

Is a

**MILITARY  
ACADEMY**

Right for You?



WAITING FOR  
LUNCH FORMATION  
AT WEST POINT

**You can get a  
great education  
tuition-free if you're  
willing to serve**

**BY MARGARET LOFTUS**

**D**uring summers in college, Caroline Zotti spent time in Africa, Asia and the Mideast. Her travels weren't for fun – though she's the first to admit they were the “coolest part” of her academic career. Rather, they were part of her shipboard training as a midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy. On these trips mids, as they're called, learn a range of skills from basic seamanship while sailing on one of the Navy's sloops to live-fire gunnery while aboard a guided-missile cruiser.

The USNA is one of the nation's five service academies, which are known for providing an education on par with elite colleges. Students are offered phenomenal opportunities for on-the-job experience like Zotti's. They undergo intensive leadership training and gain skills in areas as varied as submarine warfare, advanced cybersecurity, physical oceanography and aeronautical engineering that can serve as great stepping-stones to post-military careers. What's more, tuition and many other expenses are covered largely courtesy of Uncle Sam, and a job is typically waiting for you upon graduation. The catch? Be ready to trade your jeans and hoodies for uniforms and a multiyear service obligation following graduation.

In addition to the standard college application process, service academies require that applicants pass a fitness assessment, meet certain medical criteria – asthma and migraines are among the conditions that could rule you out – and (except for the Coast Guard) receive an appointment by their congressional representative or senator. Depending on what your skills and interests are, one of the service academies may well be able to match them.

## **U.S. Naval Academy**

**Annapolis, Maryland**

★ With its Beaux Arts buildings, oak-lined streets, and the Chesapeake Bay as a backdrop, the Naval Academy and its location in historic Annapolis have wowed would-be midshipmen and their parents for generations. Says Zac Dannelly, who graduated last May, “None of the other service academies have a stronger connection to the city that they're a part of.”

Still, despite the appealing locale, midshipmen spend most of their first year on campus adjusting to military life. It can be challenging even for those like recent USNA grad Zotti, who grew up in a Marine Corps family and whose mother is a professor at the academy. “The regimented schedule is a shock to the system,” she says. From reveille at 6:30 a.m. to taps at midnight, weekdays are highly structured with two formations, six class periods, roughly two hours for sports or extracurriculars, and a mandatory study session in the evening. Free time depends on your year, ranging from the precious 12 hours of “town liberty” allotted to plebes (freshmen) on Saturdays to full weekends for first classmen (seniors).

While majors at the academy range from Arabic to quantitative economics, at least two-thirds of students are encouraged to major in one of the STEM fields – science, technology, engineering or mathematics – to meet the needs of the Navy. All students graduate with a Bachelor of Science degree.

Summer training throughout all four years is mandatory, starting with basic seamanship and military skills during “plebe summer” leading into freshman year. Each subsequent summer, mids are required to participate in “fleet cruises” to explore various career paths. First classmen, for instance, can

choose from surface, submarine, aviation or other cruises, where they're expected to lead sailors and Marines as division officers in specialized training.

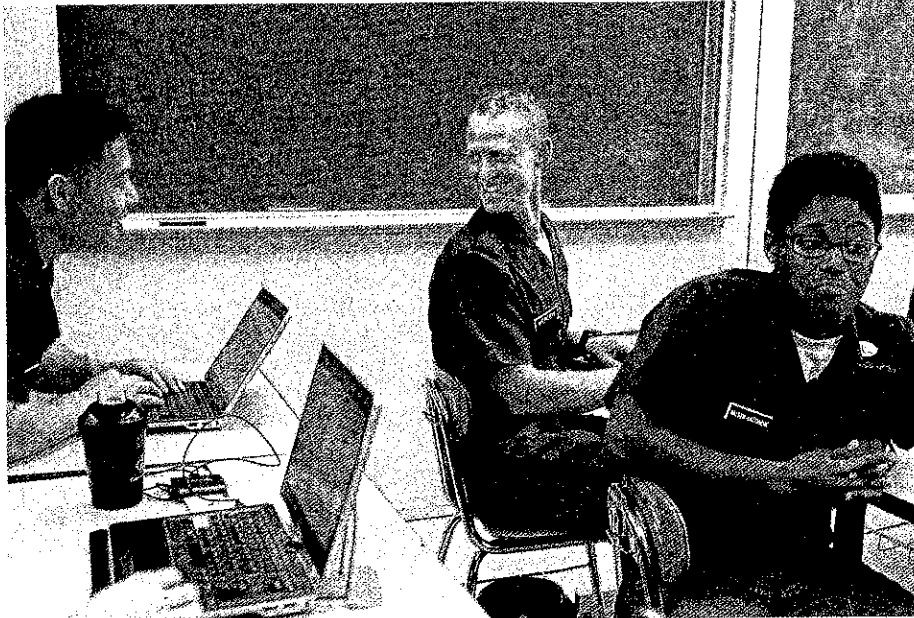
Mids must also take professional development courses each summer, which range from dive school to faculty-led cultural trips like one Zotti took to Ethiopia's South Omo Valley. First classmen submit their career preferences in August before their senior year and are assigned by November. All 4,400 midshipmen live under one roof - Bancroft Hall - that is the center of social life. "There's a forced unity in the sense

training. But gone are the days when the seven-week program was designed to weed out students, says Lt. Col. Rance Lee, associate director of admissions. "Now we bring in 1,200 students, and we want every one of those kids to make it."

