

Special Sota feature – **Matt Cordell graduates from U.S.** **Merchant Marine Academy**

By C.D. Floro
Sota Editor

Along with 198 classmates and shipmates, Midshipman Matthew Kurt Cordell received his diploma under a large tent spread out on Tomb Field, Kings Point, New York, from one of the most prestigious institutions of higher learning in the United States. This was commencement held June 21st for the 2010 graduating class at the United States Merchant Marine Academy – one of the five military service academies of the USA.

U.S. Navy Admiral Michael G. Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, delivered the keynote address to this, the USMMA's 74th graduating class. Afterwards, the graduates – midshipmen no more – engaged in a tradition of jumping into the park's water fountain!

How Matt made it, how his classmates and friends made it, is testimony not only to their intelligence and ability to stay on task over years of rigorous and varied learning assignments. (For Matt that journey took five years.) It also speaks to their commitment, as individuals, to work continuously on reaching their goals – making their dreams “happen” in real life.

But don't come up to Matt and expect to find somebody boasting about success.

“Anybody can do it,” he said about an experience that, obviously, not just anybody even considers much less tackles and makes a go of it.

Remember the 1980s movie “Officer and a Gentleman” starring Richard Gere and Debra Winger?

The portrayal of that military institution's attrition rate was fairly accurate.

Of the 300-plus cadets who began with Matt at USMMA as freshmen, more than 40 percent dropped out or were shipped home during the course of the four-year cycle.

Cadet, now 2nd Lt. Matthew Cordell tells of being indoctrinated as a child by his parents into the notion you can attain anything you dream if you put your mind, heart and soul into reaching it.

Together while he was home on leave at Marvin, South Dakota a week before graduation, they have a laugh over his journey so far over 23 years of life.

His parents, Chet and Colleen, have operated their own business – Colleen's Gardens (in recent years adding Native American crafts) – since Matt and his siblings were toddlers. Colleen (Heminger) Cordell also manages the Native American Cultural Research Center and Museum at Blue Cloud, the Benedictine Abbey at Marvin.

“When Matt was just a little kid,” his dad reminisced, “we had asked somebody to bring a load of sand into the yard.”

It was a large yard; back then the Cordells had several acres under cultivation in various garden crops, flowers and herbs.

“I wanted the kids to have a sandbox to play in,” continued Chet.

The load was much larger than expected. “What got left was a huge pile!”

“Little Matt would go out and play army in it every day.”

“How many soldiers did you have?” he turned to ask his son.

“Over a thousand eventually,” said Matt. “I’d have battles and wars going on all the time,” he added.

Likely due in some measure to his cultural roots as a Sisseton-Wahpeton Dakota, Matthew had always held onto the idea that it would be good to serve in the military. A main inspiration was the military service of his grandfather, the late Gerald “Little Joe” Heminger Sr.

“I always had wanted to be in the Army,” said Matt.

Matthew, like his brothers and sister, went to school at Wilmot.

When he graduated in 2005, he asked South Dakota’s Congressional delegates to provide a nomination letter for entrance to USMMA. And all complied. (Tom Daschle was senior Senator at that time.)

It was with high hopes that Matt submitted his application to the Academy, but the school turned him down.

Matt’s test scores in Math and Science simply were not high enough for admission.

(Note: For today’s students, here is advice from Matt’s experience – Even if your state requires only one of the standardized tests for college admission, consider taking both the SAT and ACT. Had Matt done so, his family believes his first application would have been accepted.)

That was a setback, but fortunately not the end of his quest.

The following year, USMMA sent seventeen applicants who didn’t make it to admission, including Matt, to a military prep school in Roswell, New Mexico.

This was a chance to prove yourself, to boost your knowledge of Math, Engineering and Science and perhaps gain admission to USMMA in another round. But of the 17 hopeful applicants, Matt is one of only three that started at the prep school, re-applied and ultimately graduated from the Academy.

By this time John Thune had replaced Tom Daschle in the Senate, so Matt received new letters from Senator Tim Johnson, Senator John Thune and from Representative Stephanie Herseth (now Stephanie Herseth Sandlin).

Now the USMMA accepted Matthew as a Cadet. But not only that Academy, Matt received nomination letters for three other academies including West Point at New York, Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs, and the Naval Academy at Annapolis.

He stayed with his original choice and traveled to Long Island, New York and Kings Point to study at the USMMA.

School for Matt and his fellow cadets, while filled with advanced science, math and engineering courses, was never just about classroom studies.

There were several breaks for sea duty from the trimesters of “book” learning.

Matt’s first ocean excursion was on a gigantic “roro” vessel.

“Roro” is marine-speak for a “roll on/roll off” carrier ship.

He spent four months on board the vessel “Resolve,” carrying military cargo from the U.S. mainland to the Middle East. Ports of call were in Texas, Maine, Maryland, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Dubai.

