
SCENE

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COAST GUARD ACADEMY—1939 (GRADUATION)

Drive Home for Leave and on to First Duty Station

Graduation Week is a joyful one for almost everybody. The final exams are history. The Formal Ball is glamorous with cadets in formal uniforms and their dates in formal gowns. The Inter-Class Sailing Race was exciting and my class entry, which I skippered, won for the fourth year in a row. A Coast Guard single float aircraft was giving rides to First Classmen and demonstrating water takeoffs and landings for our guests. The Baccalaureate Service was well attended. The many parents and siblings of the cadets present added a festive mood to Grad Week. My father and brother Porter had driven all the way from California to honor me. That certainly added to my pleasure that week.

My classmates and I could hardly wait for the Graduation Ceremony where we received our Diplomas, Bachelor of Science Degrees in Marine Engineering, and to my great surprise I was awarded the Charles S. Root prize for the highest grade in Mechanical Drawing. As a class, we took the Oath of Office and we were commissioned Ensigns in the United States Coast Guard.

Immediately after dismissal, we removed our cadet shoulder boards and had them replaced with Ensign boards. They are traditionally pinned on by one's mother, if present, or best girlfriend, if you have one. I had neither, so I gave the honor to my dad and my brother simultaneously, one on each shoulder.

There were some tears as the reality of leaving the Academy sank in. But for most of us, it was exciting to be leaving the confines of the reservation for the world outside. But

there were some girlfriends, if not betrothed, who could see their handsome cadets slipping away.



My father came to my graduation from the Coast Guard Academy in 1939. We then drove together across the United States to my first duty station on the West Coast

Permanent Change of Station (PCS) Orders. We were given the privilege of selecting our first duty station from a list of those available. But the order of granting the request was based on the class standing. I was tenth out of eighty-seven when I entered the Academy and I graduated tenth out of twenty-four. The choice was limited to large cutters. I requested a ship based in San Diego, but a classmate outranked me. However, I got my second choice which was the **Coast Guard cutter *Duane***. It was one of our largest and newest cutters. It was based in Oakland. *California here I come—right back where I started from!*

PCS Orders could come with short notice to execute. If they arrived by radio and were classed as **Dispatch Orders**, the recipient must be underway within twenty-four hours. This would mean leaving without time to wrap up personal affairs. Dispatch Orders were only issued in an emergency.

Proceed Orders allowed four days to arrange personal affairs and get underway. In addition, there was an allowance for travel time. Flying was unheard of, so driving time was based on mileage at four hundred fifty miles per day. And between stations might be a good time to take some earned leave.

This worked great for me. I usually had plenty of leave “on the books.” Since most of my transfers were all the way across the United States, I usually put four days proceed plus six days travel plus thirty days leave together and had a nice long break of forty days!

To ease the pressure upon getting orders, there was a Friday Night Gazette which listed forthcoming orders that would permanently change stations. If you were expecting orders, this advance notice helped a lot.

My first PCS Orders were hand delivered to me and read something like this:

From: Commandant U.S. Coast Guard

To: Ensign David W. Sinclair, USCG

Subj: Orders. Permanent Change of Station

1. When so ordered by the Superintendent, proceed and report to the Commander, San Francisco District for further orders to the USCGC *Duane* stationed in Oakland, California.
2. You are granted 4 days proceed time, mileage calculated at 450 miles a day by the most direct automobile route, and leave not to exceed 30 days.
3. Submit a travel claim upon reporting to the CGC *Duane*.

And so it came to pass that it was time to depart the Academy and drive with my father and brother to California, a new adventure contributing to this Great Life. The scenery of the most northern cross-country route was beautiful and different from the other areas I had visited and three stops en route were especially educational.

First, the **New York World's Fair**. It had just opened in April. Sixty-two nations took part. Its theme was “the world of tomorrow.” The fair was symbolized by the Trylon (triangular obelisk seven hundred feet high) and Perisphere (great ball two hundred feet in diameter). Both snow-white. The buildings and exhibits were designed to point out how man's accomplishments could improve world living conditions. Over twenty-five million attended the first year and another nineteen million the second year. It was really great.