What sets West Point apart from other academies is how early cadets take on leadership roles, says Lee. "Within a year of graduating, you're more than likely going to be a platoon leader in charge of 30-some soldiers." Plus, the school offers a broader range of majors than most service academies, from philosophy to electrical engineering. Still, the core requirements make up most

of the academic workload of the first two years, including three semesters each of math and science and two of information technology. Other requirements sprinkled throughout the curriculum: a semester apiece of military history, leadership, law and officership.

Cadets spend part of their summers on military skills-building, including cadet leader development training after their sophomore and junior years. Other summer opportunities are voluntary, from fellowships on Capitol Hill to language immersion programs. After graduation, cadets are commissioned as second lieutenants and must serve five years on active duty, in roles running



**A LEADERSHIP CAMP SOLD CADET ALEX WERDEN (CENTER) ON WEST POINT.**

the gamut from aviation to finance to military intelligence. Lee says that the academy looks for well-rounded students, those who excel in the classroom and have shown themselves to be proven leaders and athletes. (The school boasts 28 intercollegiate sports - football and hockey are popular - as well as club sports.) But there's also room for kids who "have off-the-charts SATs but aren't the best athletes, or leaders who didn't score 800 on their SATs but did well enough academically" to meet the rigors of the workload, he says.

## **U.S. Military Academy**

West Point, New York

★ Alex Werden's first impression of West Point was right out of "Harry Potter." "It's like showing up at Hogwarts," he says. As a rising high school senior from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, he had gone to the storied Hudson Valley campus to participate in a summer leadership camp. Like the fictional school, West Point is an imposing "castle on a hill," he says, exemplifying its mission to groom the best and the brightest, albeit in leadership, not wizardry.

After the weeklong experience, the college became Werden's top choice, and today he is a junior majoring in international history. Not being from a military family, he took some time to adjust during the first summer of basic

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## **U.S. Air Force Academy**

Colorado Springs, Colorado

★ As soon as he knew he'd be attending the Air Force Academy, Christopher Steele began rigorous workouts to ease acclimatization to life at 7,000 feet. Still, coming to the Rocky Mountains from near sea-level Aiken, South Carolina, he found the transition challenging. So too was the pounding on the door at 0400 to roust him for basic training. "It was shocking," he recalls, but well worth it for an opportunity to become an Air Force pilot.

At the USAFA, cadets can choose from 31 academic majors ranging from English to aeronautics engineering, but the core curriculum skews technical. Everyone has to take astronau-

tics, for example, as well as computer science. While your major obviously influences your career path, an aeronautical engineering degree is no guarantee that you'll be selected for flight training. Other factors include medical qualifications, class ranking and demand. The 19,000-acre base in the shadow of the Rockies seems like an ideal jumping-off point for ski breaks, but only about half of the weekends are free. Cadets spend the other half in military exercises such as wilderness training in the mountains. What the curriculum lacks in free time, it makes up for in togetherness. "In a normal college, you could go the whole way without talking to anyone. [Here] you're around people 24 hours a day," says Steele, now a senior. "You form a tight bond with others."

Summer opportunities are wide-ranging. A number are required, such as going through the Expeditionary Survival and Evasion Training program and stints at air force bases. Steele has spent his summers learning to fly a glider and a T-53 (a militarized version of a Cessna), shadowing officers at Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana, and attending a language immersion program in France. After graduation in 2017, he plans to train as a pilot, which obligates him to 10 years of active duty (aviators must serve an extra five years on top of the standard commitment). But he hopes to spend his career in the Air Force. "I love it here," he says.

## U.S. Merchant Marine Academy

Kings Point, New York

★ The USMMA's mission is "to educate and graduate licensed merchant mariners and leaders of exemplary character who will serve America's marine transportation and defense needs in peace and war." For Midshipman First Class Brody Oakes, the chance to merge academics with shipboard experience is what sold him on the school - that, and the picturesque campus, which is set on a peninsula on the north shore of Long Island. "We have the best backyard of any college, if you ask me," Oakes notes.

All majors focus on the maritime industry, from marine transportation - a hybrid of nautical science and marine business management - to marine engineering and shipyard management. A big part of the experience is sea year: Midshipmen serve as deck or engine cadets aboard commercial, military or passenger vessels during two or more assignments that total over 300 days and are primarily spread across sophomore and junior years. Oakes sailed as a crewman on a Maersk K-class container ship, helping keep the engines running. Stops at ports in countries like Spain, Dubai, Pakistan and India only enhanced the experience, he says.

