



PHOTO COURTESY OF DAN A. NYGAARD '87

Dan A. Nygaard '87 with his son, Adam '22, during Commissioning Week 2022. Nygaard said he delivered the same advice to Adam that his father gave him: Succeeding at the Naval Academy is not easy, but it will prepare you to meet life's challenges.

IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE HARD

By Dan A. Nygaard '87

After the longest nine months of my life, I was done. The constant pressure I felt during my plebe year at the Naval Academy had finally worn me out.

The overloaded schedule of military training, challenging classes, athletics and the seemingly random orders of upperclassmen took its toll. As a bonus, I had a youngster tormentor whose personal mission was to make me quit. Youngsters traditionally help plebes but he was different, making the harassment even harder to take. When I escaped the madness by going home on spring break, I did not want to return.

When my dad walked by, he saw college literature spread over the kitchen table along with my former applications.

“What are you doing?” was the question that broke open the floodgates.

In the next ten minutes, I ranted about how miserable it was at the Academy, how the place was full of nonsense and how I had enough. I shared with him my frustrations, my ill will towards my tormentor and the program and how I was better off doing something different. He listened without interruption and waited for me to get it all out. When I was done, I expected Dad to give me the same advice he gave me a year earlier when I was deciding whether to accept an appointment to the Academy. He told me then, “You do what you want to do.” This time it was different.

“I’m surprised to hear you are quitting. I didn’t realize that I raised a baby.” After the initial shock of his words, I muttered something about him not

knowing what it was like and how hard it was. He then said something that changed my life.

“It’s supposed to be hard. That’s the point. It’s supposed to be hard. The Academy wouldn’t be worthwhile if it wasn’t.”

He told me not to throw away a great opportunity because I was feeling sorry for myself. “Life is hard, get used to it. Now get back there and finish your job,” was the last thing I heard before I stopped listening.

A few days later I boarded the plane back to the Academy without a word spoken to my father, who was now the focus of my anger. For the next month, I didn’t reply to calls or letters, so my parents called the Academy to see if I was still there. When I finally calmed down, the end of my plebe year was in sight, and I was getting ready to board a ship in Australia as part of my summer training.

After a month at sea and in various ports, I flew home for some R&R and made amends. Three years later, I told Dad he was right when I gave him the engraved watch I received for an academic award before graduation. At a critical moment of my life, he told me what I needed to hear.

“It’s supposed to be hard” is advice I’ve relayed to my kids as they have been challenged in their young lives. I also made sure my son, Adam, understood that lesson clearly before he was sworn in with the Class of 2022 on I-Day. As he graduates and begins flight school, I know the hard Naval Academy program has prepared him well for what’s next. That’s the point. ⚓