

TULANE NROTC 65 YEAR CELEBRATION

By Bill Minor

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(Tulane NROTC 1943)

They had to drill with wooden rifles. Their pay was a miniscule 75 cents a month, calculated on one official monthly drill, although they drilled much more often.

When they arrived at Tulane University as freshmen in August, 1938, 75 of them were selected to join the Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps unit that was brand-new on the campus.

None had the faintest idea that four years later, the United States would be involved in an epic world war and that 40 of them would become Navy ensigns involved in combat around the globe.

Tulane in 1938 had been one of only six universities around the country where Naval Reserve Officers' Training Corps units were established, the only other one in the South located at Georgia Tech. In the next few years as the nation stepped up military preparedness under the growing shadow of war, more NROTC units would be created at additional universities.

Now, 65 years since Tulane's unit commissioned its first class of Navy ensigns in 1942 and sent them off to fight in World War II, dozens of alumni of the Tulane Navy unit over the past six decades are gathering on the campus on October 25 for a ceremony especially honoring the initial class.

At the same time, members of the wartime classes of 1943 and 1944 will be celebrated for their unique role in the nation's defense at a critical time of U.S. history.

Highlighting the celebration will be a dress review of the current 76-member NROTC battalion followed by a luncheon at the Levin-Bernick Center reuniting alumni of the unit's continuous 65-year-old existence. Retired Navy Captain Charles W. Frank of New Orleans, a member of the 1943 class, heads up the celebration.

Since 1942, the Tulane Naval unit has commissioned more than 2500 officers--men and women--for the U.S. Navy and the U. S. Marine Corps and consistently ranked among the largest NROTC units in the country. Its graduates have served in every U.S. military conflict around the globe ranging from WWII to the present war in the Middle East.

Attesting to the high quality of their training at Tulane's Naval unit, its graduates have been given first-tier duty assignments comparable to those given U.S. Naval Academy graduates.

One note of sadness as the initial 1942 class is honored: only 12 of its 40 members are still alive. Three were killed in action during World War II, while aboard ships in both the Atlantic and Pacific war theaters.

Coming on the heels of Ken Burns' celebrated PBS documentary, "The War," experiences of Tulane NROTC graduates during their WWII service aboard a wide variety of ships ring with the same poignancy as the war stories told by war veterans in the Burns documentary.

Ken Manson of Metairie, 85, a member of the 1942 class, recalls their rookie days in 1938 when the Navy furnished them only wooden rifles and no uniforms for months after the initial raw recruits arrived and began shaping the infant naval unit into a respectable military lot.

"It was almost like drilling with broomsticks," Manson says, "His class started in 1938 with 75 people, "but only 40 survived the four years by the time we were commissioned," Manson said. Mockingly, he added: "The pay was good...75 cents a month the first two years until we got \$7.50 per month in our junior year." (Remember, back then the lucrative NROTC scholarships which now are prized on many university campuses were unheard of.)

By January 1942, Pearl Harbor had happened, and the Navy made the NROTC cadets V-1 apprentice seaman. That's when the monthly pay became \$7.50. Importantly, however, the military draft had been instituted and as long as NROTC cadets didn't bust out, they were exempt from the draft.

When the Tulane naval unit finally received bona fide rifles to drill with, Manson remembers, they were of a World War I vintage. "Certainly our rifle team didn't use them, they had much better guns," he recalls.

Assigned to the admiral's flagship staff on the old Battleship USS Texas off the Moroccan coast during the run-up to the invasion of Italy in 1943, Manson handled communications that amazingly revealed that U.S. troops on the ground were fighting supposed friendly French soldiers rather than German troops.

"We thought we were fighting the Germans, but we learned it was the French," he said. "The Germans had evacuated and left the French behind to hold down the fort," Manson remembers, adding: "We picked up from some of the French captives that they kept fighting because they wanted to be on the winning side." Manson said that experience "made us realize the outcome of the war was still very much in doubt."

Unknown to Manson at the time, David Crais of New Orleans, his popular '42 classmate, would a month later go down with his destroyer, the USS Buck. It was torpedoed by a German U-Boat off Salerno in the Italian invasion and only 57 of its 325 crewmen were picked up after the sinking.

Meantime, on the other side of the world in the South Pacific, in a brutal November, 1942 sea battle off Savo Island in the Solomons, the Japanese fleet dealt heavy casualties to U.S. Naval forces that were supporting the Marine landing to drive the Japanese from Guadalcanal.

In the Savo naval battle, Manson's classmate Herb McCampbell would die when his ship, the heavy cruiser Vincennes, was mortally damaged by torpedoes and sank with a loss of 700 crewmen. Later, another '42 classmate, Al McCoard, would also be lost on a heavy cruiser.

