

**OFFICER
PROGRAM
APPLICATION
PREPARATION
HANDBOOK
(OCS, CSPI, DCE, &
AVCAD)**

**USCG Training Center
Cape May, NJ**

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v. 12

(Officers – except for certain captains – and those who had enlisted were let go, or “put on the beach” when wars ended.)

Officers were given commissions by the monarch. Like a commission given to an artist or architect to produce a new work, these commissions laid out the scope of their duties and their responsibilities in the specific office or position they were appointed to. And they served at the pleasure of the king (or queen), meaning they could be dismissed by the monarch at any time.

These traditions applied throughout the Royal Navy, including in ships stationed in Britain’s North American colonies. During the War for Independence, the Continental Navy maintained these traditions. And after the U.S. achieved its independence from Britain, both the Revenue Marine (starting in 1790) and Navy (beginning in 1798) carried them forward.

CONTENTS

Foreword	i
Overview	1
Application Format & Contents	9
Narrative Memo	17
CO’s Endorsement	25
Interview	35
Conclusion	45
Appendix A (Officer & Enlisted Careers)	47

FOREWORD

The information in this handbook is taken from official sources including the *Officer Accessions, Evaluations, and Promotions Manual* (COMDTINST M1000.3 (series)), the *Military Separations Manual* (COMDTINST M1000.4 (series)), the *Recruiting Manual* (COMDTINST M1100.2 (series)), and the *Correspondence Manual* (COMDTINST M5216.4 (series)) as well as the Coast Guard Recruiting Command's web site, various messages, quasi-official information I've acquired from the Internet, and e-mail exchanges and telephone conversations with various individuals who had the information I needed.

This unofficial handbook is intended to help uniformed Coast Guard personnel prepare their applications for the various officer accession programs. ESOs and others tasked with assisting Coast Guard members apply for these programs may also find it of use. However, I must insert a caution and a disclaimer.

CAUTION: the *Recruiting Manual* and *Officer Accessions, Evaluations, and Promotions Manual* are not always consistent.

president". That means they can be dismissed at any time without any reason.

These terms of service date back centuries, and are the source of the words we still use to describe the status of the people within the military hierarchy: "enlist", "warrant", and "commission".

Starting over 500 years ago, ranks in Britain's Royal Navy paralleled the distinctions that existed in civilian society, when a rigid class system existed. As today, crews were made up of seamen (there were no engineers since there were no machines), petty officers, warrant officers, and commissioned officers.

Unskilled laborers and farmers in civilian society enlisted (or were forcibly brought) aboard a ship for a set amount of time (e.g., a voyage on a particular ship or the duration of a war). The word "enlist" (to put someone's name on a list) came from the practice of putting their names on the ship's roster, at which time they were assigned to either the port or starboard watch.

Warrant officers were seamen who had become extremely skilled in one specialty (carpenter, boatswain, gunner) and given royal warrants in recognition of their skills. These warrants end of a war or voyage, giving them job security that was otherwise virtually unknown at that time.

Other differences are spelled out in the “Officer Accession Counseling Acknowledgment” form, which you can download from the Coast Guard Recruiting Command’s (CGRC’s) web site, <http://www.gocoastguard.com/find-your-fit/officer-opportunities/programs/program-forms-and-deadlines>.

Education

While higher education is a definite plus for enlisted personnel, it’s virtually mandatory for officers. Not only is a bachelor’s degree almost always required for obtaining a commission (enlisted personnel are the only exception), but a graduate degree (or more than one graduate degree) is also almost always necessary for getting promoted past LT.

Terms of Service

Another difference between officers and enlisted personnel is the terms under which they serve. Until recently, all enlisted personnel at all pay grades served under a series of fixed-term contracts with the Coast Guard. This offered some stability to the personnel system and some security to individual enlistees. Even now, dismissing an enlisted person of any pay grade before the end of her enlistment requires much documentation.

Officers do not sign contracts with the Coast Guard and serve now, as always in the past, “at the pleasure of the

DISCLAIMER: both of these publications often refer to the ESO’s role in this process and refer applicants to the ESO for further information about it. The assumption underlying these referrals is that ESOs have received training on the process, application procedures, what information is and is not to be included on the various forms, and have a store of information unavailable to applicants.

This assumption is false.

It’s really anyone’s guess how to proceed in a situation that’s not specifically covered in the directives, messages, and unofficially published CGRC documents.

While ESOs are glad to help, they can’t interpret policy that doesn’t exist – or at least policy which is unwritten. CGRC is the only entity which develops and can interpret policy as to the officer program application process, and often does so without notifying ESOs of their interpretations.

If applicants’ supervisors – or applicants themselves – learn from CGRC anything which contradicts what’s written in these pages, I hope they’ll bring it to my attention so I may make the appropriate corrections.

Andrew Webb
ESO, TraCen Cape May

OVERVIEW

Actually putting together your application for these programs is relatively straightforward and easy, even if it is time-consuming. All you need to do is complete the items on the check-off lists the Coast Guard Recruiting Command provides.

Most applicants, however, tend to focus on those items which the selection board members will never see, and don't spend as much time as they should on the items that count the most to selection board members.

Very little of the paperwork you complete will actually be seen by the officers who decide if you should be offered an appointment to one of the programs covered in this booklet. The only items they see are those which you put on the right side of your application folder.