New York World's Fair, 1939

My father wanted to visit the **Niagara Falls** because they had become a favorite tourist center and known throughout America as a “honeymooner's paradise.” They are truly a sight to see. The river plunges five hundred thousand tons of water a minute into a



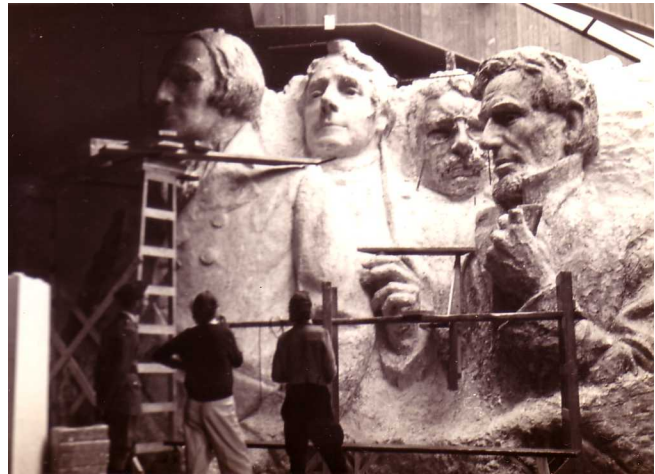
Niagara Falls, at the beginning of our westward journey

steep-walled gorge. We took a ride on the *Maid of the Mist* excursion boat that takes passengers as close under the falls as safe. Yes, under pretty heavy spray, but we were all fitted out with rain gear—sou'westers and all.

Our next big stop on our Westward Ho drive was the **Mount Rushmore National Memorial** in the Black Hills of South Dakota. It was built to embody the spirit of the foundation, preservation, and expansion of the United States. Four presidents were chosen to have their faces carved in the solid granite out cropping of Mount Rushmore.

The birth of our nation was guided by the vision and courage of George Washington. Thomas Jefferson always had dreams of something bigger, first in the words of the Declaration of Independence and later in the expansion of our nation through the Louisiana Purchase. Preservation of the union was paramount to Abraham Lincoln but a nation where all men were free and equal. At the turn of the twentieth century, Theodore Roosevelt saw that in our nation was the possibility of greatness. Our nation was changing from a rural republic to a world power. The ideals of these presidents laid a foundation for our nation as solid as the rock from which their figures are carved.

We visited the work studio to learn more. Sculptor Gutzon Borglum made models scaled one inch to one foot. These the workmen used in the studio and hauled up the mountain to take measurements and compute how much rock to cut away to form the faces and heads, which were each as high as a five story building. The workmen cut the figures from the granite with drills and dynamite. The project was started in 1927 and took fourteen years to complete.



Scale model of Mount Rushmore used to take measurements for the carving of the actual monument, which was nearly completed at the time of our trip

It was a beautiful drive out where the tall corn grows, across the prairie grasslands, up and over the Continental Divide, through big tree forests, and on miles of endless desert roads with their beautiful sunsets. At last we were on our final leg to Santa Monica and **638 Eleventh Street**.

What a difference four years can make! It was sad to see my home was no longer family packed and vibrant with activities. Where had everybody gone?

Cousin Scott Sterling was first to leave. After graduating from Santa Monica Junior College, he signed on with the Civilian Conservation Corps, which was a government service to help us recover from the Great Depression. They built and improved mountain trails. Scott was kicked in the head by a horse and wound up in the hospital. When released, he got a job with the Interior Department working on civil engineering projects.

I was next to leave, to serve my country as an officer in the U.S. Coast Guard.

My mother died of cancer in 1937, as I have previously reported.

Cousin Virginia Sterling had earned enough money to return to the University of Oregon to complete her education. She fell in love with Professor Charles Easton Rothwell. Even before we entered World War II, Easton was called to the State Department to help formulate post-war plans. He became the Executive Secretary in drafting the charter for the United Nations. Later, he was president of the prestigious Mills College for Women.

My aunt Fanny Sterling, mother of Virginia and Scott, died of meningitis while living at 638. Her husband, my uncle Ed Sterling, lost a leg to diabetes. He could no longer be cared for in Santa Monica, so Virginia and Easton took him in for the remainder of his life.

Who was left at 638?—Porter.