In April, 1943, eleven months after he was commissioned in the 1942 class, Ernie Johnson, now 85, of New Orleans, had come home on leave from the heavy cruiser, Portland. He was quoted in The Hullabaloo, Tulane's campus newspaper, as describing the Japanese as "overrated" as a fighters.

"I can't imagine I had said something like that, certainly after my ship was in the battle of Savo Island," Johnson, 85, says. His war in the Pacific later found him attached to the Marines as naval gunfire liaison and going ashore at Iwo Jima with the 4th Marine division on the second day of invasion. The end of the war would find Johnson back at Maui, Hawaii, training for the invasion of the Japanese mainland.

Manson, after his duty tour with the Battleship Texas in the Atlantic, was transferred to the Battleship South Dakota in the Pacific and found himself embroiled in some of the most ferocious battles with the still-potent Japanese fleet in the Southwest Pacific in late 1942. In one massive attack by Japanese carrier planes, the South Dakota shot down 24 or 26 attacking planes. But the So-Dak, as it was called, later had to limp out of action from bomb hits which cost 57 lives. Manson was thankful to wind up the war assigned to teach at the University of Texas NROTC.

The 1944 class of Roy Johns of Monroe, was shipped out three months sooner than their scheduled May graduation, after having become the first Tulane NROTC group to be housed in dormitories.

Johns, 83, was assigned to one of the Navy's strangest warships, a wooden sub-chaser with a complement of three officers and 30 crewmen. Having just turned age 20, Johns had become navigator for his tiny ship. In October, 1944, his vessel found itself surrounded by dozens of bigger ships in Leyte Gulf for General Douglas MacArthur's long-awaited Philippine invasion.

"We watched MacArthur wade ashore right at the beachhead where we were sending in the troops," Johns recalls. Now retired from his architectural practice in Monroe, Johns remembers his ship's skipper saying he trusted NROTC-trained officers far more than the "90-day wonders" that were being turned out at that stage of the war.

Four of Tulane's 1943 class--Gus Caire, Charles Maginnis, and Malcolm Peters, all from New Orleans, and myself, from Bogalusa--were sent to

destroyers in the Pacific that became the versatile "small boys" of the aircraft carrier-led Third and Fifth fleets as they pushed the Japanese for two years ever closer to their homeland, climaxed by the battle for Okinawa in the spring of 1945.

Okinawa saw the unleashing of the Kamikazes in all their fury, and for some strange reason, destroyers became the favorite target of dozens of the suicide planes. The Evans, on which Caire and Maginnis served, was incredibly hit by four Kamikazes but managed to stay afloat. All the while the Evans kept shooting, knocking down 24 attacking planes. Though 32 of the Evans' crew died in the Kamikaze onslaught, Caire and Maginnis survived.

Meantime, the Stephen Potter, on which Peters and Minor served as assistant gunnery officers, was fortunate to be unscathed by Kamikazes in the Okinawa battle. That kept intact the Potter's lucky streak of having dodged torpedoes and 500-pound bombs and ridden out the massive December, 1944 typhoon that sank three other DDs with the loss of 900 crewmen.

During the summer of 1939 and again in 1940, we NROTC cadets had experienced our first taste of shipboard life and a chance to fire big guns (the 5' battery) in five-week training cruises aboard the old Battleship Wyoming. The "Wyo" picked us dockside in New Orleans and we sailed around Cuba and up the East Coast, with a three-day layover anchored in New York's East River.

For some of us country boys who had never traveled beyond Louisiana's borders, an opportunity to visit New York was like a dream vacation. Some came back with stories of having seen Sally Rand do her fan dance, while a few of us went to hear a skinny young crooner named Frank Sinatra sing with Tommy Dorsey's band on the Astor Roof.

Our next port of call was Portland, ME where we ate 2-pound lobsters that cost 75 cents and were toasted by a bevy of Maine's feminine pulchritude at a country club party overlooking the White Mountains. From there, we steamed South to Charleston and were transferred for the trip home to the four-stack destroyer Broome. A few months later the Broome would be among the 50 destroyers President Roosevelt gave to embattled Britain.

The 1940 cruise aboard the old battleship would prove to be the last NROTC blue-water training cruise before WWII. Along with us on the 1940 cruise were cadets from naval units at Georgia Tech, Harvard, Yale, Northwestern, the University of California, and Stanford. As I would learn years later, the crew from Harvard would have included a guy named Ben Bradlee, had he not been grounded and confined to a tug in Boston harbor. Bradlee years later, of course, would gain fame as managing editor of the Washington Post when the paper broke the Watergate scandal.