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Abstract

The 55th College Training Detachment of the Air Force Cadet Program came to Gettysburg College in 1943. It was a separate program designed to provide educated officers for the Air Corps in the United States Army. These trainees would not only learn military drill, physical training, medical aid and flight skills, but they would also study physics, math, English, history, and geography. They were taught by members of the Gettysburg College staff and housed on campus, in dorms and fraternity houses. Their presence on campus was a constant reminder for regular students that the country was in the midst of a war.

Keywords

United States Army Air Corps, Gettysburg College, World War II

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‘Gettysburg College ... is sincerely appreciative of the honor of having as her collaborators in this latest chapter of her history the officers and students of the Army Air Corps.’ (Air Crew Bulletin)

The 55th College Training Detachment of the Air Force Cadet Program came to Gettysburg College in 1943. It was a separate program designed to provide educated officers for the Air Corps in the United States Army. These trainees would not only learn military drill, physical training, medical aid and flight skills, but they would also study physics, math, English, history, and geography. They were taught by members of the Gettysburg College staff and housed on campus, in dorms and fraternity houses.¹ Their presence on campus was a constant reminder for regular students that the country was in the midst of a war.

The outbreak of World War II hit Gettysburg College in the fact that many of the male students signed up or were called into service in Europe and the Pacific. This left

¹ Charles H. Glatfelter, *A Salutary Influence: Gettysburg College, 1832-1985* (Gettysburg: Gettysburg College, 1987), 733.

the college with a significant number of vacancies. Although the female population on campus had grown a little, the number of male students in 1943 was only about one hundred, compared with five hundred just a year earlier.² The decrease in enrollment also brought about a considerable decrease in income for the college. This was not only an isolated problem for Gettysburg College, as “many smaller colleges throughout the country were beginning to feel the financial strain of losing a great number of students to the Army and the Navy.”³ The Army took advantage of this situation to institute a military training program at colleges and universities affected by this decline in enrollment. Not only did the colleges have the need for financial help, but they also had space to house and train the cadets, as well as the faculty who were already trained in teaching academics.

The Army was interested in making sure that their cadets had an academic education as well as military training. They saw from experience that men who understood mathematics, physics, and geography made better pilots, bombardiers, and navigators.⁴ Thus, they had a vested interest in making sure that their recruits were educated at the college level. Holding these training programs at colleges and universities was a way to ensure that these courses would be taught. Gettysburg College was one of many across the nation chosen by the War Manpower Commission and the Army Air Corps to participate in this program. Other institutions chosen included the University of Arkansas, Oklahoma A&M, Eastern Oregon University, and ten other

² Charles H. Glatfelter, *A Salutary Influence: Gettysburg College, 1832-1985* (Gettysburg: Gettysburg College, 1987), 732.

³ Lt. Frederick H. Willcox, “The Birth of the College Program,” *Gettysburg College Bulletin* (October 1943): 2.

⁴ Lt. Frederick H. Willcox, “The Birth of the College Program,” *Gettysburg College Bulletin* (October 1943): 2.

Pennsylvania colleges, including Clarion State College, Penn State University, and Dickinson College.⁵ After a cadet's graduation from these programs, he would be sent to a more specialized army flight school.

Gettysburg's president, Henry W. A. Hanson, first announced the plans for the college's participation in this program in February of 1943. He informed the campus that about 550 men would come with the program to be trained, and they would be housed in Pennsylvania Hall and McKnight Hall, the two men's dorms on campus. Fraternities were warned that their houses might be used as well. The Phi Kappa Psi house was turned into a military infirmary.⁶ The Army also took over the dining room in Huber Hall, and the girls who usually ate there were sent to eat at various fraternity houses on campus. Later on, the rest of Huber Hall was turned over to the Army as more housing was needed. The approximately sixty girls who lived in Huber were moved to Stevens Hall, the James Gettys Hotel in town, or a professor's house.⁷ While things were crowded and inconvenient, the college students cooperated with little interruption or complaining. Subsequently, Huber was renovated to include a new cafeteria, pay phones, and bunk beds.⁸

In regards to curriculum, the cadets were taught academics, military science, physical training, and flying, of which academic and physical training were taught by Gettysburg College faculty.⁹ The commanding officer of the training program at Gettysburg, Captain John R. Coshey, was in charge of the military education, including

⁵ Charles H. Glatfelter, *A Salutary Influence: Gettysburg College, 1832-1985* (Gettysburg: Gettysburg College, 1987), 732.