Consider the other items listed on the check-off lists as prerequisites you have to complete to have the important stuff put before the selection board. That is, if you don't have the other items on the check-off lists completed the selection board members will never see the rest. Every applicant has to have all the items on the check list completed

Book. (You can find these at <http://www.uscg.mil/hq/capemay/Education/doc/DevOCareer.pdf> and <http://www.uscg.mil/hq/capemay/Education/doc/OCareerDevGuidebook.pdf>.)

Types of Commissions

Enlisted personnel who graduate from the Coast Guard's various officer accession programs receive either temporary commissions or Reserve commissions.

- Applicants for Reserve commissions must be in their senior year at or hold a bachelor's (or higher) degree from an accredited college or university. E-4s and below with less than four years of service may apply for Reserve commissions.
- Applicants for temporary commissions must either hold a bachelor's (or higher) degree or meet a series of other academic criteria. To apply for a temporary commission, enlisted personnel must be in pay grade E-5 or higher, have served at least four years in the armed forces, and must have served at least two years in the Coast Guard.

The main practical difference Reserve and temporary commissions is that an officer with a temporary commission who doesn't get promoted to LT reverts back to his last enlisted pay grade and can continue to serve, if he wants to. An officer with a Reserve commission who isn't promoted to LT is required to leave the Coast Guard.

board is making. A board selecting officers for lieutenant may emphasize different factors than would a captain continuation board. ... Selection boards are required to consider four basic criteria: performance evaluations, professionalism, leadership and education.

Those four criteria are described in some depth in Article 6.A.3. of the *Officer Accessions, Evaluations, and Promotions Manual*.

Selection boards meet in secret and only the list of those selected for promotion are released. Thus, the only official feedback an officer gets about the likelihood of being promoted is through periodic performance evaluations (Officer Evaluation Reports or OERs). More information on how officer selection boards work, including specific guidance for promotion boards (called precepts), is available at <http://www.uscg.mil/PSC/OPM/OpmI/opm-IPromotions.asp>.

You must be prepared to pursue further higher education if you hope to be promoted to the highest levels in the Coast Guard.

For more information on officer career management, go to <http://www.uscg.mil/PSC/OPM/default.asp>. Two of the publications there may be of interest as you decide whether a career as an officer is really for you: *Developing a Career as a Coast Guard Officer* and the *Officer Career Development Guide-*

in exactly the same way. Don't fixate on them and give too little attention to the items which really matter to the selection board members.

You have direct control over only two of these items: the narrative memo and the interview. Your application should be the culmination of years of effort and activities, not a spur-of-the-moment decision. It's not enough that you have a perfect record in the Coast Guard, the best evals possible, and an admirable record of performance and accomplishments in your rate. The selection board expects everyone applying will be The Perfect Petty Officer. To stand out you have to have an admirable a record in other areas as well.

What kinds of things are selection board members looking for? Going above and beyond what you're expected to do is one thing. Have you noticed a certain procedure on the job could be improved? If so, you've had an opportunity to stand out. If you did nothing about it, you're like most of your peers. Only a very few actually take the time to propose changes which will make work easier for all others in your rate, work area, or unit. The selection board will also be interested in your record of working to improve your community and the Coast Guard's relations with your community. Volunteer activities in a community organization demonstrate a number of

things: your interest in whatever subject the group focuses on, your interest in showing that the Coast Guard is a part of the community, and your initiative.

Make sure any activities you choose to get involved in are ones you truly enjoy and are interested in. They might be religiously-based or secular; they might involve working on environmental issues, with children, helping the homeless, building low-income housing, reducing gang activity, tutoring at-risk young people, or any number of things. Don't try to guess which activities might look best to interview and selection board members and then pursue them. You have no way of knowing which activities those might be. Do what you have passion for.

Pursuing or completing a degree is something else that will distinguish you from others, as well as help your career as a Coast Guard officer.

The following are notes I took from either a talk or something I read concerning officer program applications. I can't remember exactly where it came from or who the speaker/author was (although I believe it was the Commandant). I seem to remember it was from a review of officer program applications from promotion year just completed. At any rate, they're useful tips related to your

specific factors themselves are largely unknown.

Enlisted personnel who do well in all the criteria are virtually guaranteed advancement, once they have the required time in grade and service. Officers are never guaranteed promotions (although promotion from ENS to LTJG is almost guaranteed). And if they aren't promoted they are required to leave the Coast Guard under what is called an up-or-out policy. Whether an officer is promoted is determined by a selection board. Selection boards meet annually at Coast Guard Headquarters to evaluate officers at all ranks for fitness for promotion. To be considered, officers have to be in the "promotion zone", with the required number of years of service or a waiver of the time in service requirement.

The web site of Coast Guard Personnel Command (opm) is one you should visit – especially the page entitled "General Questions about Boards" (<http://www.uscg.mil/cgpc/opm/>

[Opm1/opm-1boardfaqs.asp](http://www.uscg.mil/cgpc/opm/Opm1/opm-1boardfaqs.asp)). The following passage from this web page describes what selection boards look at in deciding whether an officer should be selected for promoted.

Each board develops its own overall standards and selection criteria. The degree of significance a board assigns to each of the many factors it considers may vary according to the grade and type of selection the

APPENDIX A

OFFICER & ENLISTED CAREERS

Advancement & Promotion

Some of the main differences between being an officer and being enlisted relate to upward mobility. Even the words used for upward mobility are different: officers are promoted, enlisted personnel are advanced.

