

ROTC hosts "special" Army reunion

■ WWII veterans return to campus more than 55 years after leaving to fight in the Battle of the Bulge and other campaigns



Taking part in the dedication of a bronze plaque honoring the Providence College A.S.T.P. participants who died in World War II are, from left, Associate Professor of History Robert L. Deasy; Executive Vice President Rev. Terence J. Keegan, O.P.; Sergeant Major Gary Fortunato, Department of Military Science; Leo Wurtzel and George Fisher, co-chairs, A.S.T.P. Commemorative Dedication; Rhode Island Supreme Court Chief Justice Joseph R. Weisberger; and Lieutenant Colonel Randy Golonka, chairman, Department of Military Science.

On Saturday, October 17, the Providence College campus was the setting of a very special reunion of 65 men who played important roles in the history of the United States, the college, and the establishment of the college's ROTC Program.

Hosted by PC's Department of Military Science, the reunion celebrated the contributions made by these men, and their deceased comrades, who were among the 500 soldiers stationed at Providence College from July 1943 to March 1944 through the government's Army Specialized Training Program (A.S.T.P.).

"We look on the A.S.T.P. guys who were here in '43-'44 as those who set the precedent for our Army ROTC Program," said LTC Randy Golonka, chair of the Department of Military Science. "As a direct result

of their good experience here, the Army ROTC Program was established, with 1,655 second lieutenants commissioned since 1951. The A.S.T.P. veterans were concerned that they may be forgotten, but we imparted to them that they will never be forgotten."

Created to ensure that there would be sufficient numbers of doctors, dentists, lawyers, and other learned professionals after the war, the A.S.T.P. Program included the "best and the brightest" of the nation's

soldiers under age 22, chosen to continue their military training at more than 122 institutions of higher learning nationwide.

This was a fortuitous decision for Providence College, which like many of the nation's all-male colleges and universities, was facing the prospect of closing its doors due to the draft and enlistment of college-age men in the war.

PC, its neighbors, and the City of Providence began a "love affair" with these "citizen soldiers," said Associate Professor of History Robert L. Deasy. "They were stationed at PC when the campus consisted of Harkins and Aquinas

halls and the original Guzman Hall, which has since been replaced by a newer structure. Most of the soldiers were billeted in Aquinas Hall, five to a room, while others stayed in Guzman. They marched to their classes in Harkins, drilled on Hendricken Field, and exercised in the gym at Harkins or at the training field, now Slavin Center and Alumni Hall."

The Army ended the A.S.T.P. efforts at PC abruptly by assigning the soldiers to active duty with the 328th Infantry Regiment, 26th Infantry (Yankee) Division at Cherbourg, France. They would eventually fight in four major campaigns covering six different countries, including the Battle of the Bulge, during which time 37 of PC's citizen-soldiers would die.

A.S.T.P. Reunion

Since the war's conclusion, the 328th Regiment has held an annual overall reunion of those who served in that regiment. A specific reunion of those who had participated in PC's A.S.T.P. had not been held until this year, when the overall reunion was scheduled at the Sheraton in nearby Mansfield, Massachusetts.

Earlier this year, two A.S.T.P. veterans, George Fisher and Leo Wurtzel, contacted the college and asked if they could hold the first—and only—reunion of PC's A.S.T.P. soldiers on campus, so the veterans could see the place where they had served for many months

one last time. They would also donate a bronze plaque to commemorate their A.S.T.P. classmates who died in the war.

The veterans and their families, about 150 people in all, were treated to a bus escort to the college by Massachusetts and Rhode Island state police. On board one of the busses from Mansfield to the campus was Deasy, who commented on the changes that had taken place at PC and in the City of Providence since the men left in 1944. He provided the same commentary on the other bus on its way back to Mansfield.

Campus welcome

During a luncheon in Slavin Center's '64 Hall, all were welcomed by PC Executive Vice President Rev. Terence J. Keegan, O.P. The 88th Army Band of the Rhode Island National Guard played the National Anthem and entertained with music from the forties.

The keynote speaker, Rhode Island Supreme Court Chief Justice Joseph R. Weisberger, himself a World War II veteran, spoke of the contributions the soldiers had made to the city, to PC, and to their country during the war years and immediately thereafter. Commenting later on his address to the gathering, Chief Justice Weisberger expressed his admiration and thanks to these men, who more than 55 years ago became involved in the most important battles of World War II.

"Their service in relieving the 101st Airborne in Bastogne in the Battle of the Bulge, and their service in participating in the drive across Europe by General Patton's Third Army, was enormously important," said the chief justice. "They are part of a generation which grew up in the Depression and experienced economic hardship. Later, when their economic situation improved, they left civilian life and prepared to defend the nation against the greatest threat to liberty ever known before or since. . . . They are certainly deserving of the undying gratitude and remembrance of all Americans, both now and in the future."

After the luncheon ceremony, during which the plaque was presented to the college, the veterans toured the ROTC offices and then joined Deasy at Phillips Memorial Library to view a display of A.S.T.P. memorabilia which he and his brother, Richard Deasy, also an associate professor of history at PC, had set up. The items were from PC's Department of Military Science, Archives, and the veterans themselves.

"The event went extremely well," said Sgt. Maj. Gary Fortunato. "The veterans were expecting a low-key, simple ceremony, and were really flabbergasted by the presentation. The thirty student cadets who attended were overwhelmed by their conversations with the veterans. It was a good lesson in history for them, as well as in life."

Karen Wagner '00 of Wallingford, Conn.; Erika Woods '00 of Munsonville, N.H.; and Josiah Grover '99 of Manchester, Conn. were three of those lucky cadets. "The veterans were proud to see that people at the college still remembered what they did for PC," said Wagner. "The reunion gave them a sense of pride in knowing they were not forgotten, and it gave us a chance to look to the future, knowing we would be following in the paths of actual heroes."

"It hit me in the middle of the ceremony—these people we were sitting with actually fought at the Battle of the Bulge," recalled Woods. "They didn't necessarily know each other, but they are friends for life because of their strong bonds. I thought that was really neat."

"They gave us first-hand accounts of what they went through both here at the college and when they went overseas," said Grover. "Their stories and experiences were a lot different than anything we've ever experienced here. Packing up in the middle of the night and marching off to war is not something we think about."

As they departed from campus, several veterans commented about their experiences here and about what the reunion meant to them.

Leon Davidow of Wellington, Florida perhaps best summed up the group's feelings: "PC balances out the scholastic and inspirational phase of our military experiences . . . wouldn't have character development fulfilled any other way. [I'm] thankful to be here today to appreciate and relive the past. Thanks for your superior efforts to make us feel special."



Robert L. Deasy, associate professor of history (far left), comments on a library display of A.S.T.P. memorabilia. The yearbooks and brochures pictured were among the gifts given to the veterans as remembrances of their reunion at Providence College.

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