⁶ Charles H. Glatfelter, *A Salutary Influence: Gettysburg College, 1832-1985* (Gettysburg: Gettysburg College, 1987), 732.

⁷ *The Gettysburgian* (Gettysburg), 25 March 1943.

⁸ *The Gettysburgian* (Gettysburg), 1 March 1943.

⁹ *The Gettysburgian* (Gettysburg), 25 February 1943.

drilling and ceremonies. Captain Coshey had formerly been stationed at Maxwell Field, in Montgomery, Alabama, which was the headquarters of the College Training Detachment program.¹⁰ There he had trained himself on how to run this program. The flying portion of the training would be taught at the Boulevard Airport on the Mummasburg Road.¹¹

In addition, Gettysburg College would still operate for its civilian students. The Army College would operate separately, and students would not be in the same classes. For women students and the men who were still in college, scholastics would go on as usual. Inter-collegiate football and soccer were cancelled for the duration of the Army Air Corps' stay, however, in obedience to an Army Air Corps requirement that did not allow the cadets to participate in these sports.¹² More intramural sports were played instead.

The first group of 275 cadets arrived on campus on March 3, 1943. They had already been through four or five weeks of basic training and "knew the elements of drilling, military courtesy, and discipline."¹³ These men were mostly from states such as Wisconsin, Illinois, and Indiana. They registered in Plank Gym and were introduced to Captain Coshey. Classes did not start until the beginning of the next week. The second half of the men arrived at Gettysburg on April 1, 1943. They were mostly from New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. The total of 550 cadets now made up almost two-thirds of the college population.¹⁴

¹⁰ *The Gettysburgian* (Gettysburg), 18 February 1943.

¹¹ *The Gettysburgian* (Gettysburg), 4 March 1943.

¹² *The Gettysburgian* (Gettysburg), 11 February 1943.

¹³ Lt. Frederick H. Willcox, "The Birth of the College Program," *Gettysburg College Bulletin* (October 1943): 3.

¹⁴ Charles H. Glatfelter, *A Salutary Influence: Gettysburg College, 1832-1985* (Gettysburg: Gettysburg College, 1987), 733.

A survey of the cadets then on campus revealed an average age of about twenty-one years old, with extremes being seventeen and twenty-seven. The majority was Protestant, but there were also Catholics and Jews. Many men had held jobs that dealt with mechanics and industry, and about one eighth of the cadets were married. There was also a wide range of education levels among the cadets, from those who had only received a grammar - school education to those who were college graduates. However, the majority were high school graduates.¹⁵ This range of education was a challenge to the faculty in teaching classes. The cadets stayed for five months and received 700 hours of academics and ten hours of flight training. In all, a total of 1,659 men went through the training program in Gettysburg during the period from March 1943 to May 1944 when the College Training Detachment was on campus.¹⁶

The student body welcomed the arrival of the cadets. The country was at war, and while the students were not fighting, they could do their patriotic duty by making the cadets feel as welcome as possible. An editorial in *The Gettysburgian* stressed that, “It is up to the Gettysburg student body to make every member of the United States Army Air Corps feel at home among us.”¹⁷ The College Senate held dances for the cadets as well, in an effort to make them feel at home.¹⁸ According to Robert Koons, a 1943 graduate of Gettysburg College who returned to teach basic English to the cadets, the campus “adjusted pretty well to it. I think we more or less – I don’t remember students seeming to resent it or feel in any way that their style was cramped by the presence of those Air

¹⁵ *Air Crew Bulletin*, 13 April 1943, Special Collections, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg.

¹⁶ Charles H. Glatfelter, *A Salutary Influence: Gettysburg College, 1832-1985* (Gettysburg: Gettysburg College, 1987), 733.

¹⁷ *The Gettysburgian* (Gettysburg), 25 February 1943.

¹⁸ *The Gettysburgian* (Gettysburg), 11 March 1943.

