

2. 90 DAY WONDER

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Maurice tried to volunteer to become a Marine Corps officer. However, he was color-blind, the basis for many jokes over the years about mismatched socks and off-color ties; and also the reason he failed the Marine physical. He didn't give up. He was old enough at 28, with a child on the way, to probably avoid the military draft. As a lawyer, he most likely could have at least avoided combat duty. However, he decided to serve. He knew someone who obtained a copy of the Navy



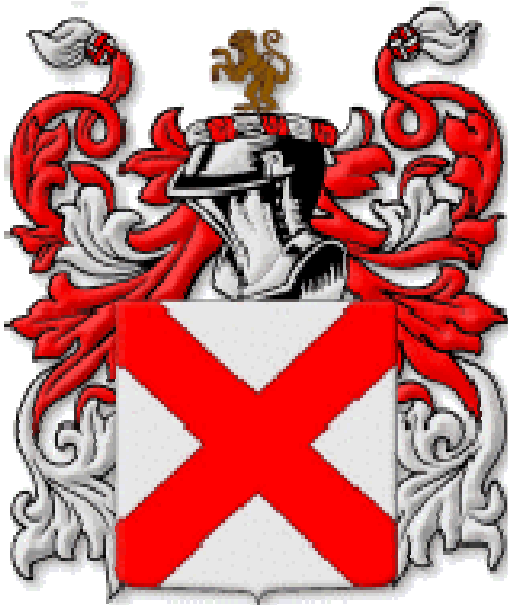
High School graduation, St. Mary's Milford class of 1931

eye test for color-blindness. By memorizing the patterns on the pages, he passed the exam to become a Naval officer. One wonders what handicap color-blindness might be for an officer on a ship at war, but Maurice was sure to double-check with others onboard regarding such occasional challenges as colored light signals; and the Navy apparently never discovered it, despite a number of later physical exams.

It is not known if Maurice had ever taken a sea voyage or even set foot on a ship. He was, however, a good swimmer. His parents, Edward J. and Delia Ryan Fitzgerald, had crossed the Atlantic by steamship in the early twentieth century to emigrate from Ireland. Edward was 17 or 18 at the time of his crossing. They never had the means for a return visit. Their early memories, as relayed by their sons, were of missed family left behind in the town of Caherciveen in County Kerry and of the then grinding poverty on Ireland's west coast. The population there is only now approaching the levels it had reached in the 1840's before potato famine, starvation, and massive emigration left empty stone cottages by the thousands. Many can still be seen there, off the bus-busy track of the Ring of Kerry tourist drive, in a now prosperous Ireland.

The Fitzgerald family, descendants of Normans, held royal title and large tracts of land with castles in Ireland, starting in the 15th century. Many had the first name "Maurice." The names William and Edward were also common in the family, indicating either a respect for tradition or a lack of originality. But in either case any historical study becomes a challenge sorting out repeating names. With changes brought about by war, religious discrimination, and brutal politics the Fitzgerald family wealth and power were ancient

history for most Fitzgerald descendants long before Maurice's father Edward was born in 1886. Edward's parents, Maurice and Eleanor O'Connell Fitzgerald, lived in Caherciveen, Maurice having moved from the village of Glenmare near Waterville. This Maurice made a living as a cooper, producing wooden casks and barrels.



Fitzgerald Family coat of arms and crest. Note the monkey at the top, a story for another day perhaps.

Some family lore in America says Edward's leaving Ireland was somehow related to the destruction of a bridge, done in defiance of British rule before Irish independence. In Ireland, some say he and his mother did not get along, adding impetus to his decision to leave. The truth is unknowable now, except that his decision, and those of our other ancestor immigrants, was made in part in hopes of better lives for their children. We believe that his mother was related to Daniel O'Connell (1775-1847), who was famous in Ireland as "The Liberator", for pressing the rulers of Ireland through non-violent means to relax unjust anti-Catholic laws. O'Connell became non-violent after seeing a terrible loss of life during the rebellion of 1798, led bravely but disastrously by another Edward Fitzgerald, not at all a close relative of the Fitzgerald's of our story here, but from the same original line—and with the "Fitzgerald chin." Monuments to Daniel include the O'Connell Memorial Church, the only such church worldwide named for a lay person who isn't a saint—being perhaps the best of both worlds. In any case, revolution of one kind or another was in Maurice's father's background.

Maurice's mother, Delia, came to America from Ireland separately after his father, and they were married in Milford, Massachusetts, where they settled. He worked for a time as an iceman, cutting ice from frozen ponds and delivering it to homes before refrigeration was common, but mostly as a factory worker at Draper Corporation in Hopedale, Mass. He was also a part-time prize fighter, a fact underscored by his slightly off-center nose. He died in 1940 at age 54 of heart disease, when Maurice was 27. He was a hard worker and sometimes



Maurice (R), with brother Bill (L), and their parents, in the late 1930's or early 1940. A Maurice, a William, and an Edward in the same photo.

a heavy drinker, but his best epitaph was perhaps spoken by his daughter-in-law, Frances, my mother, who said simply that he always made her laugh.

