

WESTERN NEW YORK

HERITAGE

Volume 19 Number 1

Western New York's Illustrated History Magazine

\$7.00 Spring 2016

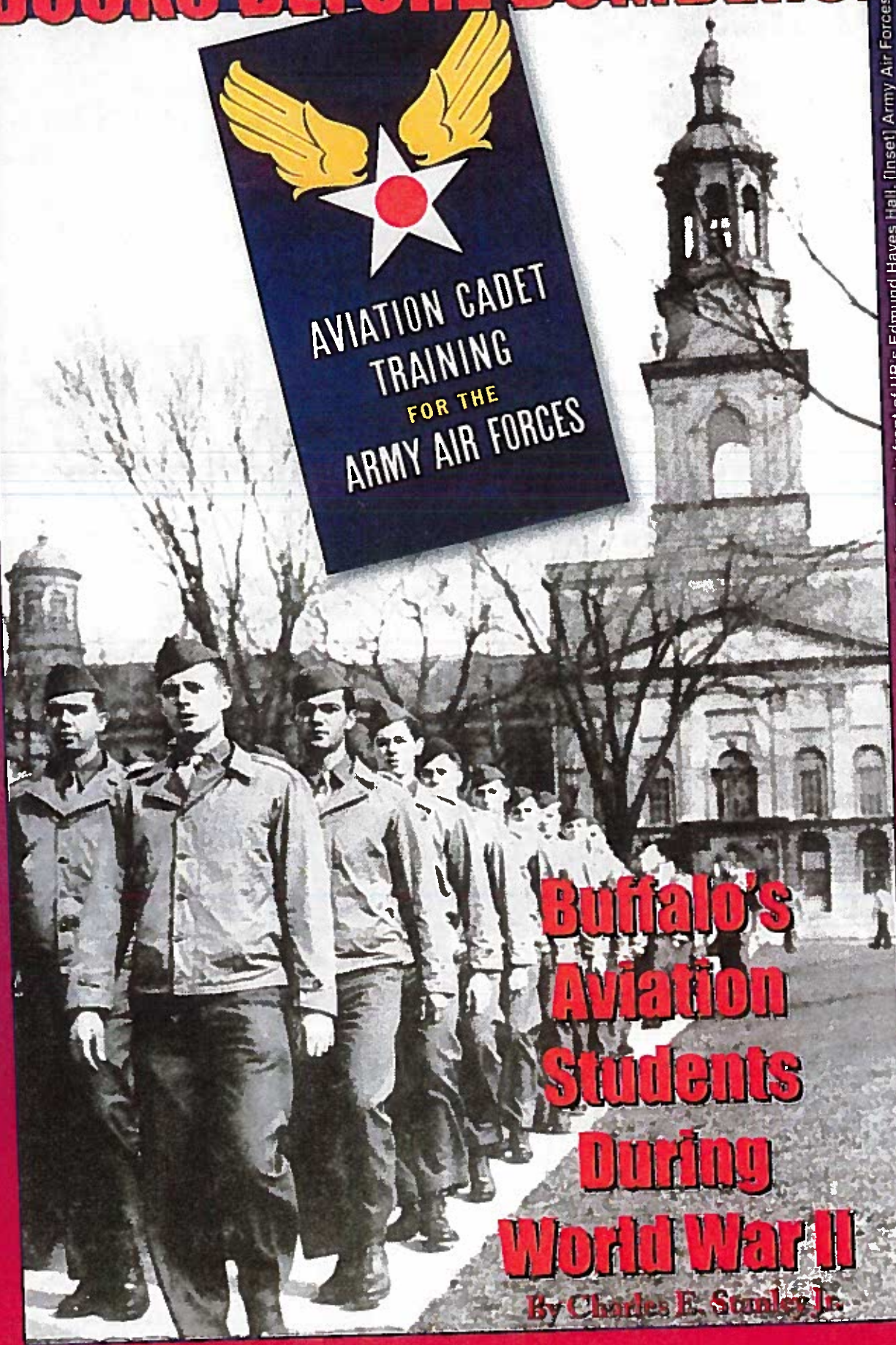


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BOOKS BEFORE BOMBERS:



Buffalo's Aviation Students During World War II

By Charles E. Stanley Jr.

