker rotation, we arrived at the Stadium by 7:30 when our almost Firstie-no-more had to report. We immediately got in line to go through the security check run by the Secret Service. You know the routine from Army/Navy football, or anytime POTUS or Vice-POTUS, and a list of other dignitaries have been present. In other words just take the basics - sunscreen, sunglasses, hats, umbrellas and ponchos (if needed). Beverages and snacks can be purchased at the concession stand.

I was entrusted early in the week with both her new officer's cover (in a plastic case tucked safely in my tote bag which never left my side) and first salute silver dollar. She needed her midshipman cover the entire week and to wear into Navy Marine Corps Stadium until she tossed it into the air. She also had the \$1 bill tucked inside.

WHERE TO MEET UP AFTER HAT TOSS

We actually determined on GC Day, after the processional, once the grads were seated and before the President arrived in a Marine One flyover, where to meet up on the field after the hat toss. Via cell phone, it was very easy – simply use all those great battles emblazoned inside the stadium, select which battle and meet on the field under it. Alexa forwarded the location info to her roommates, their senior enlisted who had returned on leave from his next duty station to render first salute, the family and friends on the upper deck, and a couple of others, who passed it on to their families. The roughly one hour afterwards is a perfect amount of time to take all the new officer, family, friends, first salute pictures before the public announcer told everyone to clear the field. The traffic in the stadium parking lot had cleared out and we went directly to the restaurant, As noted earlier, I had made restaurant reservations when we came out at Easter for 2:00 at the newly opened Brio located in the City Centre. We arrived at 1:30, ordered drinks and appetizers while Ensign changed in the restroom, and we all enjoyed a wonderful leisurely celebration lunch – outside - with family, friends and sponsor family. A perfect ending to a perfect week. Only sad part was final hugs and farewells with her sponsor family.

Our Ensign thanked us often, especially after hearing about her friend's terrible experience. She got to do everything she wanted - great parties, great memories, no pressures. We all had the time of our lives and enjoyed every unforgettable moment! And for family and friends – they had their eyes opened to what an event USNA puts on every year for GCW. When she talks about GCW, she still refers to it as the best week ever. I just smile and think "mission accomplished!" And it was all because we talked it through and got her input.

We hosted a huge party at home the next weekend for all the friends and family who couldn't make it to Annapolis. However, we did have a nice display of USNA scrapbooks (worked like crazy that week putting them together), lots of pictures of graduation, awards, and other memorabilia, plus a cd a family member had made that ran continuously. What a great time!

Graduation!!! We have attended lots of graduations, but I was thrilled to hear friends and family who came to Annapolis say that UNSA's was the most impressive event they have ever attended.

Hope anything mentioned here helps your mid and your family enjoy a great week!.

POSTSCRIPT

You know it is absolutely amazing how big their Navy/Marine Corps family is. As "old grads" they will run into each other all over the world - literally. And USNA is a life-long link no matter what year they graduate. As for the parents. . .we really do belong to the "never too old to learn" club. The Fleet and Corps present a whole new vocabulary, complete with even more abbreviations, for us to learn after their four years at USNA. And, as officers, their achievements and travels will continue to expand. Not to mention their home bases will most certainly be in some great (most of the time) places for you to visit. But rest assured all those prayers you lifted up while they were at USNA. . .will increase tenfold once they are in the Fleet and Corps and eventually deployed. Here's to fair winds and following seas!