

Reluctant war veterans gather again at dedication

● College students found themselves unexpectedly sent to battle in WWII.

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PROVIDENCE, R.I. — They were supposed to be experts with slide rules, but instead they were told 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 returned to campus during the weekend to dedicate a plaque for fallen comrades and to attend a reunion in Mansfield, Mass.

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

"I thought it 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, said. "We even had a name for it: All Safe 'Til Peace."

It did not work out that way. With the Normandy invasion looming, the 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.

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

"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."

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," Roth said.

Roth 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.