Midshipman Scuttles Tradition

By Art Carter

Midshipman First Class Mason C. Reddix Jr. scuttled tradition at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland.

He graduates this month but before receiving his diploma and taking responsibility as a young Navy officer he set a precedent as the first black brigade commander in the academy's proud history of training America's sea warriors.

Midshipman Reddix served as brigade commander for the spring semester which ended May 26, just before June Week and the gala commencement festivities which annually mark an academy graduation ceremony.

During his command service period, he was joined in the prestigious tradition-shattering post by another black midshipman, Derwood C. Curtis of Chicago, who was the Second Regiment commander. Reddix wears six stripes and Curtis, a classmate, wears five.

The deputy brigade commander post was filled by white Midshipman Charles I. Campbell III.

As brigade commander, Reddix held the senior rank among Naval Academy midshipmen. He is the first black man to be selected for the position.

Three groups of midshipmen officers are selected during the school year. A fourth group is picked from among the first three to lead the brigade during June Week.

Midshipman Reddix, the son of Dr. and Mrs. Mason C. Reddix Sr., of 4018 Willow Brook Drive, San Antonio, is a political science major at Annapolis. He has served three years on the Brigade Human Relations Committee. He has also been a manager for the varsity gymnastics team for three years.

Midshipman Curtis, also a political science major, is the son of Mrs. Florence Stanchel of 748 East 84th Place, Chicago. He has played varsity football since his first year at Annapolis and been a member of the Color Guard for three years.

His spare time activities include membership in the Spanish Club, the Officer Christian Fellowship and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

At Annapolis the responsibility for administering the brigade is delegated to midshipmen officers selected from members of the first class. Their job is to make sure the 4,200-man brigade functions as a military unit from the brigade commander down through two regimental, six battalion and 36 company commanders.

After only a short period as brigade commander, Reddix discovered that the added weight shouldered by the "six-striper" is measured in responsibility. In the past he viewed the position from the perspective of "What I would do if I wore the stripes."

MIDSHIPMAN MASON C. REDDIX JR.
Brigade Commander at U.S. Academy

Commander Reddix with his deputy commander, Midshipman Charles I. Campbell III.

Now he feels that accountability, not authority, is the necessary attribute for a brigade commander.

Reddix views himself as the most direct link between the commandant and the Brigade of Midshipmen. He is in the middle and must be able to justify his actions to both sides.

While Reddix was occupied with the entire brigade, Curtis kept busy with his half of it, the second regiment.

One of the major points Curtis is emphasizing as second regiment commander is the administrative responsibility that accompanies selection as a midshipman officer. He is trying to make sure that second classmen (juniors) in the regiment are aware of what will be expected of them when they assume leadership positions next year.

Midshipman Reddix tells DAWN "It was really worth it. I've enjoyed every moment . . ."

Photos by Cabell

Since women will be admitted to the Naval Academy for the first time with the class of 1980 in July, Reddix was asked whether he was getting out of the Academy just in time or perhaps a semester too early.

"I would like to be here as brigade commander when the women come in," Reddix replied.

Midshipman Reddix, whose ambition is to serve on a nuclear ship, doubtless found it "not a big thing" to have been selected as brigade commander as 'it is what we all hope to be, what we work for," but to many others it has great significance.

Thousands of observers who have watched the progress at Annapolis since the early thirties when several nominees of the late Representative Oscar Depriest were virtually booted out of Annapolis simply because they were black, now find this selection of Midshipmen Reddix and Curtis as a new day, a new approach, and a welcomed attitude.

A welcome that spells out in bold flag signals that opportunity for all has really come to Annapolis.

Midshipman Reddix said "Looking back over the years I've been here, I've enjoyed it. It was worth it . . . every minute of it."

Midshipman Reddix, 22, is a graduate of Holmes High School in his Texas hometown. He always wanted to be a military officer, but skipped the air corps because he wears glasses.

His sister, Elizabeth, is a student at Indiana University, and a brother, Bruce, a sophomore pre-medical student at Harvard University.

He has maintained a 3.0 average at Annapolis and graduated in the first 150 of a class of 832, the exact number was unavailable at DAWN deadline.

His fiancee, Karen Stinnette of Philadelphia is a student at Chestnut Hill College in the Philadelphia suburban area. No plans are afoot for an early marriage as Reddix plans to take advance nuclear classes before assignment as an ensign.

Midshipman Derwood C. Curtis with a member of his staff.

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