War was on in Europe and the draft was on here. Porter volunteered to join the Coast Guard, but he was classified 4-F because of poor eyesight and physically unfit for duty. He gave up his stockbroker job and found war-related work at the South Coast Company in Newport Beach, in construction of small craft. He met and fell in love with Margaret "Jill" Jillson, who lived in Pasadena. (That was too long a commute for dating, so he said they would have to get married, and they did.) They sold dear old **638** and bought a small house in the Bay Shores Estates. They added to our Sinclair Clan a son—Roy Porter Sinclair.

But what about our "extended 638 family"? What happened to my father's sisters, Aunt Lill and Aunt Kathryn? And Uncle Bill Gray? And my dog, Bobbie?

The Great Depression left Uncle Bill and his wife Lill destitute. Porter got them a job with the Boy Scout Council as caretakers at the Scout Weekend Camp in nearby Topanga Canyon. It didn't pay much but gave them a quiet place to live. They took Bobbie with them. Unfortunately, Bobbie, age about thirteen, jumped from the camp truck and broke a hip. He had to be put down. I don't know where or when Bill and Lill died, but they were heavy cigarette smokers, and I don't suppose lived for long.

When the Grays went to the camp job, my aunt Kathryn rented a room in Costa Mesa to be near Porter and Jill. She bought her meals at the corner drug store. One day she failed to show up, and they found she had died of a heart attack in her room.

Where did all those nice people go? Now you know! Virginia and I are, in 2004, the only 638 survivors. She is 97. I am pushing 89.

Continuing now with my **leave** en route, I enjoyed a couple of weeks with Porter, which included a sail from Santa Barbara to Newport Beach in his twenty-nine-foot Norwegian-built gaff-rigged **Dagge**, and a reunion with the few longtime friends still in the area. Then, and I don't remember how, I made my way to San Francisco, where I reported for further assignment to my first ship, the **Duane**. The trouble was, she was at sea enforcing the new twenty-mile fisheries limit. Since she would be out for another two weeks, the District Commander decided to send me to the **Coast Guard cutter Hamilton**, a sister ship on a local district patrol. Her duties were to follow into port the cargo vessels coming from the Orient to make sure they didn't drop bales of opium to be picked up by drug running speedboats for transfer ashore.

The *Hamilton*, like the *Duane*, was a 327-foot cutter with beautiful lines. These cutters, of which the Coast Guard had six, maintained strict adherence to military traditions, and kept the crews smartly uniformed, unlike several classes known as the Hooligan Navy for their dungaree uniforms for servicing buoys, ice breaking, lightship duties, etc.

When I reported to the *Hamilton*, she was anchored off the Marina District of San Francisco and undergoing an annual inspection by a special team of inspectors. Captain Romer, with forty years of sea duty, was Commanding Officer. I think it was satirical (or maybe sadistic) humor that he chose me to coxswain one lifeboat for man-overboard drill, and an Ensign one year my senior and on engineering duty to man the other lifeboat.

Before World War II, if you were in distress at sea, you tried to save yourself by sending out a distress message by wireless telegraph and heading for the nearest land. Consequently, the lifeboats were equipped with mountable masts and sails, and rations of water and hardtack (biscuits). And the officer wore a belt with a pistol, known as side-arms. (But since World War II, the procedure has been to stay put and let Search-and-Rescue find you.)

The instructions by the inspector was to launch the boat, row clear of the ship, set sails, and await the signal to return to the ship.

I knew there was a swift current plus wind coming at us from under the Golden Gate Bridge, so my plan was to sail close hauled as best I could to try and stay upwind of the *Hamilton*. It worked!

By the time of the recall signal, I had gained confidence in the control of the sails and the response of the crew. I asked them if they wanted to row back to the ship, as the "engineer" and his boat were doing from way downwind, or should we try sailing under

the falls? They said, "Let's Sail!" And so we did by coming in up-current, dropping the sails, and boating the mast as we drifted in the falls. Boy was I proud!

The crew hooked on and we were raised to deck level. The inspector leaned over to me and said, "Mister, where is your first aid kit?" Well, I didn't have the slightest idea. I had to be honest and said I didn't know. He pointed out to me that it was on the back of my belt! I heard from the Captain. But he thought it was a good joke.

