Navy got their man

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Rickover, we would be interviewed by at least three other members of his staff.

From the check-in point 25 of us were packed into a waiting room no larger than 10 feet by 10 feet. From this cubicle we were fetched for preliminary interviews.

In the meantime, we waited, recalling other 'Rickover-stories' we had heard. One story was of an applicant who stood trembling before Rickover, who demanded of the young man: 'Do you have 30 seconds to make money?' With his hand, the applicant swept clear the top of the Admiral's desk, papers and pencils flying about the room. 'I'm not angry yet,' Rickover replied.

Really worried now, the fellow looked around the room. By the desk was a glinting, meticulously detailed model of the USS Nautilus, the first nuclear-powered submarine. He picked it up and smashed it to bits on the Admiral's desk.

There was quiet for a moment, then an explosion from the Admiral: 'Get Out!'

The applicant was accepted. But it would be hours before my turn would come. My three preliminaries interviews with aides to Rickover were welcome relief from the nervous wait. Although the interviewers were careful to maintain strict formality with me, the half-hour interviews were bearable. Questions ranged from 'How much time a week do you spend studying?,' to 'Derive the formula for the volume of a cone.' But always it was stressed that these interviews were simply to give the Admiral more information when he went to make his decision on us. It was clear that Rickover was god.

At one, ten of us were moved to the Admiral's conference room. Two senior officers briefed us on how to walk in to the Admiral's office and what to say. 'Use no bullshit with the Admiral. The Admiral has been known to say, 'Don't give me any of that bullshit. Don't walk in there wanting your patriotic little flag. If you're in this for the money and he asks you tell him that. Don't try and oversell the Admiral.'

I sat waiting, afraid that everyone in the room would hear my heartbeat. Then an aide turned around and sang out my name, badly mispronounced, 'Munkassay, Admiral Rickover wants to see you first.' I stood up and thought, 'No, not me! Not first!'

I walked into Rickover's inner office, keeping my eyes fixed on the little frail man behind the big desk. Usually, I just made that up because I have absolutely no recollection of what his desk looked like. And of course, I had absolutely no recollection of what his desk looked like. And the office was, or even whether there was anyone else in the room beside the two of us. I didn't notice any of that.

I sat down and waited. Rickover was eating apple slices out of a paper plate on his desk. I braced, expecting a question like, 'Why are you graduating so soon?' (for which I had carefully prepared an answer which I desperately wouldn't remember.) 'How long have you been interested in our program?'
The Admiral sat back and asked, 'What does Munkassay mean?'

I fought back a smile. It seemed funny. I wanted to say, 'I'm not here to ask about my last name.'

"I mean, from the town of Munkassay, sir."

"Where's that?"

"Hungary, sir."

"What do you think people started using first names in Europe?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Gipsies."

"The sixteenth century?"

"No, it was much later than that."

Rickover pursed his mouth.

"Do you think you could be an outstanding physicist?"

"Yes, sir, if I tried hard enough."

"No, you couldn't. Get out."

I trembled my way out of the office, and looked into the scared face of the next fellow waiting to go in.

I was sent upstairs to a secretary, who somehow already knew what the Admiral's decision was. With great ceremony, she looked at a piece of paper on her desk and said, 'Congratulations. Mr. Munkassay, the Admiral wants you.'