

# THE SUN CHRONICLE

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## Scholars who found no escape from war reunite

### Special WWII Army group gathers in Mansfield

BY RICK FOSTER  
SUN CHRONICLE STAFF

#### MANSFIELD

**T**hey were the best and brightest — the boys who went to war with slide rules and physics textbooks to help smash the Axis.

When the war was over, members of the Army Specialized Training Program would go home without the college degrees and officers' commissions they had been promised. But they would fight their

way into history in France and Germany, and write a record of valor at the Battle of the Bulge.

About 75 survivors of 380 men sent to study mathematics, chemistry and engineering at Providence College during World War II are holding a reunion this weekend at the Holiday Inn of Mansfield.

Members plan to tour the PC campus today and dedicate a plaque in memory of 37 comrades who fell in combat.



RICK FOSTER

### Soldier-scholars

Veterans George Fisher, left, and Jack Kolman reminisce over a picture of members of their training unit taken at Providence College in 1943 before the group was sent to war.

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"I thought it would be a good place to sit out the war," said George Fisher of Palm Beach, Fla., one of 150,000 soldiers selected for the program nationwide. "We even had a name for it: All Safe Til Peace."

In the end, it didn't work out that way. With the invasion of Normandy looming, Uncle Sam needed men in the ranks, not think tanks, and the program was canceled.

Former students were abruptly shipped out to infantry units to become replacements in the fight against Germany.

## **The brightest**

Beginning in 1943, the ASTP program selected the brightest men then in the service to train at more than 120 colleges and universities throughout the nation. The goal was to supply men to the military who had advanced skills in engineering, mathematics, medical and dental specialties and foreign languages.

"We were promised four years of college and officer status," Fisher said. "But the program was terminated after six months. One night at about 2 in the morning we were told to pack our clothes. They put us on a windowless train and dumped us in Tennessee, where they made us part of an infantry division."

The college men, many with no formal military training to that point, were ridiculed as the "little college boys" by some of the seasoned infantry troops. But the former students would soon prove they were tough as well as smart.

Assigned to the 328th Infantry Regiment of the 26th Yankee Division, the Providence College men landed at Omaha Beach three months after D-Day and were immediately thrown into the American army's drive across the Rhine into Germany. They were involved in battles from October through the Battle of the Bulge the following January.

## **The bravest**

Advancing toward a hill on the way into Germany, Julius Roth was one of 25 men out of an original 90 who survived an ambush by German troops.

"A patrol had gone ahead and found everything all clear, but as soon as we got up the hill they murdered us," Roth said.

Roth survived the barrage by diving into a furrow in a plowed field.

Larry Treff, another Florida resident, was taken prisoner by German troops after being shot while covering the escape of five fellow soldiers.

Treff remained in a German prison camp for three weeks and later spent 21 months in a hospital recovering from wounds.

Long after the war, Treff was awarded a bronze star for his action.

Such bravery was not unusual among the former students said

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resort of mankind.'**

Leo Wurtzel

▲

Jack Kolman, a retired businessman from Brooklyn, N.Y.

"Our men acquitted themselves brilliantly, often taking on leadership of units when needed," Kolman said. "We were good soldiers."

Kolman himself still carries a bullet in his body from a wound received during the war.

The Providence contingent suffered its heaviest casualties during the Battle of the Bulge, during which 80,000 allied soldiers were killed or wounded in a six-week period. Many who escaped death had close calls.

Bob Lippin, a New York optometrist, was captured while on patrol at the end of January 1945. He and a number of other American captives were being marched behind German lines when an American P51 fighter plane thundered toward them on a strafing run.

At the last second, the low-flying pilot recognized the soldiers as American prisoners and peeled off.

Lippin was later liberated from a German prison camp by British soldiers.

## **Thank you Providence**

Most of the men's favorite memories are of their early experiences in Providence, where the trainees were warmly befriended by city residents.

"The people there were very fond of us," said Leo Wurtzel, who along with Fisher helped organize the reunion. "In fact, the welcome there bordered on the wierd."

Wurtzel was dating a local girl but was having trouble getting out to visit her on the weekend.

The young lady's father solved the problem by dropping his own car off at the campus so Wurtzel could drive out and pick up his daughter for dates.

"We were treated like sons," Wurtzel said. "That's the best way I can describe it."

The soldiers were also closely looked after by the Dominican priests who formed the Providence College faculty. If a student was having trouble with a calculus problem, Wurtzel said, a faculty member might sit up with him for hours offering help.

Despite pride in serving in an elite unit, Wurtzel said the brutality of combat is what created the most indelible impression during his wartime experience.

"Of those 37 boys who never returned, none died glorious deaths," he said. "War isn't like that. War is horrible. If a war is going to be fought, it has to be the last resort of mankind."