

Testing their limits

By [Tom Waring](#) 10/19/2011 1:01 pm



Thomas Hipwell (left), Matthew Fitzsimmons, Ian Wanjek, Darius Simmons and Brian Comisky are members of a United States Naval Sea Cadet Corps at the Naval Support Activity base in Lawndale. TOM WARING / TIMES PHOTO

Ian Wanjek is a high school junior who is looking forward to an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy.

The 16-year-old is preparing for the application process by building a resume of strong academics and participation in sports and initiating contact with the office of Rep. Mike Fitzpatrick.

The teenager is also a member of the San Antonio Division of the United States Naval Sea Cadet Corps, which is based at the Naval Support Activity base at Oxford and Robbins avenues in Lawndale.

“I wanted to join to get a taste of the military,” said Wanjek, who learned about the group from the Navy’s Web site. “It’s been fun. There are a

lot of once-in-a-lifetime opportunities.”

The Naval Sea Cadets Corps was chartered by Congress in 1958 to provide American youths with a drug- and alcohol-free environment to foster their leadership abilities, broaden their horizons through hands-on training and guide them to becoming mature young adults. Females were permitted to join in the 1970s.

There are about 480 divisions in the United States, including ones at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard and at the Willow Grove Joint Reserve Base. In all, there are some 9,700 cadets.

“It’s growing every year,” said USNSCC Ensign Jay Meisner, the local division’s training officer.

The local division is named in honor of the San Antonio, a ship that has served as the base for Hurricane Katrina efforts and as part of anti-piracy forces off Somalia. Its motto is “Never Retreat, Never Surrender.”

The group’s original home was Crest-Lawn American Legion Memorial Post 832, at 301 E. Godfrey Ave. in Crescentville.

“They were such good hosts,” said USNSCC Lt. Joan Larkin, the division’s commanding officer.

The corps is open to any American age 11 to 17 who does not have a felony record. Members are allowed to remain through their high school graduation. Eleven percent of Navy Midshipmen are former sea cadets.

Larkin has been involved with the corps for eight years, including seven with the Willow Grove-based Liberty

Bell Squadron. Meisner is a former sea cadet who enjoys staying involved.

“It’s a way of giving back,” he said.

The local division began drilling at the NSA base in August. The group gets together for one weekend a month for drilling and special events and trips. The young men marched in the recent Pulaski Day Parade in Center City.

“It’s been outstanding. We get to do different activities,” said Matthew Fitzsimmons, a 14-year-old from Cheltenham who especially enjoyed the trip to Norfolk, Va.

Larkin and Meisner agree that cadets learn authority, responsibility, time management and leadership. They gain life experiences and make lifelong friends, and are encouraged to be committed to their education.

“Their schoolwork comes first,” Meisner said.

During an awards dinner held recently at the Hyatt Regency hotel on Penn’s Landing, Wanjek was honored with the Navy League of the United States Youth Medal and Ribbon as the San Antonio Division’s Sea Cadet of the Year.

A cadet remains in good standing through various ways, including attendance, inspections, lessons and physical training. The Cadet of the Year must display initiative, teamwork and an adherence to military customs and courtesies.

Last month, at the time of 10th-anniversary remembrances of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Wanjek and the others spent a weekend at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland.

“It was educational. We got to go to the International Spy Museum, toured Air Force Two and saw Air Force One land,” said Thomas Hipwell, a 14-year-old from Cheltenham.

“You only get to do it if you are in the sea cadets,” added Wanjek, a student at Conwell-Egan High School.

Next month, the group will travel to Plumstead Christian High School to honor veterans with a flag-raising ceremony and a brunch. Members will also take a CPR certification course.

In the early part of 2012, there will be Navy-gearred trips to Norfolk, home of the largest navy base in the world, and Annapolis, Md., home of the U.S. Naval Academy

“They need exposure to the military and how they do their jobs,” Larkin said.

Darius Simmons and Brian Comisky, 14-year-olds from Morrisville, like the trips, training, drills and family atmosphere of the group.

“It’s been a lot of fun. It’s really cool. Like Wanjek said, very few people get to do these kinds of things, especially with their friends,” Comisky said. ••

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