This past summer, sea year came under a cloud as the academy suspended it amid reports of sexual and other professional misconduct towards cadets, primarily by peers or other crewmen. The program has been reintroduced, although for now it will be conducted aboard military ships only.

The accrediting body responsible for the academy has

also issued a warning, giving the USMMA two years to address academywide issues of sexual assault and harassment and governance. The school has instituted anti-harassment training and prevention, as well as a confidential reporting system so students can seek help without triggering an official investigation. Through a spokesperson, Rear Admiral James Helis, the USMMA superintendent, stressed to U.S. News that, "While there remains more work to do, we are committed to ensuring midshipmen training is conducted in an environment of safety, dignity, and respect."

While at the USMMA, students must also participate in two- to six-week internships that focus on their specialty. For instance, a marine engineering and shipyard management major may opt to intern at a shipping company or port facility. Grads leave the academy with a Bachelor of Science degree, a

### ★★★ TAKE A TEST RUN ★★★

**W**ant to investigate whether a military academy is right for you? West Point and the U.S. Naval, Air Force and Coast Guard academies each host weeklong summer sessions for rising high school seniors that put them through the paces of a fourth-class (freshman) cadet. Activities include everything from weaponry familiarization to naval and air navigation to academic workshops and intramural sports. A typical day could start with physical fitness training at 0545 hours, or 5:45 a.m., and end at 2300 hours, or 11:00 p.m., with taps. Students live in the cadet barracks, eat in the mess hall, and dress in cadet attire.

Anyone interested in applying must fill out and submit the individual academy's two-part application found on its website, typically between December and March or April. Spaces are extremely limited, so the application process is highly competitive. Each academy offers two or three sessions from May to July. The cost ranges from \$300 to \$475, which covers room, board, program materials and clothing. -Kaitlyn Chamberlin

Coast Guard license, and an officer's commission. They can satisfy their service obligation by working as licensed officers aboard U.S. flag vessels and spending eight years in a reserve unit of the nation's armed forces. Alternately, some 25 percent of graduates opt for five years of active duty in, one of the armed forces or the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Corps, which operates NOAA's ships and aircraft and aids in its research projects. Mids who decide to serve in the armed forces apply directly and, if offered a commission, will become an officer in that service. Oakes, who graduated in May, plans to work aboard an oil tanker.

## U.S. Coast Guard Academy

New London, Connecticut

★ Both of Aileen Fagan's parents attended the Coast Guard Academy. Nonetheless, Fagan's transition to military life during the eight-week indoctrination before freshman year known as Swab Summer came as a bit of a





shock. "One day you're a civilian and you just graduated from high school, and the next day you're doing pushups and getting yelled at," she says.

Like orientation at all service academies, that first summer is meant to instill core values in students and prepares them to enter the classroom and join the Corps of Cadets. But in some ways, the similarities to other military branches end there. The biggest difference is the Coast Guard's mission, which covers three broad categories: maritime safety, maritime security and maritime stewardship. "We see ourselves as guardians, not warriors," explains Susan Bibeau, associate director of admissions for marketing.

Women make up more than one-third of the most recent class, the highest among the academies (females make up 22 percent of West Point's Class of 2020, for example). And with a student population of about 900, the school vies annually with the USMMA for the distinction of smallest service academy and boasts a student-faculty ratio of 8-1.

Academics are rigorous, with a heavy dose of science and math. Save for a government and a management major, most options are STEM-related, ranging from civil engineering to marine and environmental science. Support is baked into the chain of command system, with the entire corps divided into companies, consisting of students from each year. Older students mentor and advocate for the younger ones in their companies, Fagan explains. "We're there for each other."

Summers bring opportunities for professional development and training programs, such as the required multiweek stint for sophomores sailing aboard the tall ship

#### RECENT GRAD AILEEN FAGAN AT THE COAST GUARD ACADEMY

Eagle that serves as a seamanship training platform. The experience also helps build leadership skills and challenges cadets' physical limits (climbing the rigging on a tall ship is no easy task). Depending on

their year, cadets are required to participate in a mix of training, professional development and academic internships each summer. For instance, last summer, Fagan, a marine science major, did oceanic research in Iceland.

Graduates are obligated to five years of service. The majority are stationed on ships in the Coast Guard fleet, from polar ice breakers to national security cutters. Most grads focus either on commanding the movements of a ship and what goes on "topside" or on engineering, maintaining the physical plant of the ship. The actual missions of these new ensigns depend on the functions of the teams they're assigned to, which range from drug interdiction to search and rescue. A small percentage of graduates head either to flight school at Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida for 18 months before moving on to a transition or "1" course, where they learn to fly a specific aircraft, or they are stationed at shore units of large U.S. ports, where they manage Coast Guard response and prevention operations. Pilots owe an extra nine years of service, not including flight training.

After graduation last May, Fagan was assigned to a Coast Guard cutter based in Port Angeles, Washington, monitoring offshore fisheries, enforcing quotas, and protecting endangered species. Reflecting on her academy experience, she observes how much more engaged in the world she has become. "It's made me a better person," she says •