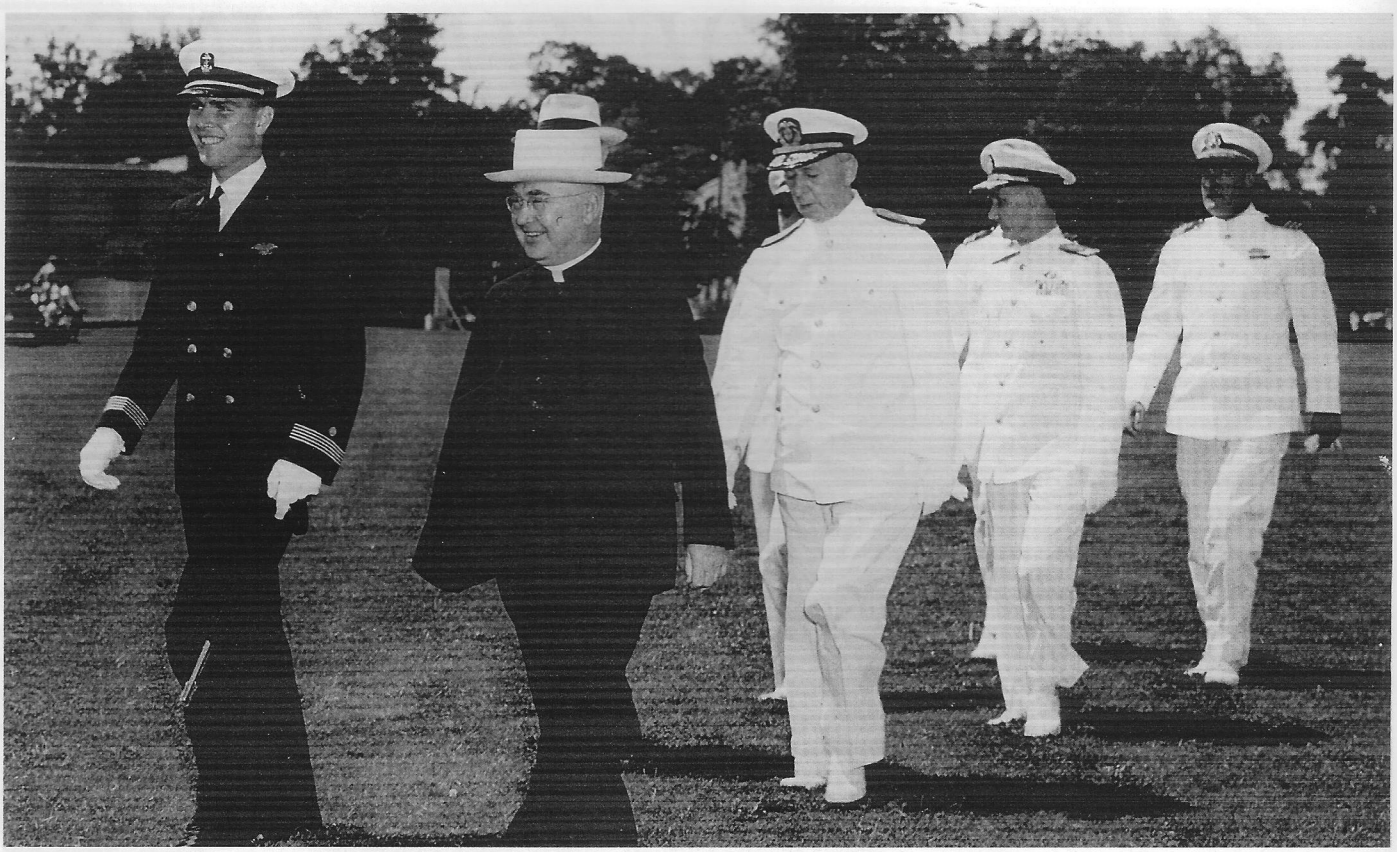

Cadet Midshipman John Tucker, Regimental Commander at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy (left), escorting Francis Cardinal Spellman to review the regiment in 1950.

After years of living in tight quarters at sea, John Tucker has settled into a large comfortable study. Nautical books fill the shelves and pictures of his favorite ships line the walls. He motions me toward a couch and relaxes in a nearby chair. On the wall behind the couch is a framed front page of the New York *Daily News*. Spread across the front page is the picture of a smiling Mamie Eisenhower escorted to a press interview by a young U.S. Lines officer named John Tucker. I know this is going to be a good visit when he opens a photo album filled with memorabilia and he tells me, "Do I have some stories for you." Over the next six hours we talked about his career, ships, people, United States Lines and the difficulty of family life when away at sea.

A life at sea was a natural choice for John Tucker. His roots go back to Newfoundland and a family of master mariners that included captains on both sides of the family. He points to one of the pictures. "See that brigantine up there? It's the brig *Heidi*—my great grandfather John H. Tucker was skipper. That was painted in Genoa, Italy, in 1856," he said. While he was a boy, the family moved to the Boston area and, after graduating from high school, he joined the Navy. In World War II, he served in the Pacific, returned as a decorated veteran and enrolled in the Merchant Marine Cadet Corps.

The first story he shared was how he met his future wife. It was a late evening at LaGuardia Airport and two people were searching for transportation to Great Neck, Long Island. John Tucker was broke and not sure how to get to the Merchant Marine Academy. Penny was looking for an escort through the unpleasant elevated Long Island Railroad station in Flushing. "He was tall and in uniform so I asked him where he was going," she said. John's first reaction was "Now there's something nice," and he readily agreed to share the taxi and train ride. After a few lonely weekends at the academy, a determined John Tucker returned to her apartment building, and rang doorbells looking for "a blonde dental hygienist".

"When I finally found her we went out to the local beer joint for a cheeseburger and that's how it began," he recalled.

John Tucker graduated in 1950 from the United States Merchant Marine Academy where he earned the rank of regimental commander and a rating of "outstanding" in academics and leadership. With his background, he had no trouble landing a job in New York with United States Lines, which at the time was one of the leading American shipping companies. As the American-flag carrier on the North Atlantic, the company operated the luxury passenger liner *America* and a new superliner—the *United States*—was on order. The main source of income came from 46 freighters sailing to and from Europe and the Far East. Tucker was told to report for a ship assignment after Christmas. He was home in Boston for the holidays when an urgent call came from the Marine Superintendent: the freighter *American Traveler* is sailing out of Boston on Christmas Day and they need a third mate. Would he take the job? The answer was yes. "I didn't know it at the time," he said, "but it was the