Members of the 23rd Detachment of the Aircrew College Detachment Training Program march in formation in front of UB's Edmund Hayes Hall. [Inset] Army Air Forces pamphlet for the aviation cadet training program. COURTESY UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES, STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT BUFFALO, PRIVATE COLLECTION

Today's students attending Canisius College and the University at Buffalo might be surprised to know that hundreds of uniformed soldiers could once be seen marching across their respective campus greens. The soldiers were Army Air Forces recruits, training to join the fight against Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan during World War II.

When war broke out in Europe in September 1939, the United States was one of the weakest military powers in the world. Even Portugal had a larger army. The U.S. Army Air Corps could muster only 22,000 personnel – just twice the number of the army's cavalrymen.

Despite its small size, however, the Air Corps was an elite group. In addition to the rigorous physical standards – including perfect eyesight – the Air Corps differed from other branches of the service in that it required two years of college. This was at a time when only a quarter of American adults finished high school and only five percent held college degrees.

As the likelihood of war increased, the United States hurried to expand its military strength. The Air Corps, renamed the Army Air Forces (AAF) in 1941, faced the gargantuan challenge of expanding from a small, technologically backward outfit to one capable of achieving mastery of the skies halfway around the world.

The expansion of American industry that would produce tens of thousands of fighters, bombers and transport planes, as well as countless other needs of the war effort, is well documented. But the aerial armada coming off of the assembly lines would be worthless without a trained cadre of pilots and crew to take them to war. An unprecedented expansion in the number of airmen would be needed, and it would take upwards of 18 months to train each one of them. To achieve this feat, the Army Air Forces rapidly transformed itself into the largest educational institution on earth.



Brought up on a steady diet of aviation pioneers and heroes, becoming a pilot was the dream of many young men of military age in the early 1940s, despite the fact that most had never seen the inside of an airplane before. Popular culture and recruiting efforts played up the romantic angle of taking to the skies.
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

The AAF soon came to realize that there were simply not enough college graduates in the country to meet its needs. On December 10, 1941, just three days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the AAF eliminated the two-year college requirement for its recruits and instituted a qualifying exam instead.

Soon thousands of recruits flocked to the AAF. Flying held a certain romance in the popular imagination. Pilots were heroes to every schoolboy. World War I aces, barnstorming daredevils and aeronautical groundbreakers and record-setters were fresh in memory. Only 15 years had passed since Charles Lindbergh's solo transatlantic flight.

Magazine and radio ads reinforced the heroic image. *Life*, *Look*, *Collier's* and the *Saturday Evening Post* were replete with illustrations of handsome young officers being admired by pretty girls. No such glory was attributed to the common in-

fantryman, whose nickname – the dog-face – spoke for itself. If a young man wanted high status, good pay and a sharp uniform, the AAF was just the ticket.

It was not long before the number of qualified applicants for flight training exceeded the AAF's ability to train them. By the fall of 1942, there was a backlog of over 70,000 potential aviation cadets. Moreover, the surplus was increasing monthly. While 13,000 men were entering the AAF monthly, there was room for only 10,000 of them at the training centers.



CDT students relax in their makeshift barracks, established in Norton Hall, UB's former student recreation facility. The building was off-limits for non-military personnel, so the recreation facilities for civilian students were moved to the second floor of Hayes Hall.
 COURTESY UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES, STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT BUFFALO

The AAF's solution to this embarrassment of riches was the Aircrew College Detachment Training Program. After taking basic military training, each recruit would spend three to five months at a designated college or university. There the prospective pilots, navigators and bombardiers would gain the academic and technical background necessary for their specialties. Besides giving the backlogged recruits something to do, the AAF hoped that the CDT program might reduce the number of "washouts" – that is, eliminations from consideration as officers – in later phases of training.