The enlisted advancement system is extremely transparent. Every enlisted person knows exactly what she needs to do to advance. Six factors go into calculating a score which determines one's place on a list that ranks everyone in a given pay grade and specialty from top to bottom. Individuals have direct control over some of the factors (servicewide exam scores), some control over others (marks, medals and awards), and none over others (time in service, time in grade, and bonus points).

The most notable difference between the officer promotion system and the enlisted advancement system is its complete lack of definite and identifiable criteria an officer must satisfy to get promoted. It is extremely opaque. There are no factors an officer has complete control over. And the

whole application, narrative memo, and interview.

With respect to your application, as a whole, "Clearly defining who you are creates a powerful emotional connection with those who evaluate you. It makes your application memorable and your cause persuasive."

That being the case,

- ensure that the whole application communicates one message;
- that message should convey something truly important about who you are and what you care about, so you should focus on a couple of key areas;
- the message you convey can relate to a specific activity you're passionate about, interests, life experiences, career goals, etc.;
- primary & secondary themes in your application enhance your believability by communicating and reinforcing one consistent message;
- applicants who are the most credible communicate the strongest themes;
- treat each part of the application (narrative, interview report, letters of recommendation/CO endorsement) as part of a unified whole rather than as if they were separate entities unrelated to each other.

With respect to your narrative memo and the interview,

- remember that board members are looking for applicants who aren't just paying lip service to lofty ideals (i.e., CG core values);
- look at it as a painter's canvas, your task being to paint a

vivid self-portrait;

- help readers get to know you;
- help readers understand your core interests, skills, values;
- don't use it just to submit a list of activities, awards, accomplishments;
- communicate your underlying motivation behind facts;
- remember that board members realize applicants are trying to say what they think board wants to hear.

The officer programs you'll find covered in this handbook are:

- OCS (Officer Candidate School)
- CSPI (College Student Pre-commissioning Initiative)
- DCE (Direct Commission Engineer program)
- AVCAD (Aviation Candidate program)

OCS

OCS is a 17-week training program for civilians and enlisted personnel who want to become Coast Guard officers. It is conducted at the Coast Guard Academy in New London, CT where officer candidates (OCs) train alongside Academy cadets. Graduates of OCS receive commissions as temporary (regular) officers or Reserve Coast Guard officers.

one – and would like to see something that catches their eye and makes them read your memo closely.

CONCLUSION

The key to preparing well for the interview and the selection process is to begin work on your narrative memo before you start working on any other part of the application. The memo is (or should be) the most time-consuming item on the list of things you have to provide. It is also the single most important item you have total control over.

Even before the interview board meets you and gets a visual impression of you, its members will read your memo and draw conclusions about you from it. Make it good.

Your interview board will provide your ESO with their interview report in time for it to be included in your application folder. You should provide your completed application folder to your ESO in plenty of time for him/her to send it to the local recruiting office before the deadline listed in the latest ALCGRECRUITING officer program message. (A week before the deadline is a good time to let it go.)

Remember: the selection board members have dozens, if not hundreds, of application folders to go through. They're looking for anything that will make it easy to reject some-

CSPI

CSPI is a scholarship program for students who have completed at least two years of college and are attending

- a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), a member institution of the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU),
- a Native American Tribal College or University, or
- colleges and universities located in Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The Coast Guard pays tuition and expenses for participants in this program who, after graduation, attend OCS and receive a Reserve Coast Guard commission. CSPI is only open to civilians or E-4s who will soon be leaving the Coast Guard. Although it is intended to increase the number of minority applicants, anyone may apply.

DCE

The DCE program is not widely known, but it allows enlisted personnel with a bachelor's degree in an engineering field to obtain temporary commissions.

AVCAD

The Coast Guard's AVCAD program (what used to be called the Aviation Cadet program, now named Aviation Candidate program) is a means for enlisted servicemembers to attend OCS and then go immediately to flight school.

It's not unusual for enlistees applying for these programs to know little about the real nuts-and-bolts differences between being an officer and being enlisted. Appendix A is intended to give you an idea of some of those differences to give you a better idea of what you're trying to get into.

More information on these programs (specific qualifications, deadlines, etc.) is on the Coast Guard Recruiting Command's web site **www.gocoastguard.com** and TraCen Cape May's Education web site **www.uscg.mil/hq/capemay/Education/oprograms.asp**

interview, the CSPI candidate may be participating in their very FIRST interview, ever! They will be inexperienced and nervous; they may do or say things that are unnerving or that appear not to be in direct alignment with the behaviors of a commissioned officer. But the goal of the interview board is to assess whether or not that CSPI candidate has a passion for the Coast Guard, the potential to be a leader and manager, and has demonstrated personal values that are in direct alignment with Coast Guard core values.

The bottom line is that the Officer Accession Programs Applicant Interview, communicated via the CG -5527, is one of the most valuable portions of the application package in that it is a selection panel membership's only significant personal insight into an applicant's suitability for enrollment in an officer trainee program or for immediate commissioning as an officer. It can, in fact, be a determining factor in final selection for a commissioning program. Being a Coast Guard leader is not easy. It is a huge undertaking to find those applicants who live up to Coast Guard core values; display leader attributes; are competent, courageous, and mature; and who act in a way that they would have their people act. Therefore, we are depending on each of you to help us out.

If you follow the pointers in this chapter, you should do well in your interview.

APPLICATION FORMAT & CONTENTS

Almost everyone, before taking a fill-in-the-bubble test, has heard the proctor say something like, “Part of this test is following directions.” The same is true with respect to applying for the various Coast Guard officer programs.

