Al Sullivan once planned to go to Harvard Law School but thought it sounded too boring. After graduating from Dartmouth, he became a steel-worker instead and eventually made his way to the university’s Department of Political Science – 40 years ago.
Many roads lead to the classroom

by Bill Cunningham

When Al Sullivan came to Texas State University 40 years ago, he already had completed one full career as a 20-year Navy pilot, not to mention stints as a steel worker, logger, cowboy and iron miner.

He joined a political science department of a dozen instructors, a number that has nearly doubled, and was back this fall teaching a full load of classes with 81 years and a successful bout with cancer behind him.

A native of Boston (and Irish to the core), Sullivan was no stranger to Texas when President Billy Mac Jones hired him to begin teaching in the spring semester of 1970, but then he was no stranger to many places throughout the United States and the world.

Sullivan has deep Boston roots. He is a graduate of Boston Latin School, the nation’s oldest school, founded by the town fathers in 1635, a year before the founding of Harvard. Among the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence, five attended Boston Latin School.

Sullivan’s students always remember his rich sense of humor, so it would come as no surprise to them that when he attended a reunion at his old preparatory school and saw a plaque honoring the five Declaration signers and other illustrious alums, he declared, “What’s Benjamin Franklin doing up there? He flunked out!” He says he heard Franklin was weak at mathematics.

Sullivan enlisted in the Navy in 1945 but served only one year before returning to peacetime in the United States. Going “on the road” after the war, he hitchhiked across the country, working in a logging camp in Oregon, a ranch in Montana, and a blacksmithing shop and iron mine in California.

He returned to New England long enough to get his bachelor’s degree at Dartmouth College before hitting the road once again. “I was planning to go to Harvard Law School, but it looked so boring I couldn’t stand it. Houston was going like crazy after World War II, so I moved there and took a job in a steel mill at a dollar and a half an hour,” Sullivan recalled.

Back to the Navy
His civilian career was to be short-lived, however, as 1950 brought the Korean War. He volunteered to go back into the Navy.

Before his 40-year (so far) career at Texas State, Sullivan had a 20-year career as a Navy pilot, retiring as a lieutenant commander. He had enlisted in 1945, served one year, then re-enlisted in 1950 when the Korean War broke out.
His career as a pilot drew him into one of the most historic events of the conflict between the South Korean allies and Communist North Korea. It also began a close association with Gen. Mark Clark, a World War II hero who became commander of the United Nations forces in Korea in 1952.

Serving as a helicopter rescue pilot for downed fliers, Sullivan participated in the Naval aerial assaults on heavily defended bridges in North Korea during the winter of 1951-52. Those missions were reported by war correspondent James Michener, who wrote the 1953 novel *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* based on his wartime coverage. The novel was made into movie in 1954.

Sullivan's skills brought him to the attention of Gen. Clark, who made him his personal pilot, not only for military duties as commander but also for diplomatic and recreational duties such as flying him to dinners and fishing trips with the emperor of Japan.

After the Korean conflict, Sullivan was assigned to a naval station in Rhode Island. He earned a master's degree in political science at the University of Rhode Island before being deployed to the aircraft carrier USS Wasp in the Mediterranean, Baltic and North seas.

His next assignment – as an ROTC instructor at the University of Utah – gave him the opportunity, again studying nights and summer sessions, to earn his Ph.D. in political science.

His last assignment in the Navy was as a flight instructor at the advanced jet-training base in Meridian, Miss. While there, he began his teaching career with night classes at Meridian Junior College and the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg.

**A wife and new career**

The Meridian newspaper announced his retirement from the Navy with the headline “Lt. Cmdr. Sullivan, ‘The Flying Professor,’ Finally Folds His Wings.”

Sullivan's Navy career had brought him not only adventure but also a partner in life. While taking cadet training in Pensacola, Fla., he was scheduled to take tests to assess his potential as a flight trainer. Upon his arrival at the Navy hospital where the tests were scheduled, he met a young Wave who served as secretary to the psychologist administering the tests.

Macel Sullivan said she was struck by the cadet's “cavalier” manner, and romance ensued. They were married in 1952 and now have two children – Edward and Susan. While Al Sullivan teaches political science, Macel is the real politician in the family, having served 18 years in San Marcos as justice of the peace before retiring.

The Sullivans arrived in the Deep South at an exciting and tumultuous time with the blooming of the civil rights movement. Southern Mississippi was the first public university in the state to integrate its student body, and Sullivan taught its first integrated night class.

The couple was not immune from the tension of that time in Mississippi history. “I remember attending meetings to support civil rights where there were FBI agents checking under chairs and tables for bombs,” Macel Sullivan recalled. “It was terrible. Churches and synagogues were being bombed or burned, and Navy cadets from Meridian had to join the search for the bodies of the civil rights workers” whose murders inspired the movie *Mississippi Burning.*

A helicopter rescue pilot himself, Sullivan is rescued from the sea after his helicopter was shot down off the coast of Korea during the Korean War. Sullivan participated in the air attacks of bridges in North Korea that James Michener wrote about in his novel *The Bridges of Toko-Ri.*
Back to Texas

Sullivan had planned to move to South Carolina to rejoin his former commander, Mark Clark, who was serving as president of The Citadel in Charleston after his military retirement. But before Sullivan could make the move, Clark retired from the post, and the Sullivans took the opportunity to head to Texas, where Al had been a flight instructor in Corpus Christi and a steel worker in Houston.

“Dr. Jones offered me the job as an associate professor, and in two years I was made full professor,” Sullivan recalled. “Texas State has been good to me ever since.”

His courses on the governments of Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, China, Japan and India are fondly remembered by his students not only because of their educational value but also because of Sullivan’s entertaining sense of humor.

Upon moving to San Marcos, the Boston native was amused to see that one of the streets in his neighborhood was named Hughson Street, which brought back memories of a famous Boston Red Sox pitcher who once started three games in the 1946 World Series. A friend informed him that the street was indeed named for the pitcher, “Tex” Hughson, a native of Hays County who returned to San Marcos after retiring from baseball. Sullivan made a point of finding Hughson, and the two began a long friendship in which they would reminisce about such famed Red Sox as Ted Williams, Johnny Pesky, Bobby Doerr and Dom DiMaggio.

Growing the department

Sullivan initiated foreign study programs in Texas State’s Department of Political Science and taught students in Berlin and the University of Moscow during the Cold War.

With his colleague, the late Randall Bland, he co-authored *Texas Government Today*, one of the best-selling texts on his adopted state’s political system.

In addition to his university career, Sullivan for years used his skills as an artist and humorist as an editorial cartoonist for the *San Marcos Record*, a sideline he had also pursued while stationed in Pensacola.

In spite of the colorful image of Texas politics (and some of his own disparaging cartoons), Sullivan praises the roles played by Texas governors of both parties during his tenure here. (However, he said he does regret that former Lt. Gov. Bill Hobby, whom he considers one of the great minds in Texas public service, never sought election as governor.)

A continuing refrain in conversation with him is “Texas State has been good to me.” He cites not only his rapid promotion to full professor, but also things like support in initiating new programs and care during his recent successful battle with cancer.

Sullivan said this summer that he was eager to begin his 40th year on the campus on the Hill. His students can look forward to his witticisms, impersonations and vast collection of Irish jokes as he continues to prove that education can be an entertaining and rewarding experience.