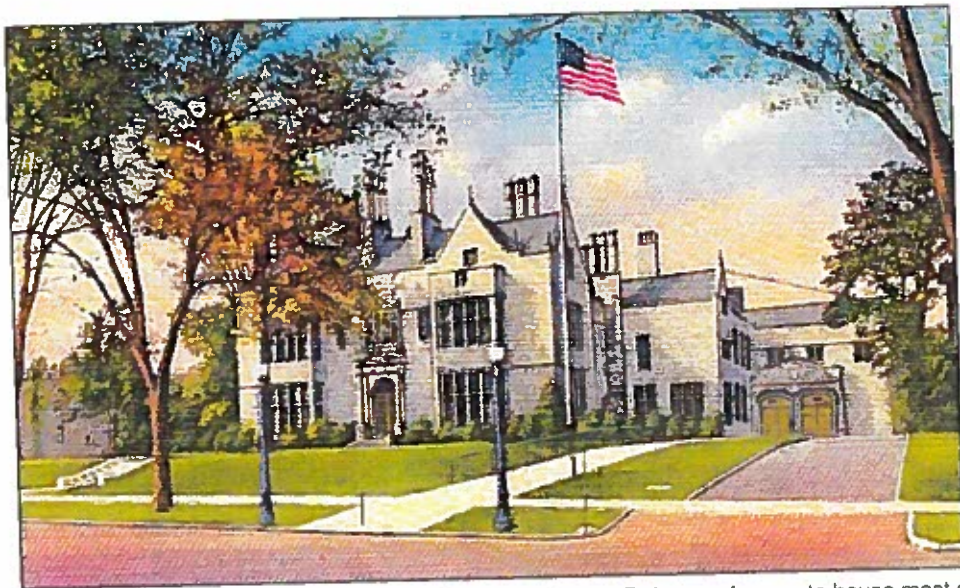
The Program Begins in Buffalo

The AAF approved an initial group of 153 detachments at various colleges and universities in early 1943. Thus Canisius College and the University of Buffalo would play host to the 22nd and 23rd Detachments, respectively.

The first CDT class arrived at UB on February 28, 1943. The 200 young recruits settled into the university's recreational center, Norton Hall, which had been converted into a "barracks." There, in their rare off-hours, they could relax in the recreational facilities once enjoyed by the university's traditional students. Since Norton would now be closed to non-military personnel, the second floor of Edmund Hayes Hall became the new recreation hall for the rest of the student body.

Canisius' first class, also featuring 200 students, appeared on March 1. While 25 of them were quartered at the Clarence airport, the rest were lucky enough to be housed in the majestic Buffalo Consistory at 1180 Delaware Avenue. Originally constructed as a mansion for George F. Rand II, the president of Marine Trust Company, it was a former Masonic retreat leased by the college from the City of Buffalo for that very purpose.

The Consistory's main ballroom, once a glamorous setting for high society events, became a bunkhouse lined with



Canisius College leased the Buffalo Consistory building on Delaware Avenue to house most of its trainee detachment. PRIVATE COLLECTION

double-decked beds. Two huge, glass pendulum chandeliers hung low from the ceilings. One of them hovered so close to an upper bunk that its occupant could reach up and touch it.

Likewise, the Consistory's great dining room became a mess hall. A recreation room was set up in the area beneath the auditorium and featured billiard tables, eight bowling lanes, handball courts and steam baths. The building's swimming pool was available for both exercise and relaxation.

The aviation training program couldn't have come at a better time for both Canisius and UB. College officials worried that most of their male population would join the Army or Navy by mid-year. The draft age had been lowered from 21 to 18 on November 11, 1942, and college-age reservists were being called to active service as well. Anticipating a serious financial deficit due to declining tuition revenues, UB had even issued an urgent appeal to alumni and other friends of the university for emergency donations.

All of these concerns disappeared with the arrival of the AAF aviation students in early 1943. In addition to the future airmen, UB's medical and dental schools hosted military programs as well. Professors suddenly found themselves so busy teaching classes that scholarly research was deferred. Some even found themselves teaching courses outside of their normal academic purviews. The colleges' contracts with the War Department specified that the institutions would neither benefit nor suffer financially due to the CDT programs. Nevertheless, instead of the projected deficit, UB posted a financial surplus for the year.