Part of being an officer is knowing how and where to find information, knowing who the best person is to turn to, and on your own figuring out how to accomplish administrative tasks. While a full-time ESO and other shipmates are glad to help you complete the application, you should seek their help only if you are unable to do it on your own.

Not taking the time to read the references doesn’t qualify as unable. It will not reflect well on you if you ask for help finding something you should be able to find on your own. Completing the application is a straightforward task. Instructions are generally available on-line in various instructions and publications. You just need to find, read, and follow them.

However, there are likely to be times you find the references (e.g., the *Recruiting Manual*, the *Officer Accessions, Evaluations, and Promotions Manual*, and *Coast Guard Re-*

“Recommended for consideration” or “Not Recommended for consideration” decision to the Officer Selection Panel, via the Officer Programs Applicant Interview Form (CG-5527, revised June 2004). No previous version of this form is authorized for inclusion in a commissioning program application.

Treat the CG-5527 as an OER-type document document; provide ample commentary to support the numbers. View excessive white space as a deficiency in the overall evaluation of your applicant. Otherwise, acknowledge that the selection panel will draw its own conclusions in the absence or in the dearth of commentary.

Interview board members are cautioned to be especially cognizant of the experience and maturity level of their interviewee in relation to the program the interviewee is applying for.

For example, a 20-year-old college sophomore candidate interviewing for the CSPI program, (a training program in which officer trainees have two years to be nurtured, trained, and developed) should be held in a different regard than a candidate who has, in addition to a four-year degree, multiple years of work experience, and is interviewing for the Direct Commission Engineer (DCE) program.

That DCE candidate will be expected to complete accession training (DCO School), report to their first unit, and be knowledgeable enough in their craft that they can begin to contribute immediately to the accomplishment of their unit’s mission. On the other hand, besides participating in their first panel-led in-

These specific excerpts (with *emphasis* added) were written for the officers who will be interviewing you. They will also be useful to you, as you prepare for your interview.

The members, and particularly the president, of the Officer Applicant Interview Board have a range of important responsibilities, all of which culminate in the final goal of providing an impartial evaluation of an applicant's leadership potential, communication skills, character and intellectual development, commitment to the principles of health and well-being, and, most importantly, the applicant's ability to align with Coast Guard core values as either a prospective officer trainee and scholarship beneficiary or as a Coast Guard officer.

Please remember that it is not the responsibility of the interview board to disqualify an applicant; the Coast Guard Recruiting Command is the **ONLY** disqualifying authority for commissioning program applicants. Therefore, interview board members receive **ONLY** the same items in an application package that a selection panel member receives. This excludes medical, legal, or security checks and other qualification information. Interview board members should conduct their assessments from the information contained in the applicant's narrative, transcripts, and letters of reference and/or command endorsement, as well as from the information obtained from the applicant during the interview.

It **IS** the responsibility of the Interview Board to provide a clear, substantiated, and collective

provide contradictory guidance. When this happens, the YNs in your SPO, your full-time ESO, or your officers should be able to help you reconcile the differences. If they can't, you should immediately contact CGRC.

Your application consists of a number of documents placed in a green, two-prong folder. Along the tab edge of the folder (in the following order) are your:

- Last name
- First name
- Middle initial (if any)
- Abbreviated name of the program you're applying for (e.g., OCS, AVCAD, CSPI, etc.)

While this identifying information must be in the order shown above, there's nothing official specifying whether it is to be typed, hand-written, or in some other format. Nonetheless, for the sake of legibility and neatness, I recommend you use a label (in **ALL CAPITAL LETTERS**) with the required information on it.

The forms you must include in your application are available from the CGRC's web site (<http://www.gocoastguard.com/find-your-career/officer-opportunities/programs/program-forms-and-deadlines>).

These forms, as well as other documents, must be assembled in the folder in a specific order, some on the left side of the folder and some on the right. To guide you as to which forms go on which side, there is a check-off list.

Officer Programs Check-off Sheets

The most recent version of the check-off list consists of three pages: two for the items on the left side and one for those on the right side. Make sure you have the most recent version, which is downloadable from the CGRC's web site, <http://www.gocoastguard.com/find-your-career/officer-opportunities/programs/program-forms-and-deadlines>.

Left Side, Page 1 – items self-explanatory except “Officer Package Review/Validation Form”. This form is completed by the recruiting office your application goes to. You can ignore this requirement.

Left Side, Page 2 – items self-explanatory. Read this page especially carefully! Military personnel can ignore many of these items.

Right Side – items self-explanatory except “Qualifying test score”. You don't need to list a score for more than one of the tests listed. For example, if your ASVAB score qualifies you, you don't need to list an SAT or ACT score or take either of those tests.

7. proof you've satisfied the math requirement (if applicable),
8. copy of each degree you've received (if applicable),
9. proof of your qualifying SAT/ACT/ASVAB/AFCT score,
10. up to five personal awards, and
11. Employee Review summary (from DirectAccess).

Leave out **everything** else. (*Applicants for the DCE program do not need to provide proof they've satisfied a math requirement.*) As mentioned in the previous chapter, those who endorse your memo don't have a right to see your complete application folder. The same is true of the members of the interview board.

Deliver these three folders of information to whomever is setting up your interview (e.g., your ESO) at least a week before your scheduled interview date. The ESO will distribute them to the members of your interview board and they need time to review them before the interview. Remember: they're busy with their primary duties.

