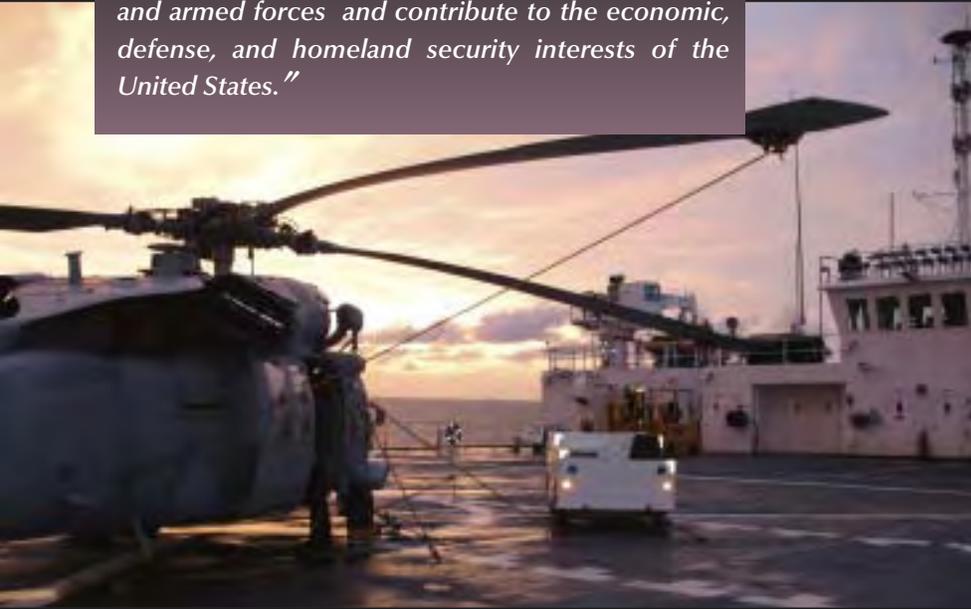




Getting a Start Through the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy

by MIDSHIPMAN JAMES JOHNSTON

"To graduate merchant marine officers and leaders of honor and integrity who serve the maritime industry and armed forces and contribute to the economic, defense, and homeland security interests of the United States."



This is the mission of the United States Merchant Marine Academy (USMMA). As a plebe (freshman), I memorized and repeated this mission on command several times during the course of my plebe summer. Now, as a full-fledged midshipman in my second year at the USMMA, I watch plebes scream the mission of the academy at the top of their lungs.

While at the USMMA, the majority of midshipmen will complete more than 170 credits and will participate in over 670 hours of laboratories and lectures covering various topics applicable to STCW certification. Upon graduation, each midshipman receives a bachelor of science degree, a commission in one of the six mili-

tary/federal services (including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), and a U.S. Coast Guard merchant marine officer's third mate (3/M) or third assistant engineer license.

Academics

There are two professional license academic departments at the USMMA—marine transportation and marine engineering, which are divided into three majors for each. Within marine transportation there is:

- "straight deck" marine transportation, a major primarily consisting of marine transportation courses such as ships' operations;
- maritime operations and technology, also known as "ship's officer," where students pursue a 3/M license while also seeking qualifications as a qualified member of the engine department;
- the logistics and intermodal transportation major, which focuses on logistical aspects of tying together the four modes of transportation—shipping, air, rail, and highways.

The marine engineering majors are:

- marine engineering,
- marine engineering and shipyard management,
- marine engineering systems.



Midshipman Johnston takes the helm aboard a small boat from the USNS *Comfort*, a hospital ship with humanitarian missions. Photo by Cadet Gina Robles, California Maritime Academy.

At the academy, we spend the equivalent of a year at sea as part of our curriculum. During this “sea year,” midshipmen receive practical, hands-on training in their respective license majors. At the end of plebe year, each class of midshipmen is split into two groups known as A-split and B-split. Generally, the A-split group will go out to sea in the winter months, and

be back at the academy during the summer months. The B-split group does the opposite. After the plebe year split, the midshipmen will not see their fellow classmates in the opposite group until their senior year.