Academics and Routine

Coursework for the trainees consisted of normal college-level studies, but at an accelerated pace. The future airmen studied mathematics with a special eye to navigation. In physics class, they learned the principles of electricity, weather and flight. They also took practical courses in civil air regulations, first aid, military courtesies and in sanitation and hygiene.

As preparation for their future role as officers, the aviation students studied English, geography and history – particularly recent European history and the causes of the war. In geography, they learned about elementary navigation, physiography, economic



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Academics for trainees in the CDT detachments were similar to that of civilian college students, only at an accelerated pace. Professors worked extra hours and taught extra classes to accommodate both military and civilian students. Here Father Thomas Fay teaches history and current events of the war fronts to a group of Canisius trainees. Fay was known as the "Father Duffy" of the 22nd Detachment, serving as its Catholic chaplain as well as a professor.

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Men of the 23rd Detachment line up for chow during a break from their academic studies and military drills.

COURTESY UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES, STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT BUFFALO

centers and geopolitics. Trainees who demonstrated that they had already gained a proficiency in one of the areas of college study were allowed to take Navigational Aids instead, the one elective course.

Although the program was designed and paid for by the Army, military commanders scrupulously upheld the academic freedom of the faculty within the classrooms. The aviation students were taught just as any other college students would be and they were held to the same academic standards.

It was a high-pressure, demanding program. There was no "washing out" due to academic deficiency, but each cadet's marks would become a part of his military record and would be considered during the classification process, when the men would be chosen as pilots, navigators or bombardiers. Poor marks or ratings could eliminate a cadet from the possibility of becoming a pilot, the most prestigious position in the AAF. Outright failure could mean losing the opportunity to become an officer, along with the status and higher pay that accompanied the rank.

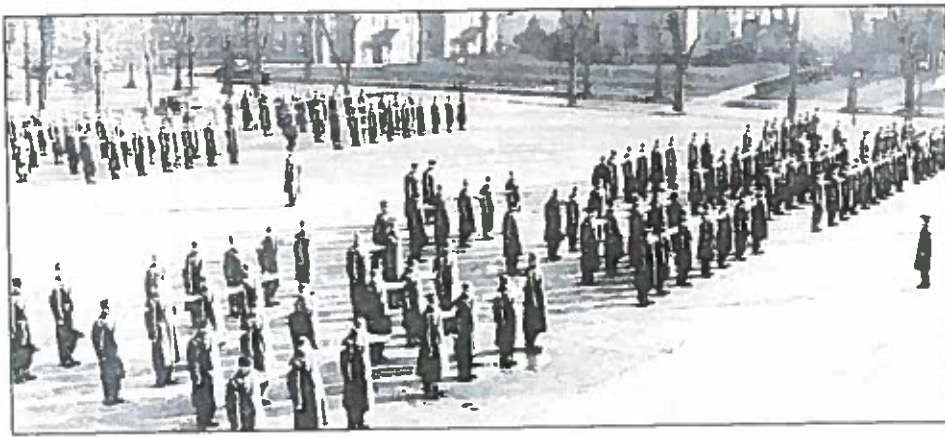
At UB, the aviation students' daily routine began with reveille at 6:00 a.m. After a hearty breakfast, classes began at 7:30 and continued until lunch at noon. Afternoon classes

extended from 12:30 to 4:30. From 4:30 to 5:30, the students practiced military drill.

The CDT students were something of a curiosity at the UB Main Street Campus. Every day, groups of 20-25 uniformed students, called "flights," could be seen marching in columns to their classes with loads of books under their arms. As they paraded, they would keep cadence to such songs as "I've Been Working on the Railroad," "Hinky, Dinky, Parlay Voo" and "Army Air Force" ("Off we go, into the wild blue yonder...").

Military courtesies were followed throughout the day. Entering each classroom, the students were called to attention by a group leader and stood stiffly until their civilian instructor told them to be seated. When calling upon a cadet in class, the instructor would address him as "Mister." At the close of each class, the instructor signaled the group leader to call the cadets to attention before they marched out. Discipline was enforced rigorously and inspections were frequent. Each cadet did his best to avoid receiving "gigs," or demerits, for infractions.