Finally, the following are excerpts from Coast Guard Recruiting Command's *Interview Guidance for Officer Accession Programs*. You can find this document on-line at

<http://www.uscg.mil/hq/capemay/Education/doc/O-InterviewGuidance.pdf>

tion board with your application folder.

The advice given on many civilian job-search web sites is useful in preparing for your interview. But take the advice with a grain of salt: you're being interviewed, after all, for suitability not for a specific job, but for a career track. And not for a civilian career track, but for one in the U.S. Coast Guard.

What to give the interview board members

In addition to preparing yourself for the interview, you also have to prepare three identical folders (one for each interview board member). Essentially, you are to provide the interview board members with the same documents the selection board members will eventually see. And the selection board sees only documents which bear on your suitability for a commission – not your eligibility for a specific program. Military personnel provide *only* the following items:

1. résumé,
2. narrative memo,
3. CO's endorsement,
4. up to two letters of recommendation,
5. college transcripts (if applicable),
6. CLEP test results (if applicable),

After printing out the check-off list, I recommend you read through it slowly and carefully, highlighting each item that applies to you. This will serve two purposes. It will

- make you pay attention to each item making it more likely you don't skip over anything important.
- make it readily apparent at a glance which items you have to complete and which you can ignore; this may also lessen your anxiety.

Explanation of application items

Most of the forms and other documents you have to include in your application are self-explanatory. Even those, however, may be unclear as to whether they require action on your part or just need to be included in the application as blank forms. What follows is meant to help you figure out exactly what you're supposed to do with the forms that are difficult to understand. If you find any other forms or parts of the required forms difficult to understand, please let me know so I can include them in future editions of this handbook.

Anticipated Dates and Places of Residence

If you're not due to transfer between the date of your application and the date your OCS class is scheduled to begin, the only residence you'll list is your current one. If you're scheduled to be transferred before your OCS class is scheduled to begin, list your current residence and your residence at

your next unit. If you don't know what your residence address will be, list your new unit's address.

Approved "Request for Conditional Release" form (DD-368)

Fill out section 1 of the form (your own information) then date and sign it in section 3. Don't have your command fill out any of the information below that. This will all be done after you've been selected.

OCS Agreement form

There are actually three different versions of this form. The CG-3211A is for ex-military personnel only; the CG-3211B is for enlisted personnel; and the CG-3211C is for warrant officer applicants.

After reading the form *carefully*, put your name on the line at the top of the form and complete the information at the bottom of the form (e.g., date, your signature, witness signature, etc.). Note that the witness signature ("by direction") must be that of an O not a W pay-grade officer.

CSPI applicants, in addition to qualifying for OCS, must also already be attending a college or university and provide the Coast Guard with information that allows it to track your progress toward your degree. These items are:

Degree requirements as published in current college catalog

Photocopies of pages from the catalog or other school publication describing the school's degree requirements will be sufficient. A print-out from the school's web site will also suffice. The Coast Guard's selection board wants to compare the num-

table in front of you and leaning slightly forward shows engagement in the discussion. But if you're prone to nervous gestures with your hands it might be a good idea to leave them on your knees or in your lap.

Don't be afraid to gesture to add emphasis to what you're saying, but don't wave your hands or arms around wildly either.

Maintain appropriate eye contact with your interviewers. Don't stare at them but don't just glance at them and quickly look away, either.

Try to speak naturally and modulate your voice, in pitch and volume. Nothing would be worse than to speak in a monotone and bore your interviewers. But avoid speaking too loudly or too softly for long stretches at a time.

In everything during the interview, moderation and appropriateness are the keys. If someone says something funny, laugh – or at least smile. Show you're a real person, not a zombie. But, again, don't be overly demonstrative.

Overall, act in the interview as you would act in conversation rather than in an interrogation.

After you leave the interview, the board members will discuss their impressions of you and report their findings on an interview report form. This report will go to the selec-

actual, formal qualification interview. Your command and mentors, coaches, and champions can assist you by arranging and preparing for simulated interview panels and afterwards providing honest, analytical feedback and advice from which you can improve and refine your performance.

You should also use the “Officer Programs Applicant Interview Form” (CG-5527) as another preparation aid. Since the interview board members will be completing this form after your interview, you want to make sure you’re prepared to cover all the items on the form.

The night before your interview, like the night before a final or servicewide exam, you should do *nothing* related to the application process. Relax and have a good night’s sleep. In the morning, have a good breakfast and try to maintain your relaxed state. Work out or do whatever you do to work off stress.

Arrive for your interview a few minutes early wearing your service dress uniform in inspection condition. If you have to travel some distance to get to the interview site, seriously consider going the night before and staying overnight close by.

In the interview, try to maintain a neutral posture. By this I mean don’t brace up, but don’t slump in your chair either. If you’re sitting at a table or desk, putting your arms on the

ber of credits and types of courses the degree requires with the number of credits and types of courses you already have to see how much farther you have to go to finish your degree. You have to be able to complete your degree within two calendar years after starting the program.

Statement from college indicating tuition cost and determining eligibility for in-state tuition

You’ll need to ask the school’s registrar, bursar, business office, or other official to give you a letter itemizing tuition and fees you’ll be expected to pay and stating that you’re eligible for in-state tuition.

Proof of enrollment in a qualifying school

This document should be written on the school’s letterhead or have some indication it’s from the school you seek to attend.