Force Cadets. I don't remember that, we just seemed to accommodate ourselves to each other as far as I know."¹⁹

A regular day for the cadets on campus started early. Reveille was played at 5:25 AM, assembly was five minutes later, and breakfast was at 6:30. Sick call and police call were at 7:30, and classes began at 7:45. These classes were the academic subjects and physical education. Drill was from 11:00 until noon, then lunch. Classes began again at 1:00 PM and retreat was at 5:15. Dinner was at 5:30, and after that there was some free time, study time, and taps was played at 10:00 PM.²⁰ On Sunday mornings, cadets were required to attend one of the many churches in town.

The cadets were taught mathematics, physics, geography, history, and English by the Gettysburg College faculty. Each of these subjects lasted for three months, except for math, which went on for four months. As there was such a variety in the levels of previous education among the cadets, some men were allowed to test out of regular courses or take accelerated courses. These men also had the option of taking electives that furthered their education and would be of help to them later on in their Army careers. Some examples of these courses included calculus, navigational aids, military German, and conversational French or Spanish.²¹ The cadets marched in formation to and from class, and discipline was very strict. Demerits were given for delinquency, and punishment usually involved extra walking and a restriction of privileges.

¹⁹ Robert W. Koons, interview by Daniel A. Jewett, 23 March 1998, transcript, Oral History Collection, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg.

²⁰ "Aviation Student Training Regulations Army Air Forces Eastern Training Command 55th College Training Detachment (Aircraft) Gettysburg College, 1944," Special Collections, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg.

²¹ *Air Crew Bulletin*, 13 April 1943, Special Collections, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg.

Physical training continued for all five months that the cadets were on campus. This was led by Head Coach Hen Bream of the College's Athletic Department. In March of 1943, he attended a training session at Maxwell Field that would help him to run this part of the College Training Detachment. Upon his arrival back on campus, a new system was set up. Adapting the athletic fields already used by the college, volleyball and basketball courts were set up. The soccer fields were converted into an obstacle course, and the football field was set up to include chin-up bars. Men ran an almost two mile cross-country course. In addition to all of this, the cadets trained with calisthenics, dumbbells, boxing, tumbling, tug of war, marching, swimming, and sprints.²²

Headquarters for the Army on campus was located in Glatfelter Hall, along with the President's and Dean's offices. The presence of the 55th made Gettysburg an official Army post, and it was run accordingly. There were four other officers on campus in addition to Captain Coshey. The adjutant was in charge of paperwork, personnel, supplying the aviation students, and transportation. The intelligence officer also served as mess officer and summary court officer. There were two tactical officers who were in charge of drill and training the cadets.²³

While the 55th College Training Detachment worked hard on campus with both military and academic training, the aviation students also found time for extracurricular activities and entertainment. They gratefully took advantage of the civilian students' offer to share publication of *The Gettysburgian* until they were able to start their own paper. The 55th's section was entitled the DODO. A call went out to any cadets who had experience in journalism or were interested in helping out. A twenty-four piece marching

²² *The Gettysburgian* (Gettysburg), 15 April 1943.

band was also formed by the aviation students. By borrowing instruments from the college and practicing during drill, “the band has grown from a drum and bugle corps to a well organized marching band.”²⁴ Banquets were held on special occasions and dances with the Gettysburg College girls brought entertainment to campus as well.

Weidensall Hall, the Student Christian Association Building, was also open to cadets during their free time. As with the civilian students, they were free to make use of the ping-pong tables, the pool, and the building to relax, play checkers, and listen to the radio and records.²⁵ The cadets also put on a number of plays and variety shows that the rest of the college and the people in town were welcome to attend. The casts were made up of aviation students, and these shows were meant to both entertain and show Gettysburg what the Army Air Corps was all about. In cases where girls were needed in the cast, female students were asked to help out.

So, while the war changed life on campus, Gettysburg College students adapted and not only became used to, but enjoyed their guests. Some civilian students were moved to different living quarters and dining facilities. The Army could be seen drilling on Nixon Field, the baseball field, where the present day library and freshman quads are located, as well as across the street from Weidensall Hall, where the Chapel presently stands. Obstacle courses took over other athletic fields and there was no intercollegiate football or basketball. One change that might not have been noticeable to all was that the flag that always flew over Pennsylvania Hall did not fly during the 55th College Training

²³ Lt. Frederick H. Willcox, “The Birth of the College Program,” *Gettysburg College Bulletin* (October 1943): 4.

²⁴ *The Gettysburgian* (Gettysburg), 5 August 1943.

