



# With Flying Colors: Confessions of a NavCad

*Richard L Upchurch*

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Barely escaping death in a light airplane when he was 10 years old, Tom Fitzgerald spends the next eight years avoiding all things challenging and adventurous. During his second year of college he is bored and out of money when he encounters a dashing US Navy pilot recruiting naval aviation cadets (NavCads). He listens to the debonair officer make his pitch and decides that if he is ever going to have a life, this is his big chance. He signs on the dotted line, determined to prove his mettle by becoming the dauntless warrior he admires in all of the recruiting posters. The following summer he reports to the Naval Air Training Command in Pensacola, Florida and is greeted by Technical Sergeant Dempsey Flanagan, a Marine more frightening than any non-commissioned officer he has ever seen on the silver screen. From that moment he knows that his life will never be the same. The days of flight training are occasionally terrifying, often uproarious, and always turbulent. A timid college sophomore who has never succeeded at anything, Tom is increasingly anxious before each flight, and then depressed about his mediocre performance when it is over.

On several occasions he barely escapes being washed out for lack of flying aptitude. Though tempted to quit, he decides to hang around and struggle through one disheartening day at a time, always hoping things will improve. Instead of getting better, however, the days get worse. He is hounded by his lack of self-confidence, the disturbing memories of his near-disastrous flying experience eight years earlier, the often expressed doubts of his parents and mentors, and the incessant pleas by his cousin and idol, a WWII fighter pilot, to give up his foolish idea and come home. As he progresses many of his classmates quit or wash out, and a few are killed in aircraft accidents. In the meantime, he must battle the ever-present harassment by an adversary from his youth who is now a fellow cadet. When Tom tries to boost his confidence by participating in reckless rites of passage, the results are usually comical and sometimes painful. He learns that what may seem a good idea over a few beers can prove to be a mistake with long-lasting consequences. Frustrated by the lack of encouragement from home, Tom joins a group of cadets who surrender their fate to guardian angels, accepting the premise held by many pilots that they are colleagues killed in combat or aircraft accidents. When he finally develops confidence in his flying, his childhood nemesis works hard to tear it down. Tired of dodging the daily attacks, Tom confronts the bigger and stronger cadet in impromptu wrestling and boxing matches and later, in a reckless, illegal dogfight over central Texas that nearly takes both their lives. It is after this frightening experience that their adversarial relationship takes a new and surprising twist. With graduation day approaching, Tom and his surviving classmates are given their assignments in the fleet. Although disappointed, they struggle to keep a positive attitude and vow to somehow be assigned together at their new duty station where they will strive to make their squadron the finest in the Marine Corps. Later that week, however, an unexplained tragedy torpedoed their renewed enthusiasm. But again, the NavCads' camaraderie binds them together. They bury their sadness and focus on the adventures awaiting them over the horizon. *With Flying Colors* is a must read for all young men and women about to make a major change in their lives. Journeying through Tom Fitzgerald's calamitous and humorous escapades while in quest of his Navy wings reminds us how people, culture, and events shape us--good or bad--into what we eventually become.

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