Student Information and Degree Plan

In conjunction with the above, the Coast Guard also wants to see a degree plan from the school. Essentially, this degree plan is the school’s acknowledgment that you only have to complete only a certain number of credits in certain types of courses before you graduate. Having it prevents the school from moving the goal posts as you near graduation, saying “Ooops, I forgot to tell you you have another course to take before you can graduate.” It also shows you how you’re going to complete your degree in two calendar years. The Recruiting command’s web site has a form to use for your degree outline.

Currently, you can't obtain your degree through a distance learning program if you're selected for CSPI.

Page 7 (CG-3307) acknowledging prohibition against using GI Bill during CSPI

The purpose of this Page 7 is to make sure you know you can't receive GI Bill benefits for the same courses the Coast Guard is paying for. Prohibiting you from doing this is actually a benefit to you since, as an officer, you're likely going to need a graduate degree to get promoted to higher ranks. Because you won't be spending down your GI Bill benefits while you're finishing your bachelor's degree, you'll have that money available to use for graduate school costs later on if you need it.

Signing this form will not effect your eligibility for GI Bill benefits in the future.

The text of the statement on the Page 7 should read something like:

I acknowledge that I am prohibited from filing a claim for _____ education benefits for courses taken as part of the CSPI (College Student Pre-commissioning Initiative.

In the blank space above, insert the name(s) of the program(s) you're currently eligible for:

- Ch. 30 Montgomery GI Bill - Active Duty (MGIB-AD),
- Ch. 33 Post-9/11 GI Bill,
- Ch. 1606 Montgomery GI Bill - Selected Reserve (MGIB-SR),
- Ch. 1607 Reserve Education Assistance Program (REAP).

Coast Guard service. Interview board members for chief warrant officer applicants shall be lieutenant commanders or higher. All members must be equal or senior to the grade for which they are considering the applicant.

You should approach your interview for an officer program the same way a civilian job applicant approaches a job interview. Use it as a way to let the board members get to know you as a whole person, elaborating on the points you made in your narrative memo.

The key to a successful interview is to prepare for it.

Read the guidelines for interview board members from Article I.B.9.b. of the *Officer Accessions, Evaluations, and Promotions Manual*. They will give you an idea of what kinds of questions to expect during the interview. You should write out and practice responses to each of the questions listed in the *Officer Accessions, Evaluations, and Promotions Manual* guidelines.

After you've completed your research in the print resources, you should seek opportunities to participate in as many rehearsal or mock interviews as time and availability of people will allow. This exercise allows you to become familiar with the panel interview method and to gain confidence in responding to an array of questions presented in a unique format, without the anxiety that can accompany the

INTERVIEW

The primary purpose of the officer accession interview is to assess your

- leadership potential,
- communication skills,
- character and intellectual development,
- commitment to the principles of health and well-being, and, most importantly,
- ability to align your approach to life within the Coast Guard and its core values.

The *Officer Accessions, Evaluations, and Promotions Manual* tells us that “the interview’s primary purpose is to evaluate the applicant as a prospective Coast Guard officer. In many cases, the Report of Interview is the most valuable portion of an application and a determining factor in selections for officer programs.”

The interview is conducted by a board of three officers. As laid out in the *Officer Accessions, Evaluations, and Promotions Manual*,

The board’s senior member shall be a lieutenant commander or above. Other members should have the rank of ensign or higher with more than one year

NARRATIVE MEMO

The *Officer Accessions, Evaluations, and Promotions Manual* requires “A brief narrative explaining the applicant’s reasons for applying ... and [explaining the applicant’s] goals as a Coast Guard officer, if selected.”

The narrative memo is something like the cover letter a civilian job applicant sends with his/her résumé. This is your *only* way to directly address the members of the selection board. It’s also a good way to make a good first impression with the members of the interview board who will read it before they meet and interview you.

The only standard requirement for the narrative is that it be written in the form of a standard Coast Guard memorandum. Aside from that, there is no template – no fixed number of paragraphs or required subjects you should address in it.

Even so, with some thought about the who will be reading it and about your competition, you should be able to figure out what you should – and should not – include in the memo.

The audience for the memo consists of those who make up

lated to the interview process. You should provide a blank copy of the “Officer Programs Applicant Interview Form” (CG-5527) to give those who write your endorsement a concise view of the factors selection boards consider when selecting applicants. Those factors are:

- performance of duties,
- communication skills,
- leadership skills, and
- personal and professional qualities.

your chain of command, the officers who sit on the board that will interview you (to decide whether to recommend you for the program or programs you’re applying for), and the officers at Headquarters who will sit on the board that will determine whether you should be selected for that program.

As to your competition, everyone competing against you for a chance to attend one of these programs has (like you) met all these programs has (like you) met all the requirements on the check list. They all have perfect or nearly perfect marks, they all have the required college credits, they all have passed the physical, etc.

From your perspective, the purpose of your memo is to make you stand out from all other applicants.

Don’t include information that’s written elsewhere in your application package. Because you’re limited to two single-sided single-spaced pages, including such information would be a waste of precious space you could use to talk about other important things. Think of the narrative memo as a brochure used to sell a product. You’re the product. It gives readers a few easy-to-read reasons to buy you, tells them what you can do for them. Here are a few suggestions.

Emphasize what you can uniquely contribute to the Coast Guard and the types of billets you're likely to be assigned to (especially your first billet). Convince the reader that your product is better than the competition's. Mention experiences – in and out of the Coast Guard – that make will make you better able to perform officer duties. But leave out experiences that, while interesting, don't have much to do with duties you might be assigned to unless they illustrate a specific character trait or how you embody one of the Coast Guard's core values. Remember: you only have about a page and a half of space in which to sell yourself. (The To, From, etc. lines take up about half a page at the beginning).

