

---

The SUN CHRONICLE.COM

HOME

## **`All-safe' vets reunited**

*BY RICK FOSTER/SUN CHRONICLE STAFF*

MANSFIELD -- They started World War II as wonder boys -- top students recruited by the army to study chemistry, physics and engineering to become the scientists needed by the war effort.

But they ended up as hard-fighting infantrymen thrown into the battle for Germany. Along the way, members of the little known Army Specialized Training Program blazed a trail of glory despite minimal training and some of the military's worst casualty rates.

On Thursday, a dwindling number of ASTP veterans gathered at the Holiday Inn to remember 37 comrades from Providence College who died on the field of battle. Fewer than a dozen veterans and their wives will travel to the college today to rededicate a plaque in their honor.

`` We thought we had a good place to sit out the war," said George Fisher of Palm Beach, Fla., a retired real estate executive.

`` The program even had a nickname, `All Safe Till Peace.'"

A total of 380 were chosen on the basis of intelligence tests to study science and foreign languages at Providence College.

But in 1944, barely six months after the program started, the government decided the recruits were needed to replace soldiers wounded at the front. ASTP, with more than 150,000 soldiers studying at 120 colleges across the country, was abruptly shut down.

`` One day we got a letter that the program was closing," Fisher said. `` The next morning they put us on a train at 2 a.m. and literally dumped us in Tennessee."

The Providence recruits joined the 328th Regiment of the 26th Yankee Division, which was then training for deployment in Europe. The green troops reached the combat zone just in time for the Battle of the Bulge.

Despite little more than rudimentary combat training, recruits who had been dismissed as `` college boys" by more experienced soldiers gained a reputation as ferocious fighters. A large percentage of the men received purple hearts and bronze stars as a result of their actions.

`` They're a legacy," said Col. Steven McGonagle, professor of military science and commander of the ROTC detachment at Providence College. `` What they did was unprecedented, being pulled out of college in the middle of the night, placed on a train at 2

a.m., spending 220 days in the line and fighting in four major campaigns while suffering 10 percent casualties."

The former soldiers' recall of their war service is colored both by fond memories of college life and horrific images of battle.

Dr. Cory Cookingham, an allergist from Flint, Mich., said ASTP broadened the horizons of a Depression-era youth who grew up expecting to go to work in an auto plant.

"I think of it as one of the really fortunate things that happened to me," said Cookingham, whose Providence College experience propelled him into medical school after the war.

Julius Roth, a retired public relations man from Queens, was twice wounded in the Battle of the Bulge and spent four weeks in the hospital. Roth said he feels lucky to have survived because two members of his light machine gun squad were the first soldiers of his unit to die in combat.

Paul Crossan of Westchester, Pa., says he vividly remembers a tragic accident in which planes called to support American troops along the German border accidentally attacked soldiers of the 328th instead.

"I remember the captain trying to call off the air strike," he said. "Those boys got the hell shot out of them."

Members of the ASTP unit gathered at Providence College three years ago to dedicate a plaque to their comrades. The plaque is now being relocated to a grotto inside the newly-built campus chapel.

"It's a beautiful place," Fisher said. "It gives us a bit of closure knowing that our plaque will be there and that our guys will be remembered forever."

RICK FOSTER can be reached at 508-236-0372 or by e-mail at [rfoster@thesunchronicle.com](mailto:rfoster@thesunchronicle.com).

---

| HOME | CLASSIFIEDS | REAL ESTATE | CITY & TOWN | CALENDAR | FEATURES | OBITUARIES | OPINION | SPORTS |  
| WEDDINGS | BIRTHS | REUNIONS | GUESTBOOK | ABOUT US | DINING DIRECTORY | BUSINESS/STOCKS | AP NEWS |  
| SPECIAL REPORTS | TV LISTINGS | ENTERTAINMENT | HEALTH | BOOKS | PERSONALS | SERVICES | PAPER ROUTES |  
| PHOTO REPRINTS | AUTO DEALER DIRECTORY | OUR ARCHIVES | LOCAL LINKS | E-THE PEOPLE | ACCUWEATHER |

©Copyright 2001 All rights reserved