²⁵ *The Gettysburgian* (Gettysburg), 25 February 1943.

Detachment's stay on campus. This was because Army posts were only allowed one flag, and they decided to place it in front of Huber Hall.²⁶

The college students were not the only ones who embraced the aviation students. The town of Gettysburg also adopted the cadets as their own. The first issue of *The Gettysburgian* that came out after their arrival included welcome messages from area businesses that advertised in the college's paper. In September 1943, members of the community presented the 55th with an American flag and an Army Air Corps flag that they had bought with money raised from different organizations. Captain Coshey told the crowd attending the ceremony, "I know that we of the 55th College Training Detachment all feel that we are a Gettysburg outfit, and therefore it is singularly appropriate for us to receive our banners from you, the representatives of this community."²⁷ The churches in town were very welcoming towards the cadets and enjoyed having them attend their services as well.

Once a cadet graduated from the Army Air Corps training program, he was sent to further flight school and eventually became a pilot, navigator, or bombardier.²⁸ The knowledge gained at Gettysburg made the men better at flying. The basic education they received and the military training would go on their record and show that they were skilled. After the further flight school, the only instruction needed was operational training, which basically taught aviation students how to apply this knowledge to wartime situations.

²⁶ *The Gettysburgian* (Gettysburg), 1 September 1943.

²⁷ *The Gettysburgian* (Gettysburg), 1 September 1943.

²⁸ Lt. Frederick H. Willcox, "The Birth of the College Program," *Gettysburg College Bulletin* (October 1943): 3.

The contract between the college and the Army was only for a year. Because of the preparation at Gettysburg College and colleges around the country as well as the Allies' progress on the war front, the Army began to prepare for the end of the war. As a result, the 55th College Training Detachment was discontinued and scheduled to leave campus by May 1944. The school was then to open as fully civilian in the fall of 1944. President Hanson thanked the students for their cooperation through the whole experience and said that "at no time in history has the college accomplished any task more creditably than the present task allotted to it as war time service."²⁹

The college had participated in wartime service before. During World War I, members of the Student Army Training Corps had their barracks in Pennsylvania Hall from September until December 1918. The ROTC program had been active on campus and by the time the Army Air Corps came to Gettysburg, over two thousand students had been through the program. In early 1943, Gettysburg had over a thousand students or alumni in the service, which was about twenty percent of all living alumni and former students.³⁰ So the 55th College Training Detachment was not the first military presence to have lived and trained on campus.

Nor however, would it be the last. The withdrawal of the Army Air Corps left the college without the financial help that it had received from housing the cadets. In June of 1944, the college again opened its doors to servicemen when it welcomed a Service Command Unit of the Army Specialized Training Unit of the Army Air Forces. This unit was comprised of seventeen-year olds waiting to turn eighteen so they could join the Army. There was a six-month training period for the approximately two hundred men in

²⁹ *The Gettysburgian* (Gettysburg), 10 February 1944.

the Specialized Training Unit.³¹ This program lasted until March of 1945, when success abroad made it clear that the war could not last much longer. Finally, all buildings on campus were able to be returned to their regular college functions.

President Hanson wrote to the aviation students about their arrival on campus in April of 1943.

In devoting her resources without stint or reservation to the war-time training of men of the Army Air Corps, Gettysburg College feels that she is performing a patriotic duty and receiving a memorable honor. She is proud of the material facilities and spiritual stamina which makes it possible for her to serve, to their mutual advantage, both the remainder of her civilian student body and the men of her nation's Army. And she is sincerely appreciative of the honor of having as her collaborators in this latest chapter of her history the officers and students of the Army Air Corps.³²

His statement echoed the sentiments of many students on campus. Gettysburg College played a crucial role in the Army Air Corps Training Program. Although they were only here for fourteen months, they left a big impact on campus as well. They were a constant reminder that the country was at war and that sacrifices were being made by many. The college and the community were doing what they could to help serve their country, and the service men appreciated it.

³⁰ *Air Crew Bulletin*, 13 April 1943, Special Collections, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg.

³¹ Charles H. Glatfelter, *A Salutory Influence: Gettysburg College, 1832-1985* (Gettysburg: Gettysburg College, 1987), 733.

³² *Air Crew Bulletin*, 13 April 1943, Special Collections, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg.