

'Little college boys' reflect on WWII days

Students became soldiers in blink of an eye

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PROVIDENCE — They were trained with slide rules and physics equations but instead were ordered to hoist rifles and fight the Germans during World War II.

About 75 survivors of 380 men trained at Providence College during World War II gathered this weekend to attend a reunion in Mansfield, Mass., and return to the Providence College campus to dedicate a plaque for fallen comrades.

The men were sent to the school to study math, chemistry and engineering to help defeat German forces.

Beginning in 1943, some of the brightest men in the service were selected to train at more than 120 colleges and universities. The goal was to supply men to the military who had advanced skills.

"I thought (Providence College) would be a good place to sit out the war," George Fisher of Palm Beach, Fla., one of 150,000 soldiers selected for the program nationwide, told The Sun Chronicle of Attleboro. "We even had a name for it: All Safe 'Til Peace."

But it didn't work out that way. With the Normandy invasion looming, the U.S. Army canceled the program and called the men up to fight. Former students were abruptly shipped out to infantry units to become replacements in the fight against Germany.

"We were promised four years of college and officer status," Fisher said. "But the program was terminated after six months. One night at about two in the morning we were told to pack our clothes."

The college men, many with no military training, were ridiculed as "little college boys" initially, but they soon changed minds.

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 thrown into battle, including the pivotal Battle of the Bulge.

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

"A patrol had gone ahead and found everything all clear, but as soon as we got up the hill, they murdered us," said Roth, who survived by diving into a furrow in a plowed field.

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

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.

Despite pride in serving in an elite unit, Wurtzel said, the brutality of combat made an unforgettable impression.

"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."