The day's work officially ended at 6:00 p.m. with a colorful flag-lowering ceremony at the university's flagpole. Many spent their evenings playing chess, checkers, ping pong or billiards.



Trainees of Canisius' 22nd Detachment assemble for an inspection parade.
WESTERN NEW YORK HERITAGE PRESS COLLECTION

Others wrote letters, read or called family members and girlfriends from telephone booths. Lights out came with taps at 10:00 p.m. Silence reigned throughout the building. Any whisper would be followed by an "at ease" order and demerits.

On Saturdays the students rose at 6:00 a.m. as usual. They changed their sheets, shined their shoes and crawled around on their hands and knees searching every nook and cranny for dirt. Then they attended classes until noon chow.

At 1:30, a student-officer would call "Prepare for inspection!" Captain Harold D. Woodbury, commander of the UB unit, would enter and scrutinize each of the students and his assigned area for the slightest fault in appearance. Afterward, the tension diminished to a certain degree, but further precision drills followed.

Free time began at 3:00 p.m. Saturdays and continued until 10:00 p.m. Sunday evening. Only students who passed every subject, and had few infractions against the rules, could be given off-campus leave.

Although CDT was considered to be a "pre-flight" phase of training, each aviation student was scheduled to spend 10 hours of flying time in a 65 horsepower Piper Cub from a private instructor. UB students used the Buffalo Municipal Airport while the Canisius students flew out of Clarence. This initial flight experience would be carefully evaluated to determine the candidate's suitability for further phases of flight training.

On March 31, 1943, a group of students from the first CDT class at UB reported to the Buffalo airport for their first 45-minute flight. Upon arrival, they were immediately assigned to an instructor who guided them to their plane and explained its vital parts.

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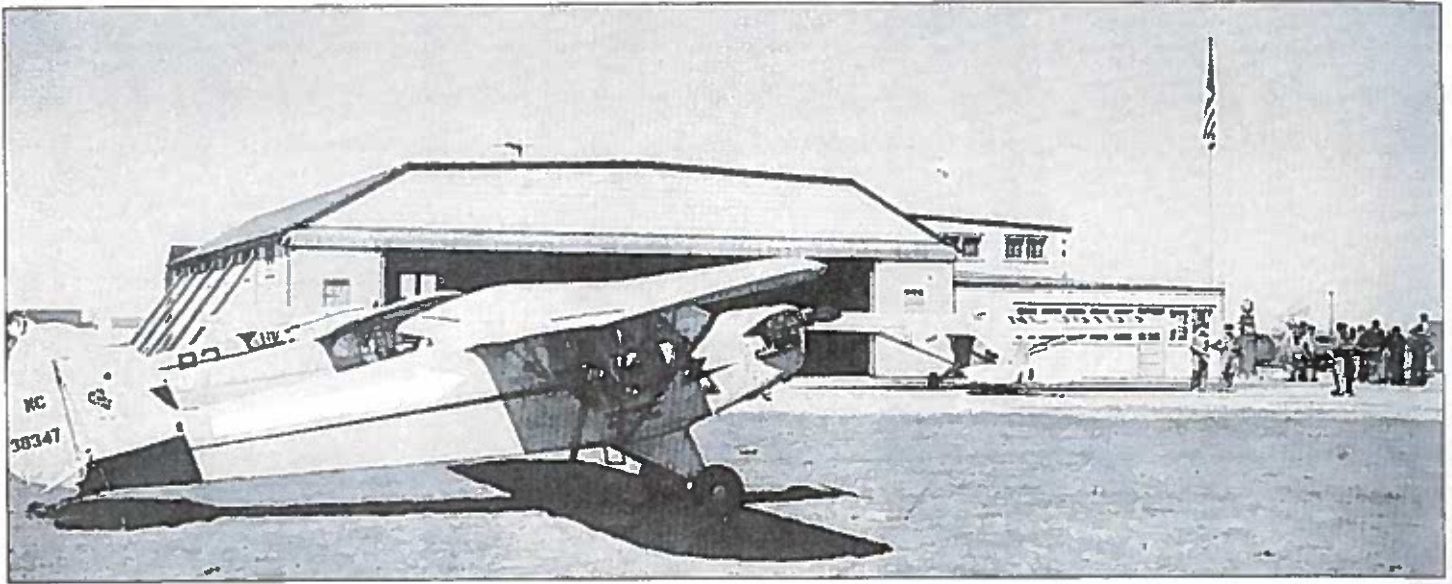
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Introductory flight training was included as part of the CDT program, despite the fact that more intensive flight training would be conducted later by the AAF. Here a Piper Cub sits at the Clarence Airport, waiting for the next lesson.
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It was an inauspicious day to begin a career in aviation. The wind gusted ferociously. The wingtips of the light aircraft had to be held down by ground crew as it taxied into position for takeoff. Nevertheless, the civilian flight instructor took the cadets up into the air, one by one.

The instructor showed each student some flying maneuvers and allowed him to take the controls briefly. Like many Americans in the early 1940s, most aviation students had never even seen the inside of an airplane before. Now they were expected to fly one. Following each flight, the instructor jotted down notes regarding each student's performance.

Aviation student John Seemuller was the tenth cadet to fly that morning. As Seemuller and the instructor taxied on the tarmac toward the takeoff position, a blast of air caught the Piper Cub's tail and flipped the plane up on its nose. It teetered there for a few seconds and then flipped over on its back. Both men escaped unhurt, but flying was canceled for the rest of the group. The cadets were indelibly impressed – flying was dangerous, even on the ground.

When the weather finally cleared the following week, the aviation students began flying in earnest, sometimes twice daily. They learned to bank, make "S" turns and to fly straight and level. Every now and then, the instructor would give a surprise order to check the student's sense of direction. "Take me home," he would call out. It was up to the student to navigate the hundred miles back to the airport.

Community Reception

The aviation cadets at both colleges quickly became an integral part of Buffalo's wartime community. On April 18, 1943,

they comprised 700 of the 10,000 uniformed marchers participating in the largest military parade in the history of the city. It was part of a patriotic effort to raise \$40 million in war bonds for a navy cruiser to be named *USS Buffalo*.

It seemed that nearly everyone in the city turned out to watch the cavalcade. Military units marched smartly as hundreds of thousands of spectators lined Main Street. Roddy McDowell, the 13-year-old Hollywood actor, waved enthusiastically from the turret of a Stuart light tank. Veterans from the Spanish-American War and the First World War joined the spectacle, as did local Coast Guard personnel, Boy and Girl Scouts, firefighters, the New York Guard and American Legion members.

Marching behind a cadre of AAF mechanical trainees from the Curtiss-Wright and Bell aircraft factories, the Canisius and UB CDT units reached the review stand at Lafayette Square. There they sang the obligatory Army Air Force song while planes from the Civil Air Patrol flew in formation overhead. The crowd cheered enthusiastically.

From that point forward, no patriotic event seemed complete without the presence of the aviation cadets. They marched in the Memorial Day parade, staged open houses intended to spur recruitment into the Army Air Forces and participated in war bond and Red Cross fundraising drives. Thirty-five UB air students, members of the Air Cadets Glee Club, sang at a special concert with the Buffalo Philharmonic "Pops" Orchestra – again singing the Air Corps march.

The first class of aviation students graduated from Canisius and UB in May 1943. Additional classes graduated roughly at six-week intervals over the next year. The graduates all took trains to the AAF's Classification Center in Nashville. There



A group of students from the first class to graduate from UB's 23rd Detachment pose for the camera. From left to right are: Joseph Volpini, Jesse Simmonds, Gerald Ryan and the author's father, Charles E. Stanley Sr. These young men graduated in May 1943. Stanley went on to fly B-24 bombers with the 15th Air Force and was shot down twice over Romania and Yugoslavia.
AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

they were processed, examined physically, mentally and psychologically and – if they did not wash out – were classified as pilots, navigators or bombardiers.

Pilots proceeded to preflight training, followed by three phases of flight training: Primary, Basic and Advanced. At last, they were commissioned as officers. Even then, bomber pilots spent an additional 12 weeks in Transition School, where they learned to fly their assigned aircraft type, followed by another 12 weeks spent with their crews getting used to each other as a team. Only then, 15 months after graduating from the CDT program, were they sent overseas to join a combat unit.

The End of the Program

The CDT Program, despite its popularity in Buffalo, was not without its critics. The Regular Army, starving for riflemen to fight the ground war, envied the AAF's surplus of manpower. The



RIXFORD U. JENNINGS (1906 – 1996) *Pavement Patchers*, litho, 1944
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Rixford U. Jennings served as president of the BSA 1945 – 1946.

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Following the termination of the CDT program, the Jesuits purchased the former Buffalo Consistory building for \$92,000 and made it the home of Canisius High School. COURTESY CANISIUS HIGH SCHOOL

Navy, too, was competing for recruits. To some, it seemed as though draftees were fighting and dying in the mud while aviation students were being coddled on comfortable college campuses.

Moreover, the entire concept of the College Training Program was a bit backwards. Aviation students were given their college training before they reported to AAF classification centers, where about 15% washed out due to disqualifying defects such as poor eyesight. The CDT program had been a waste of government resources for each eliminated man.

Nevertheless, the AAF successfully kept the program's critics at bay until sufficient officers had been trained to meet its projected needs for the duration of the war. In early 1944, the AAF decided to shut down the CDT program nationwide. The final Canisius and UB CDT classes graduated that April.

The City of Good Neighbors bid a fond farewell to its departing aviation students. The *Buffalo Courier Express* and a local radio station, WEBR, hosted a farewell dinner dance at the Hotel Buffalo for the final classes of both Canisius and UB.

Mayor Joseph J. Kelly presided, declaring that "Buffalo owes a great deal to these air cadets. They have been a vital part in the civic life of our city for the past 13 months." Big band orchestras played until 1:00 a.m. "Buffalo is one mighty fine place!" exclaimed one feted graduate.

Impact

The CDT program had been entirely successful from the standpoint of the air students, the colleges and military administrators alike. Faculty reported that they had never taught more earnest and interested students. The military commanders had nothing but praise for the quality of the instruction that the aviation students had received.

Predictably, the dismantling of the CDT program presented a problem for the colleges. The military trainees had comprised nearly half of their enrollees in the 1943-44 academic year, and upon their departure administrators began to worry about deficits once again.

Fortunately, however, other factors helped to mitigate the loss of the military program. Female enrollment increased at an unprecedented pace, perhaps spurred by the prosperity and sense of independence women had gained from their work at the burgeoning local defense plants. The enrollment of 17-year old males increased unexpectedly as well. Many of these hoped that their college education would help them gain higher positions when they joined the military.

With the CDT students now gone, Canisius College and the City of Buffalo needed to find a new use for the Buffalo Consistory. The Jesuits soon bought the building from the city for \$92,000, and it has been the site of Canisius High School ever since.

Some 2,500 aviation students had passed through the cadet program at the two Buffalo schools. Another 1,000 fresh enlistees entered the AAF's ranks due to their recruitment efforts. Together, these were technically enough airmen to staff 350 heavy bombers, the equivalent of an entire Bomb Wing. If one considers that the cadets who completed the program became officers (only four of which were included in the crew of nine or ten men assigned to each bomber), then the impact was even greater. It was an impressive contribution to the war effort by any standard. 🇺🇸

Charles E. Stanley Jr., the son of UB aviation cadet Charles E. Stanley Sr. and a former aide to Governor George Pataki, is the author of the upcoming book, *The Lost Airmen: The True Story of US Bomber Crews Stranded Behind Enemy Lines in Yugoslavia during World War II*. He is Senior Editor of the website Catchingflak.com, a blog dedicated to historical, political and cultural commentary. He can be reached at charlesstanley.author@gmail.com.



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