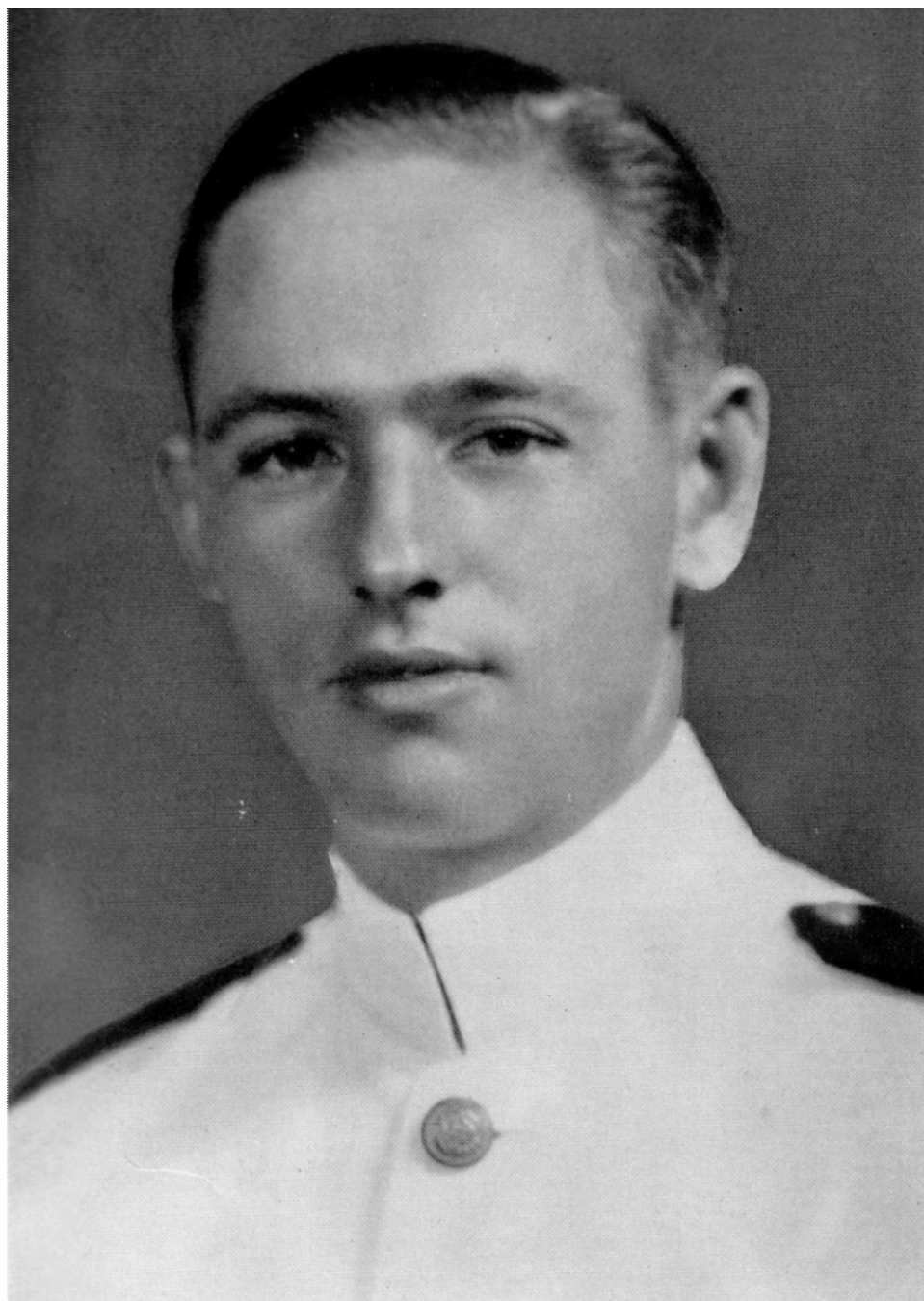
From the 1939 *Tide Rips*—the Coast Guard Academy Yearbook

DAVID
WILLIAM
SINCLAIR

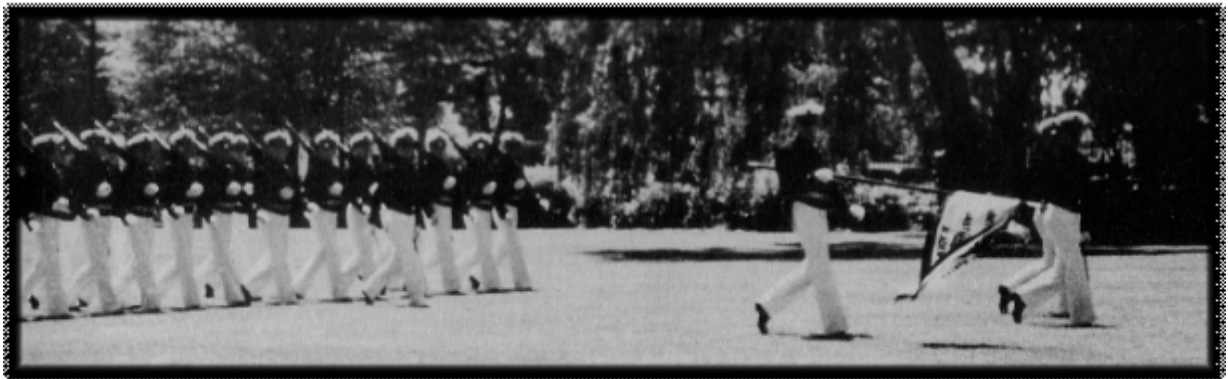
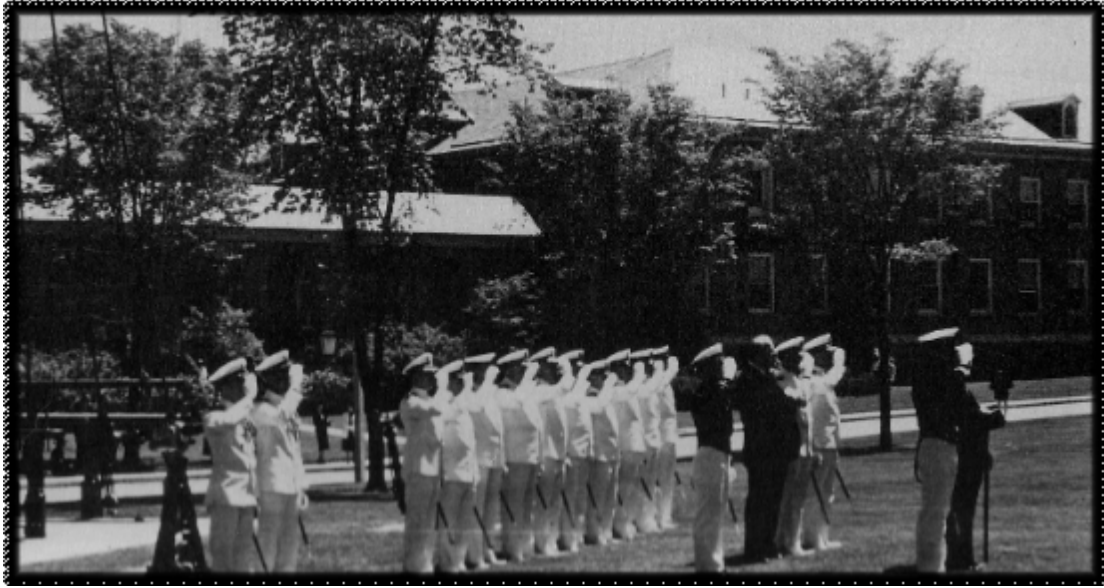
Santa Monica, California

■ Folks, meet "Soupy" Sinclair, the bonny Scot. You should have seen him swell with pride when we stumbled on those weathered headstones in Holyrood Castle that marked the place where some of his ancestors lay. A chip off the old block, he is thrifty to the Corps. His good business sense has carried TIDE RIPS through a stormy year and without his well-thought-out ideas the staff would have been in a bad way. He's as handy with a shovel as with a sail; we've heard many a regaling tale of the virtues of his sunny California. Be it weather, water, or women, she's got the best. Soupy's energy was not quite equal to his thriftiness, however, and during his last three years at the Academy his walking was confined to that necessary to carry him to and from class. In the past, the art of sailing in small boats has been somewhat neglected, and his work in making sailing a minor sport will always be appreciated. If there's work to be done, Soupy is the man who will "gripe" the most and get the most done. His ability to work hard at anything he undertakes will stand him in good stead always.





Business Manager, Tide Rips; Company Adjutant; Expert Rifleman; Rifle Team
3, 2, 1; Fifty Club; Commodore of Sailing 1.



Graduation Parade

