

Willie Keith: A Life Changed

Sometimes it takes an event in one's life to change a person. In Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny*, it took the navy to change the life of Willie Keith.

Before Willie joined the navy he was living the easy life. His mother came from a wealthy family so Willie had no problems financially. He never really took anything seriously. He didn't even take Princeton seriously. "But his real career at Princeton had consisted of playing the piano and inventing bright little songs for parties and shows." Willie just took everything he had for granted. When he graduated from Princeton he probably could have gotten a pretty good job or gone on to earn his master's degree. Instead, he elected to become a piano player in a cocktail lounge. "He was not paid much. The fee was, in fact, the smallest permitted by the musicians union for a piano player. Willie didn't really care, so long as fifty-dollar bills flowed from his mother." That was his life before the navy. In the navy, all of that changed.

Once in the navy he learned that he couldn't really rely on his mother for everything. He was still careless and naive about some things but he did learn that he was on his own. At Furnard Hall he had received 48 demerits and was almost expelled. Willie then had to push himself to be on top of everything. The 48 demerits were not just going to go away and he couldn't have his mother do something about it. Willie had to be the one to get himself out of the mess he had created. Even when his father came to tell Willie that he could probably get him transferred to the army Willie said, "Will you do me a favor, Dad?...Tell Mom, as nicely as you can, to call off Uncle Lloyd." His Uncle Lloyd was in the army and could have gotten Willie transferred but Willie decided to stay with the navy. Little by little he was learning to become more dependent on himself, instead of dependent on his mother.

When Willie finally got on board *The Caine* he was given the job of decoding messages. There was one time when he forgot to decode a dispatch and left it in his pants for three days. Because of that incident Willie did not get a very good fitness report and was put in hack although DeVriess had given him permission to attend the admiral's party. After his meeting with DeVriess he had received a Bible from his father. His father told him to read Ecclesiastes 9:10, it read, "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest." After reading that Willie decided to stay on board the ship and not go to the admiral's party. Here was another chance to escape from the navy yet Willie stayed with it.

Nearing the end of the book, Willie had worked his way up to become the Executive Officer. When the kamikaze plane hit *The Caine*, Willie did not panic. He was able to take control of the situation. While some of the crew are abandoning ship Willie says,

Now all hands, this is the executive officer. I ask you not to abandon ship. I've had no damage reports from any space but the after fireroom. The noise you heard was some ready ammunition popping on the galley deck-house. Things look pretty bad there for a minute. The captain gave permission to abandon but he also gave permission for volunteers to stay aboard and try to save the ship.If we abandon it we'll all get dumped into the personnel pool in Okinawa. If we stick with it we'll probably pull an overhaul in the States. Stay with the ship.

Willie could have never stayed so calm if it hadn't been for his navy training. When we first met him he was living the easy life and waiting for his mother to give him fifty-dollar bills. Now, Willie has learned how to take responsibility for his actions.

As we have seen, Willie's experiences with the navy changed him to be a better person. The 48 demerits and the forgotten dispatch were the steps he had to take to become the officer that was able to take control of a situation. His encounter with the navy changed him from a boy to a man.