Plebe Year

It all starts during plebe summer. I remember shaking my father’s hand, hugging my mother, and heading off into the great unknown. The next weeks were filled with running until I wanted to pass out, doing pushups until my arms felt as if they were going to fall off, and screaming myself hoarse. After our indoctrination period, we were given a couple days of rest, and then classes began. The first trimester incorporates a class introducing both the engine and deck aspects of ship operations. This class is known as KP 100 and helps us decide our license major, which must be decided within the first ten weeks. There are no undecided majors at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy.

Plebe year is tough. I began my day at 0600 each morning to muster with my fellow plebes on the main deck of my barracks. From there we either went to breakfast or began to clean. We do not have janitors, so midshipmen must keep the heads (bathrooms), showers, decks, and anything in between clean. After being inspected and going to colors, I headed off to class for the day. After a long day of classes, I headed back to my barracks to study. At 2000 (8:00 p.m.) each night, I would

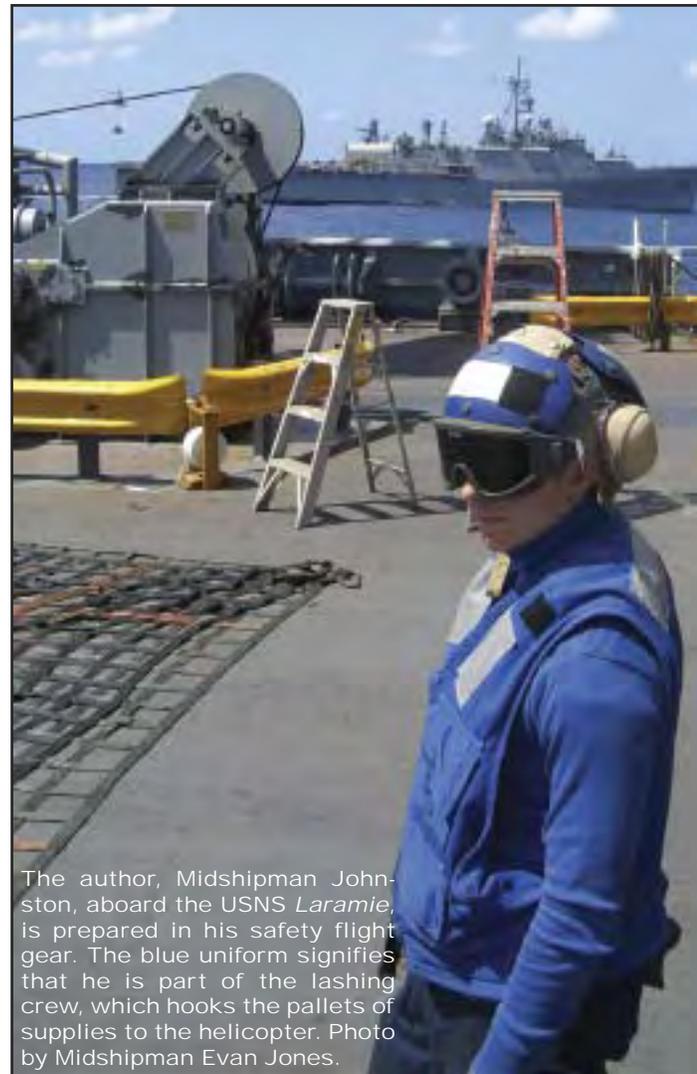
muster with my fellow plebes for “tattoo,” a 20-minute training period with an upperclassman training officer.

By the second trimester, I began my professional classes. As a logistics major, I was taking courses such as terrestrial navigation, celestial navigation, safety of life at sea (which covers lifeboatman training in preparation for our first sea year experience), firefighting, and meteorology, all of which require a minimum of a 70 percent pass rate to meet U.S. Coast Guard standards.

At Sea

That summer, I found myself standing on the deck of a Horizon Lines container ship, the S.S. *Horizon Trader*, with the rest of my B-split group. I joined her in Hawaii—the farthest I had ever been from home. We set sail for Guam for the start of an amazing adventure. After Guam, I sailed to Hong Kong, then Kaohsiung, Taiwan. After these exotic locations, the ship sailed back to Washington and California before heading back to Hawaii to repeat the run.

