

Soaring High – Q&A with Navy Commander Matt Sass '00

We had the opportunity to catch up with St. Mary's Springs Academy alumnus, Matt Sass. Sass is a class of 2000 graduate, a UW-Madison alumnus, and a Top Gun graduate. Recently promoted to Commander in the United States Navy, he is stationed at the Great Lakes Naval Base in Illinois, overseeing the Navy Talent Acquisition group for the Midwest region. Here's how SMSA gave Matt the roots needed to soar high.

Q: BEFORE COMING TO ST. MARY'S SPRINGS ACADEMY, YOU ATTENDED PUBLIC SCHOOL, WHAT MADE YOU SWITCH?

A: I played a lot of hockey growing up. A year before, when I was in eighth grade at Theisen Junior High, Mike Cowan was hired by SMSA as their high school coach. I'd always had a great relationship with him and had gone to some of his hockey camps, and I wanted to play for him in high school. He had been coaching in Waupun, but I knew I wouldn't play there. But when the opportunity presented itself, my family and I looked at transferring to SMSA and joining him there. Because my family couldn't afford tuition, I was able to get financial aid to help me attend. While it was sports that helped with the decision to attend SMSA, it was a decision that would impact everything else in my life.



Q. WHAT WAS IT LIKE ADJUSTING TO LIFE AT SMSA?

A. Coming from the public school system, which is a big school district, SMSA was much smaller. In larger schools, when you have 30 kids in a class, and you've got five or six classes, that's a lot of students. But with Springs, the classes were considerably smaller, so I was able to talk to teachers more openly, really ask questions and form that relationship. That led to closer relationships and bonds with everybody, including my friends and teachers. The teachers were way more approachable than any school I attended.

Q. WHAT IMPACT DID THOSE RELATIONSHIPS HAVE ON YOU?

A. I think the genesis of a smaller school is that the relationships you develop aren't superficial. They are deep. I know they're deep, because I can easily go ten years without seeing some of my high school classmates in person, and when I see them, we pick up as though a day hasn't passed. That's how you know you have a strong relationship. And that's what SMSA taught me: the importance of relationships, how to develop them, and how to maintain them.

Q. WHAT WERE YOU INVOLVED IN AT SMSA?

A. I was involved in sports throughout high school, including football, hockey and baseball. I was also part of the National Honors Society, Chess Club and Math Team. I also gave back by volunteering with the school and my home church, St. Paul's Episcopal, to support Loaves and Fishes and the Broken Bread program.

Q. WHAT WAS YOUR PLAN POST-GRADUATION?

A. I don't know if you've heard of this movie called Top Gun. It came out in 1986. While I was too young to see it in the theater, when it came out on VHS and Betamax, you better believe I watched it all the time! I watched it all through high school, and anyone who went to high school with me is going to know that I was known as the



Top Gun guy because I could quote the movie front to back. I was enamored with it. That movie sparked my passion for flying.

I knew I wanted to go to college, and I knew I wanted to fly planes, but I didn't know how to make ends meet. I also didn't know how to become a pilot, so I talked to a Navy recruiter about it. That's when I learned that to be a pilot, you have to be an officer and to become a Naval officer, I had to graduate from college. That meant I would need a Navy ROTC scholarship to make that happen.

Q. WHERE DID YOU ATTEND COLLEGE?

A. At the time, 54 schools across the country offered Navy ROTC. Because of my strong academic background, the relationships I built, and the well-rounded experience at St. Mary's Springs Academy, I was able to apply to Notre Dame, Marquette and UW-Madison. I got the Navy Reserve Officer Training Course Scholarship at those schools. I'd always wanted to be a Badger and settled on UW-Madison, where I majored in History.

Q. HOW DID YOU CHOOSE YOUR MAJOR?

A. When I enrolled in college, I thought I had to be an aeronautical or mechanical engineer or something to fly airplanes, and I started doing that when I got to Madison. I was terrible at it. It didn't excite me. I was just going through the motions. But I had an academic advisor who suggested I think about my major differently. She knew that my goal was to fly. She asked me if I thought there was a course for flying at the school. Of course, there wasn't, so she told me to find a course I was passionate about and wanted to learn more about, and it only took me a moment to decide. History is what excites me, and that's because of the impact two of my former history teachers at Springs had on me. Tom Kitchen and Roger Korinek were fantastic. Because of them, I would have taken multiple history courses at one time if that was an option.

Q. HOW HAS YOUR EDUCATION AT SMSA AFFECTED YOUR NAVAL CAREER?

A. My education gave me the foundation for what ended up being my military career. You might be surprised to learn I am not Maverick, but I am Goose. When I got into the Navy ROTC program, I started learning about the Navy as a whole. While I dreamed of being a pilot, a leader, the one in charge was the mission commander. The pilots are more like bus drivers. It's everybody in the back that's doing the work. I rode on a P-3 as the mission commander and tactical coordinator. Because of the foundation I received at SMSA, I could take the technical inputs and formulate them into the science and art of warfare. It's the coolest job in the military.

Q. IF YOU COULD GIVE ADVICE TO SMSA STUDENTS, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

A. Develop options. Get every bit of education you can, and every time you can learn something new, learn it. I learned how to do this; you might not need it now, but maybe it'll come back into play later.

Diversify your thoughts, and you're learning. When it's time to focus on something, focus on it because no two people are the same, and no two scenarios will be the same. What works for one might not work for you. So, cultivate options, and you will better set yourself up for success.