Concentrate on a few most valued strengths. This will help you focus and will make it easier for everyone who reads your application to remember you. Show how those strengths will make you a greater asset to the Coast Guard as an officer than as an enlisted person. Before writing your narrative (which should be short and packed with information) identify those key strengths and match them with with the requirements of the first billet you're likely to go into. Once you've done that, figure out ways to present a few of them.

Tell readers what motivates you, and how that relates to a career as an officer in the Coast Guard. Think about when

and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) prohibits all but select people with a need to know from seeing much of what's in the application folder unless you feel those drafting the endorsement should see it. Your command can't require you to provide this information without reasons specified by the governing statutes.

The Interview Report

Some applicants are under the impression that they have to provide a copy of their interview report to their command, for the command's use in drafting the CO's endorsement. Not only is this not a requirement, but it's impossible since you have to provide your CO's endorsement to the interview board and only after the interview's completed can the board write the interview report.

Even if this were possible, however, basing a command endorsement on the views of the interview board members would reduce the amount of independent evidence the selection board will eventually have when making its decisions as to who to reject and who to accept for the Coast Guard's officer accession programs. By basing his/her endorsement on first-hand knowledge of you, a CO provides the selection board with more useful information.

This doesn't mean your CO should ignore everything re-

- evidence of your ability and willingness to meet your financial obligations,
- the character standards set out in the *Recruiting Manual*,
- the section of the *Officer Accessions, Evaluations, and Promotions Manual* which describes how average marks are calculated, and photocopies of documents that include the information needed to calculate them, as well as those which include your most recent marks for Performance, Leadership, Military, and Professional Qualities Factor.

I also suggest you provide a list of your strengths, similar to what you provide to your supervisor at marks time.

The officers who draft and review the command's endorsement have no reason to see the many documents the completed application will contain. And, as a practical matter, there's little in the application that will help the command draft the endorsement.

For example, knowing your blood pressure, what grades or whether you have forgotten to include any of the many forms only a YN at OCS will ever want to see will provide little to nothing of value to those who draft and review the endorsement. Indeed, my experience is that providing this information usually just clouds the task at hand: evaluating your potential value to the Coast Guard as a commissioned officer.

Further, the Privacy Act and the Health Insurance Portabil-

you've been most satisfied at work and tell readers what turns you on in your work.

Overall, tell readers what *you* would want to know about an applicant if you were on an interview or selection board. Here are a few specific items you should definitely address:

Why you want to be an officer – What do you want to do in the Coast Guard that you can only do as an officer rather than as an enlistee? Ensure that what you write here aligns with the Coast Guard's core values.

Your current and previous Coast Guard experience – Mention what you've done, how you did it, and how what you did and how you did it affected others in the Coast Guard and the Coast Guard itself.

Your future in the Coast Guard – Discuss how you can only do what you want to do in the Coast Guard if you're an officer and how your unique talents and gifts will not be fully employed unless you are an officer. It is always best to align what you want to do with what the Coast Guard is looking for. But don't pick don't pick an area you really aren't interested in just because there's currently a demand for people in that field. Do you really want to spend a career doing work you don't enjoy, whether you're an officer or remain enlisted?

Here are some other things you might consider weaving into your essay:

Challenges – something in your life (whether in the Coast Guard, your personal life, or elsewhere) that very few other people have experienced and succeeded at. *But be careful about blowing your own horn too loudly.* We all like self-confident people, but we don't like braggarts.

Your uniqueness – What makes you different from everyone else applying for this specific program or everyone else in the Coast Guard?

Your leadership experiences and successes

Your personal goals – Align them with the Coast Guard's core values

Weaknesses revealed in your résumé – Address them

Put yourself in the shoes of those who will be on the interview and selection boards. **What would you like to know about an applicant?** If you keep that question in mind as you write and re-write your memo, you should do fine.

Finally, some tips on the actual process of writing the memo.

If you're not confident about your writing ability, take a creative writing course. There are hundreds of resources (many of them free) available on the Internet, in-

CO's behalf.

Based on that reasoning, you should provide the SPO with a check list of the program's requirements. The CGRC "Officer Programs Check-off Sheet" (from CGRC's web site, <http://www.gocoastguard.com/find-your-career/officer-opportunities/programs/program-forms-and-deadlines>) is as good a guide as any for this purpose. However I also recommend that (where they're not listed and where that will help the YNs who actually conduct the review) you write on the check-off sheet citations to relevant manuals.

What You Must Provide

You are not required to provide anything beside your narrative memo to those who draft the endorsement. The assumption underlying an endorsement is that the person drafting it knows you well. If this is not the case, an interview may be in order. But what's written in the endorsement should be based on the drafter's personal knowledge of you rather than on documents.

That said, I strongly recommend you provide your chain of command with items that will help your command draft comments on the six items listed earlier in this chapter, which commands are required to cover in the endorsement. These include:

I've been unable to locate any reference which specifies the format your CO is to use in covering these items, although bullet format seems to me the most logical.

Also, even though it is not specifically required, it also seems logical to me that the last paragraph of the endorsement should read something like this:

I certify that Petty Officer Washington meets all qualifications for the _____ program as set forth in the *Officer Accessions, Evaluations, and Promotions Manual*, the *Recruiting Manual*, and all other relevant directives and ALCOASTs.