This duty tour shows a sharp contrast between the Merchant Marine Academy and the other U.S. military academies. The USMMA is the only academy whose cadets, whose “students,” serve the country in war zones.

On the Kings Point campus is a monument established in honor of 142 USMMA midshipmen who lost their lives delivering war material to American forces in World War II.

Now just as this feature is being prepared for publication in the August 25th edition of the Sota, Matthew has received his first medal and battle ribbon in the mail. It is the Merchant Marine expeditionary ribbon and medal for service in support of U.S. Middle East war operations.

Later Matt served for four months aboard a bulk cargo ship, the Moku Pahu.

The Moku Pahu carried commercial loads, such as grain out of New Orleans destined for Costa Rica (where it was used for brewing beer), Puerto Rico, and other islands in the Caribbean.

Matthew has some good memories from those cruises, including passage through the Panama Canal and sightseeing on the islands.

The final tour at sea was four months on the Kauai, a container ship, on what was referred to as “the pineapple run.”

The vessel no longer carries pineapple, but it makes a regular run taking commercial loads back and forth between Seattle, Oakland and Honolulu, Hawaii.

“This was a lot of fun,” said Matt. “Because every other weekend we’d spend in Hawaii.”

There were a lot of fun activities during the sea duty. Looking back, he said, “It has been lots of fun, especially zip-lining in the trees of Costa Rica and skydiving, body surfing, snorkeling and helicopter rides in Hawaii.

When he was not out on the ocean, everything still did not take place in the Kings Point classrooms.

“We took field trips,” he shared, “to offices and duty stations where alumni are posted.”

He explained how much Academy alumni – many in positions of authority in government and the private sector – support the school and today’s students.

One visit was to the Pentagon, where midshipmen received a behind-the-scenes briefing by an alumnus on the threat of piracy off the Somali coast. Pirates have become more and more brazen in attacking commercial vessels, holding ships and crews hostage for ransom, sometimes demanding millions of dollars for their release. (The Somalis have turned from fishing to the much more lucrative criminal practice of piracy since multi-national corporations began using their African gulf coast as a toxic waste dumpground – imagine if the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico had not been an accident but was done on purpose!)

Why is it so many stories from Dakota akicita, from WWII, Korea and Vietnam contain references to how differently others looked at, or singled out the Dakota soldiers? The “difference” has been positive, for example younger soldiers in Korea looking up to Master Sgt. Woody Keeble and calling him “Chief,” or sometimes there was humor involved. We recall talking with the late Levi Williams who remarked about it.

Well, this was a service academy and not active duty, of course, but there is one such incident to share from Matthew’s experience – just as he was getting ready for graduation.

“We were all crowded into a large auditorium,” said Matt, “to take our final Coast Guard exams.”

It was crunch time; the midshipmen had crammed as much as possible to pass this final academic hurdle.

“There was a lady in charge of the testing,” he continued. He didn’t know where she was from, but her voice definitely sounded as though English was a second language.

There were actually two examinations, one for those who were testing for their third mate “deckhand” Merchant Marine certification, and those testing for third engineering certification.

Matt was a “deckie,” having decided from the beginning to go into the Army and not to serve in the merchant marine fleet.

“When she (the testing leader) called out to divide the students, she shouted ‘Deckies’ come here and ‘Engines’ here!”

“When she called out ‘Engines’ a bunch of the guys looked up and pointed at me. One called out, ‘He’s the Injun!’”

Matt laughed.

“Another time, another place,” he said, “it would have been an insult.”

“Here it was just funny.”

Well, Matt passed his exam, coming away from commencement having earned a Bachelor of Science Degree in Logistics and Intermodal Transportation as well as a third mate’s merchant marine certificate allowing him to serve on vessels of unlimited tonnage.

He plans to always keep that third mate’s certificate up-to-date. A close friend, from Austin, Texas, third engineer, already has a berth upon a LNG tanker. Pay is good for working on floating barges with highly flammable cargo. The fuel these ships carry is so hazardous that the tankers must load and unload at sea, well outside ports of call.

But Matt’s main objective remains to serve in the U.S. military, and he wants a career in the Army. Immediately following his Kings Point graduation, he attended a commissioning ceremony, where his officer boards were pinned to his Army uniform.

Today, Matt is spending the summer at home, working nights doing security work at Dakota Sioux Casino in Watertown, and looking forward to an active duty assignment at Ft. Lee, Virginia. That will happen as early as October. There he will take a 16-week officer training course in transportation.

Afterwards, he hopes to be assigned to a duty station at Seattle. But where he goes will depend on wherever the Army needs his service.

We wish him well. If his journey so far is an indicator of what’s yet to come, Matt will go a long way.