Maurice was born in Milford on December 15, 1913, the third and last of three sons. His older brothers were Maurice, yes the same name again, who died an infant, and William. Maurice and his brother Bill, my father, played multiple sports well, especially baseball. Bill stood out more as an athlete and Maurice excelled more as a student. Maurice was St. Mary's High School class valedictorian, and was active in debating and dramatics. He graduated "cum laude" with an A.B. from Boston College in 1936. He ranked 4th in a class of 350 despite having taken off one year to work in the loud, hot, sometimes dangerous foundry at Draper Corp. He needed to make money to continue his studies, as this was during the Great Depression. He also needed a suit to attend law school, his dream, so Bill had his wedding suit re-tailored to fit Maurice's smaller frame. He graduated from BC Law School in 1939, number 1 academically in his class. He completed his law studies in the allotted

3 years, but only by working an 8 hour night shift at a rubber boot factory. He was paid \$16 per week for 40 hours, equivalent to about \$217 in 2005 dollars. A classmate at BC was Thomas "Tip" O'Neill, who went on to become Speaker of the US House of Representatives, after also serving in the Navy. Maurice was his law class Vice President, with Tip having managed in a controversial election to get just enough votes to be President.

Maurice was admitted to the bar in Mass. on October 25, 1939. He lived at his parents' home at 8 Quinlan Street and practiced law in Milford from then until June 1940. He was probably not very busy, as the times were still economically hard. He then accepted a position in Brooklyn as an associate editor at the American Law Book Company. He was one of the editors of Corpus Juris Secundum, a compendium of US law that is still published. He held this position until he went into the Navy. His father had died in April of 1940 and his mother, Delia, went with Maurice to live in Brooklyn. He was her favorite, and she kept close tabs on his social life. After about 6 months, she fell down some stairs. She was not seriously injured, but she returned to Milford.



Maurice and Rita at Princeton

Maurice had been introduced by a friend to Rita Sherman of Medway, Mass., a dance instructor and daughter of a local car dealer. She and her sister went to New York on holiday, and went to see him. After a short courtship, they married in Medway on August 30, 1941 in a very small ceremony with his brother Bill as best man. Rita's father didn't think Maurice was good enough for his daughter, and referred to him as a pauper. Maurice and Rita lived in Brooklyn together for about a year, at 917 President Street, close to Prospect Park. She went with him to Princeton for his first 8 weeks of Navy training. After Princeton, she returned to Medway. Their only child, a daughter Marianne, was born February 15, 1943. Rita lived in her parents' home while Maurice served on the first of two east-coast minesweepers that would precede his duty on YMS 339. Rita became estranged from Maurice around this time and neither he, nor

any Fitzgerald, were invited to his daughter's Christening, even though his ship was in nearby Boston at that time. For many couples the war's long separation would lead to divorce. In fact, 1946 had the highest divorce rate in US history until 1981, and was higher than the current rate now. Such would be the fate of their marriage.



Like warships, officers in the Navy are “commissioned”; appointed by the President and confirmed by act of the Senate under Article II of the Constitution. Maurice was thus formally accepted into naval service on September 7, 1942 at the lowest officer rank of Ensign, in the US Naval Reserves. He reported for his first active duty on October 5th for an 8 week officer indoctrination program held at Princeton University. Many prominent colleges were then being used for similar purposes. The country needed millions more trained sailors, soldiers, airmen and marines and the officers to lead them, as badly as it needed new warships. At Princeton, Maurice learned the very basics of seamanship, navigation, communications, tactics, naval weapons and engineering, along with military procedures and regulations, leadership and more. These subjects are taught to Naval Academy midshipmen and to equivalent Naval ROTC college midshipmen over a 4 year period that includes daily classes or drills during the school week as well as 3 summer training programs of 6 weeks each, almost as long individually as the total time Maurice had at Princeton.

Ensign Fitzgerald, USNR; picture probably taken in the fall of 1942 .



There would be more training later for Maurice, but for now this was all. Officers from these programs were derisively called “90 day wonders” by career military men because of how much more they needed to know to be effective. The Navy hoped they would learn more during their first assignments, working next to only slightly more experienced officers in many cases, so that they would be at least adequate when they went “in harm’s way”, as John Paul Jones first called naval combat.

As illustrative of what Maurice didn’t know when he left Princeton, he told the story of how he had orders to report to his first ship, the minesweeper USS Hawk (AM 133). He walked down a long pier, Navy ships on both sides, carrying his clumsy sea-bag, orders under one arm. Arriving at the ship, and up a set of reversing stairs, across a gangway to the quarterdeck, he re-

ported for duty. The officer and sailors on watch there could still be heard laughing loudly as Maurice went back down the gangway, down the stairs and down the pier to where the Hawk was actually berthed. He had mistakenly reported to a destroyer, a ship much different in appearance and much larger than the Hawk. He laughed about it himself, years later, but it is telling that he remembered.

Such was the initial level of knowledge of the “90 day wonder” officers who America sent off to world war. And Maurice had been at Princeton not 90 days but less than 60. But the truth is that experienced career officers made up only a small core part of the eventually needed force. They held the line, and more, in the early days of the war. But it was those “wonders” and their enlisted counterparts, who learned mostly by doing, who contributed most to victory.



Maurice's “dog tag”, serial number 194923;
worn at all times at sea in wartime.