As the deck cadet, my primary job was to assist the chief mate. The chief mate assigned me various administrative tasks, deck work with the other mates or crew, and standing watch on the bridge. As a junior officer, I was challenged to represent my academy well. On top of these duties, I had a sea project to



The author, Midshipman Johnston, aboard the USNS *Laramie*, is prepared in his safety flight gear. The blue uniform signifies that he is part of the lashing crew, which hooks the pallets of supplies to the helicopter. Photo by Midshipman Evan Jones.



complete. The sea project consisted of navigation plots, seamanship, ship structure drawings, fire plans, stability and cargo calculations, ship's business, and marine engineering for deck officers. This project would be under the greatest of scrutiny when I returned to the academy. Written examinations covering navigation, cargo, and navigation law would also be waiting upon my return.

Back in Class

Upon return to the academy in November of my third class year (sophomore), I submitted my sea project. A return to the academy also meant getting back into the regimental lifestyle, which seemed especially difficult after three to four months at sea aboard a non-regimental ship. This meant shorter-than-short hair, a clean shave, and musters throughout the day.

It also meant seeking out opportunities to become a team leader to two plebes in order to help them through the plebe year process. In addition to my team leader duties, I started participating as a petty officer—an assistant to a first class midshipman officer.

On top of these leadership duties, my academic schedule included courses such as tanker operations, electronic navigation, stability and trim, cargo operations, and seamanship. These courses ultimately prepared me for my return to sea that March.

Second Sea Leg

I was more prepared for my second sailing period of eight months. All midshipmen are required to obtain a minimum of 300 days aboard commercial vessels to apply toward our U.S. Coast Guard license. We obtain the bulk of this requirement during our second sea period.

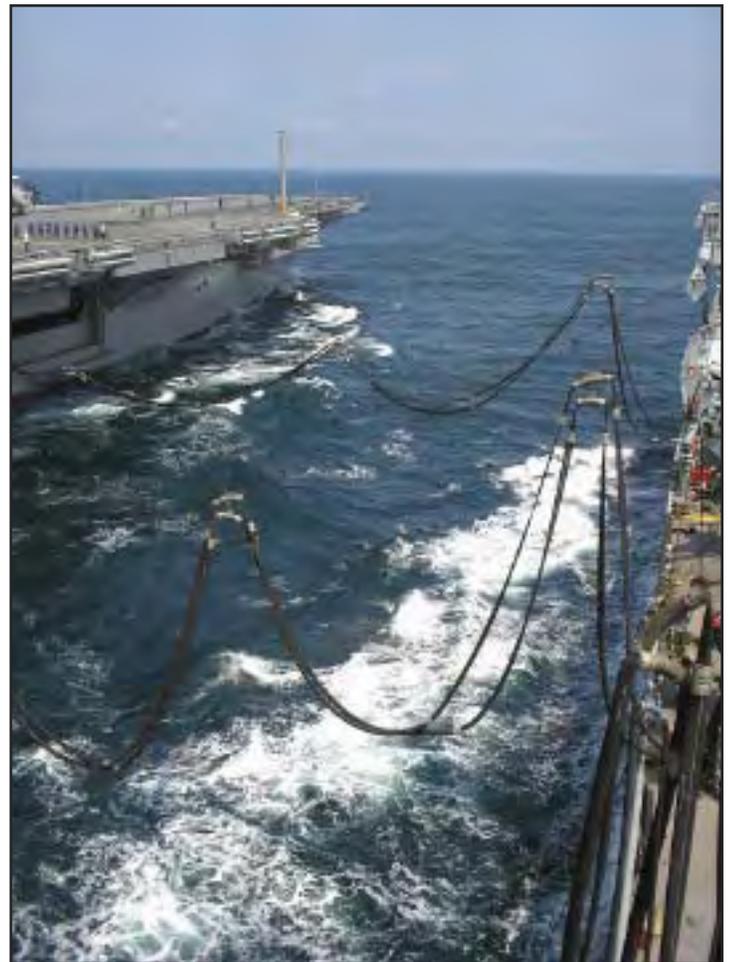
This time, I knew what was expected of me as a cadet, where things were located on ships, ship-board terminology (for the most part), and I understood how things were done (at least on the deck side of things). However, accompanying my new go-getting attitude and sense of freedom was the increased size of my 2nd sea year project. I knew it was a lot of work once I saw it, but if I just worked on it a little bit every day, I also knew I would get it done.