That will give CGRC's staff (which reviews applications for completeness) a quick way to know that your command has reviewed the requirements of the program you're applying to and has determined that you qualify for it. Alternatively, the endorsement could cite references instead of the names of the publications in the body like this:

I certify that Petty Officer Washington meets all qualifications for the _____ program as set forth in refs () through ().

Nowhere do any of the references say specifically which entity is responsible for actually checking DirectAccess, your PDR, and other documentation so the command can certify you meet the standards. It stands to reason, however, that since the Servicing Personnel Office (SPO) has access to all such documentation it should perform this task on your

cluding Skillsoft (which is available through the CGPortal). Or take a college writing course.

Spend a lot of time on it. As noted above, this is your *only* way to directly address the members of the selection board. You want it to be the best product you can turn out.

Don't just write one draft and leave it at that. At the beginning, you should write at least two or three different versions of your memo, each started at a different time – preferably some days (if not weeks) apart.

Let each version of your memo sit for a week or two before looking at it again.

Edit each version as if it were the only version.

After a couple of months, you should have two or three pretty good and very different memos. Pretend you've never seen them before and read each with a critical eye, as if you were on an interview or selection board. Do any of them jump out as markedly better or worse than the others? ***Throw out those that are really bad*** – topics badly organized, bad grammar or syntax, difficult to read, etc.

Polish the ones that are left.

Let each remaining version of the memo sit for a week or so before looking at it again, then once more try to look at each with an unbiased eye. By now, one should

stand out from the rest as the one you're going to be using. Tinker with it over the course of a few more weeks replacing words here and there, reorganizing sentences or clauses, etc.

Put the final version aside until a week before your interview, then look at it again and make final changes (if any).

officer should possess and then state how you have or lack those qualities. The "Officer Evaluation Report (OER)" for W-2s through O-2s provides a good deal of material to draw from when stating the command's views on whether you possess the qualities a junior officer should possess, taking into account the fact that you have not yet received any officer-specific training.

Article 4.B.1.b. of the *Recruiting Manual* requires the endorsement to include several specific things.

1. An evaluation of your potential value to the Coast Guard as a commissioned officer.
2. An evaluation of you compared with other personnel your CO has known who have completed the program you're is applying to.
3. Any outstanding professional or other qualifications you may possess.
4. A statement of knowledge about your ability and willingness to meet your financial obligations.
5. A statement certifying that the command conducted a review of your record to determine if you meet the character standards described in Article 4.B.1.a. of the *Recruiting Manual*.
6. Your average marks during your current enlistment according to Article 1.B.31 of the *Military Separations Manual*, and your most recent marks for the Performance, Leadership, Military, and Professional Qualities Factor.

ture endorsement will likely be taken as a slap in your face and as a mark against you.

Contents

Article 1.B.5.f.(2)(c) of the *Officer Accessions, Evaluations, and Promotions Manual* and article 4.B.1.b. of the *Recruiting Manual* provide some guidance as to what the endorsement should contain. The endorsement is not meant to be a rehash of the comments section of your most recent marks so it should generally avoid comments on your abilities in your rate.

With one exception, the interview and selection boards want to know if you are officer material, not how well you have done as a petty officer. That exception is that the board does want to know if you have any outstanding professional qualifications.

Generally, then, the only rate-related information that should be included is that which relates to officer duties and qualities, and your potential as an officer.

The endorsement is meant to be a concise statement of what your CO thinks of you and whether he/she thinks you will be a good officer.

One way your chain of command may approach drafting an endorsement is to lay out what qualities your CO thinks an

CO'S ENDORSEMENT

You should provide your chain of command with a copy of the companion to this handbook, *A Supervisor's Guide to Officer Program Application Endorsements*. This chapter provides an applicant's version of the information contained in the *Supervisor's Guide*.

Be aware that Article 4.B.1.b.1. of the *Recruiting Manual* requires this endorsement to come from a commanding officer who is an O pay-grade officer, not a W pay-grade officer or an OIC. Here's what it says:

All [application] packages require a commanding officer's (CO) endorsement. Only one recommendation from a member's CO shall be included in his or her application package. The CO must be a commissioned officer; an endorsement by an officer-in-charge is not sufficient. Since selection panels do not have access to personnel records and are not aware of NJP, adverse administrative remarks, or other indicators of non-adherence to the Coast Guard's core values, CGRC relies on the CO's endorsement. The CO's endorsement certifies that the command conducted a review of the member's record and that the applicant meets character standards in this article. If the CO rescinds his or her endorsement at any time before the appointment, the applicant will

be disqualified for that selection cycle.

Unfortunately, the *Recruiting Manual* doesn't say who's supposed to write the endorsement for an applicant who's attached to a unit with an OIC and CGRC has provided no other guidance I've been able to locate. If you're in that situation, you should contact CGRC immediately to find out who's supposed to write your endorsement. And please let me know what you find out.

Format

The fact that your CO is required to write an endorsement for your narrative is your first clue as to the endorsement's format. Go to the *Coast Guard Correspondence Manual*. There you'll see a section on endorsements – specifically, how they're to be formatted.

The endorsement is *not* a stand-alone memo from your CO to the Coast Guard Recruiting Command (CGRC). This means that the CO's signature or initials on your memo's *Thru* line, with no comments, will be considered insufficient.

Although your CO has a right to do this and even though such an endorsement is ostensibly positive, the absence of comments will indicate to the members of the selection board who read it that the command doesn't think enough of you to write anything good about you. That is, a signa-