

# The Black N: Not Your Typical Varsity Letter

IN THE ACADEMY JUSTICE SYSTEM, THE MIDSHIPMEN ARE PROSECUTED BY TWO SEPARATE YET EQUALLY IMPORTANT GROUPS: THE OFFICERS WHO UNCOVER THE CRIME, AND THE COMMANDANT WHO PROSECUTES THE OFFENDERS. THESE ARE THEIR STORIES.

Time heals all wounds, and also softens the scar from receiving the Naval Academy's mysterious and unsanctioned Black N, turning it into a badge of honor for some. For almost 100 years, this "scarlet" letter for midshipmen of questionable virtue who have racked up more demerits than most has been a bit of a secret. Many notable, albeit miscreant, alumni claim to have them (one was just spotted by an alum sewn to a sweater hanging on a chair at the Pentagon) and a few proud and brave alumni responded to *Shipmate's* request for their Black N tales of woe. Visit [www.usna.com/seastories](http://www.usna.com/seastories) for more tall tales.



**Rear Admiral Charles Lanman '32, USN (Ret.), Commander George Lanman '57, USN (Ret.) provided on behalf of his father**

My father, Rear Admiral Charles B. Lanman '32, bragged about his having more Black Ns from frenching out (over the wall) than any of the rest of his class but no recognition was

allowed for this in *The Lucky Bag!*

My father told us that he would attend the debutante parties in Washington, DC, during the holiday period between Thanksgiving and New Years. To do this, he would regularly go over the wall. I never got the pure statistics on the number of times he was caught and served his Class A punishment on REINA MERCEDES, but he seemed to be very familiar with the ship when he returned to teach Navigation to the second class from 1939 to 1941. He and his roommate Albert Sidney Major '32 later put a whole battalion of second class on report for midshipmen rowdiness.



**Edwin Chapman '55**

I received my Black N during my youngster year for giving a first class midshipman officer the raspberry while marching to class. I was the guide-on for my platoon and we were marching down the walkway by Tecumseh singing Army-Navy game fight songs about two weeks before the big game.

We were stopped by a midshipman regimental commander and chastised for singing in ranks. As he walked away, our whole platoon let out a loud raspberry. He immediately turned around and stopped the platoon again, saying, "Everyone who did that, raise your hand!" I raised my hand, looked around at the platoon and saw no other hands raised! So, he took my name and said he was writing me up for disrespect to a superior officer. I expected a boatload of demerits, but to my surprise I received a Class A offense notice, reporting personally to the Commandant and the Superintendent. I was told that our class had a reputation of being unruly, and therefore I was being given the Class A to put the class on notice. My name and offense were yelled out in the evening meal hour for all to hear. Since my firsties did not think that the offense warranted a Class A, they sent a plebe over to this guy's room several evenings in a row to call him out for his action. Needless to say, I felt the same way.

My punishment was not marching off demerits, but mustering in to the Administration Office every half hour after evening meal until lights out. I had to run from the 4th Battalion quarters to the Administration Office for several weeks. I had to remain at Bancroft Hall at all times other than classes and missed going to the Army-Navy game. When the game was over, I had to ring the bell outside Bancroft Hall every hour until the Brigade came home. My 16th Company classmates awarded me a Black N to wear on my bathrobe. I also received the honor of being the 16th Company Commander for the first and third

sets. I am not sure that our Class of 1955 was any more “unruly” than those before us. In fact, we have had some very distinguished graduates from '55, I am proud to say!



**Bruce Dolph '56**

The mysterious Black N, you say? Well, I have two of them, as signified by a Black N with a star on my bathrobe. Mine were awarded for drinking and going over the wall. Actually, my preferred method of escape was to go “around the wall”—the sea wall, that is. Coming back after a night’s debauch

was another matter. Once I fell in the Severn with my overcoat on. Of course, it got soaked and very heavy. I’m not sure I would have gotten up on shore had not my buddy, Ed Zabrycki '56, reached down and pulled me up.

My second Class A was at Christmas time my first class year. I had planned on going out in my civvies after bed check—which I did. I had forgotten there was a concert that evening and hence a second bed check. My good buddy Bob Schatz '56 was Mid OW that night and kept delaying his report hoping I'd return. Finally, he had to report that Dolph was missing, and when I did return three sheets to the wind, my wives put me in the shower before sending me up to the Main Office where Commander John Drew, the OW, was waiting for me. He asked me, “Dolph, have you been drinking?” I replied, “I’d rather not answer that, Sir.” And no more was said about it. I got my 100 demerits, which gave me 145 (150 was OUT) and I walked on eggs the last six months until my cap went up in the air with the rest on 1 June. All’s well that ends well!

Those were the good old days...and as a buddy used to say, “Yeah, and the nights weren’t bad either!”



**Captain Douglas K. Rush '72, USNR (Ret.)**

When I was a plebe, I was Class A'd for going over the wall. As I recall, I received 100 demerits. I proudly have what I believe to be a rather unique Black N because mine was awarded for an offense committed during the Army-Navy football game week during a pep rally in Tecumseh Court late at night, chanting, “Beat Army!”

Some of our upperclassmen were daring us to go over the wall.



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Suddenly, the chant changed to “Over the Wall! Over the Wall!” A bunch of us broke away from the pep rally, climbed over the wall and ran around town yelling “Beat Army” at midnight. When our raiding party returned, the Officer of the Day and several of the midshipmen watch section members were waiting. We took off running but I made the mistake of stopping when the Officer of the Day yelled “Halt, that is an order!” He asked if I had gone over the wall. I answered yes. The result for obeying the order and answering truthfully: 100 demerits! At least I have a good story to tell.

This was at a period in the Academy’s history when the first class would put the restricted plebes in the corridors between the wings of Bancroft Hall, close the doors and windows and have us exercise in full dress uniforms and rig rifles (hold them at arms length until your strength gave out) until the windows were covered in moisture and the floors were wet with sweat. Fortunately a few weeks later, the Shah of Iran visited the Academy and reviewed a parade. He honored old traditions and, as a head of state, granted amnesty to offenders and pardoned all of the plebes. My demerits were eliminated. I still wear my Black N with pride on my Naval Academy bathrobe.

My second Class A, which occurred when I was a firsty, was deserved and not as interesting. ↕