I received my orders to the USNS *Laramie*, a Military Sealift Command (MSC) oiler, in March. I joined the

ship in Norfolk, Va. We were the “duty oiler,” refueling Navy ships up and down the Eastern seaboard. There is nothing like seeing two ships alongside and underway, both of which are no more than 250 feet away, conducting refueling operations.

A few months later, I was assigned to the USNS *Comfort*, one of MSC's two hospital ships. She was on her way down to Latin America and the Caribbean on a humanitarian mission. It was an amazing experience, working alongside merchant mariners and active-duty military personnel. We helped so many people, little and big, young and old.

After a short rest period in my hometown in September, I found myself on a MSC-contracted tanker, the USNS *Samuel L. Cobb*. We transported fuel to U.S. Navy and Coast Guard stations. I found that this longer sailing period made me much more comfortable at stand-



Refueling a Navy carrier while underway. Photo by Midshipman James Johnston.

ing a bridge watch. My confidence in my abilities as a deck cadet and as a future third mate officer increased

immensely during this second sailing period and would serve me well upon my return to the academy.

Second Class Year

In November 2007, I returned to the academy once more as a second classman with a whopping 303 days at sea. The other 57 days would come from port watches stood here at the academy as well as ship simulations on academy simulators. I had excellent experiences on all of my ships, and had learned a lot. However, it was time for me to get into the mindset of another five trimesters—about one and a half years—back at the academy.

I immediately turned in my second sea project and signed up for my oral examinations. Upon returning from the second sailing period, all deck officer trainees must take oral examinations from at least two licensed mariners. These oral examinations count as a large part of our grades during this sea period. My commanding officer placed me as company commander petty officer, an assistant to command some 150 midshipmen.

On the Horizon

As of this writing, I have only recently completed the second full trimester of my second class year. As a logistics major, I took a logistics, management, and marketing course. I also took ships' medicine, a course required by Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping. Next trimester, I will be taking 17 credit hours, including courses in radio communications and radar operations and a bridge simulation course.

Between my second and first class years, I plan on completing a required 10-day internship with the U.S. Coast Guard in Jacksonville, Fla. After that, I will return to the academy for midshipman officer training, and help train the incoming plebe class of 2012. I will not have a summer break like my civilian counterparts, but I will find a way to get my rest—somehow.

First class year will not come soon enough. I am striving to be a midshipman officer in charge of an aspect of

the regiment of midshipmen. There are more than 70 midshipmen officer billets to choose from. Perhaps the most sought after are the command positions such as regimental commander, battalion commander, com-



These small boats are used by the USNS *Comfort* to transport personnel from the ship to shore. Photo by Cadet Gina Robles, California Maritime Academy.

pany commander, and platoon commander. There are other staff positions as well, such as logistics, human relations, and honor board officers, to

name a few.

First class year will also be challenging as I have what is known as a “capstone” project. For logistics majors, this consists of a study of a major logistics concept, such as maritime security, that must be presented to a board of professionals. Finally, I will take non-credited classes to prepare me for the Coast Guard third mate’s license exams. The license exam is taken in late May of our first class year, and is the final qualification before graduation in mid-June. Upon graduation, we receive our bachelor of science degree, our commission in the armed forces, and our U.S. merchant officer license.

Thus far in my career at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, I have experienced many things that I would never have experienced had I not accepted my appointment to the academy. I plan on receiving an active duty commission as an ensign in the United States Coast Guard, with the hope of working within port security operations. I plan on working toward a master’s degree in maritime business and logistics while serving on active duty.

Special thanks to:
Captain Brian Hall
U.S. Merchant Marine Academy

LT Ann Wickham
U.S. Coast Guard liaison to USMMA

