

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

COLORADO COLLEGE AND WORLD WAR II

by John L. Zorack

Editor's Note: During World War II, Colorado College was designated as a Navy and Marine Corps V-12 training site. Young men bound for war received military training at the same time they took college-level courses. As a result, many young men who otherwise would not have been able to go to Colorado College were able to matriculate there while doing their military service.

After World War II ended, a number of those men returned to Colorado College as civilians to continue their studies, participate in peacetime campus life, and eventually graduate with a degree.

One of those was John Zorack. He wrote this memoir, unpublished until now, as part of Colorado College's 125th anniversary celebration in 1999.

Colorado College, in 1942, was as far away from me as Parris Island, South Carolina, where I expected to attend “boot camp” upon graduation from Cheyenne Mountain High School in Colorado Springs. In other words, I never expected to attend Colorado College because it was a very expensive private school. Colorado University at Boulder was my first choice. The ongoing World War II, however, dictated the direction of my college education.

Enlisting in January of 1943, I was advised by the recruiting officer I would be going to “boot camp” in June. I received a letter from the Commandant of the Marine Corps, however, stating I had been selected for a new Officers Training Program to be started at colleges around the United States, including Colorado College. It further stated I was to report to Colorado College for active duty, where I would commence military training.



V-12 PROGRAM RECRUITS

This group of future U.S. Navy officers in the V-12 Program posed in front of Hagerman Hall, the Colorado College dormitory in which most of them were living. Both U.S Navy and U.S. Marines officers were educated and trained at Colorado College during World War II. Hagerman Hall was torn down shortly after the war ended. (Photograph from Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College.)

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The selection of Colorado College for the Navy/Marine Corps V-12 program was no accident. Colorado College President Thurston Davies was a World War I highly decorated Marine officer. At the start of World War II, he was commissioned a Major in the United States Marine Corps to provide leadership and implement the Navy's V-12 Officer's Training Program. President Davis had an outstanding reputation as a college administrator. That, coupled with his Marine Corps experience, made him an ideal person to oversee the Navy's V-12 program.

After the declaration of war following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, President Davies knew many of his male students would be drafted. He implemented a physical training program for all male students to insure they were physically fit for military service. During 1942 over half of the male student body was drafted. The men remaining at Colorado College had enlisted in the Navy and Marine Corps Reserve.

The Colorado College I reported to on July 1st, 1943, was a somber campus with no typical fraternity and sorority rush parties. The College had "gone to war."

I was disappointed. I would not be leaving Colorado Springs to serve my country along with my fellow high-school class mates. It became a blessing in disguise, however. I attended Colorado College as an officer candidate for sixteen months when Marine Corps troops were engaged in some of the most difficult battles in the Pacific campaign against the Japanese. My only thought at the time was that I would not be leaving home and "seeing the world" like my other high-school classmates.

Although I did not leave Colorado Springs, enrolling as a freshman student and officer candidate at Colorado College did open a window to a new world, totally unfamiliar. This was also true for the over 400 Navy V-12 students registering at Colorado College with me. We stood in a most nonmilitary line in front of the old athletic building waiting to be issued uniforms under the critical eyes of two specially assigned Marine Corps Drill Instructors, Staff Sergeant John Lilley and Sergeant John Onuska. We would soon learn to form military lines and march in military formations under the commands of those two outstanding Marines.



U.S. MARINES V-12 DRILL INSTRUCTORS

This photograph is of Sergeant John Onuska and Staff Sergeant John Lilley. It was their job to turn the V-12 Marine recruits at Colorado College into highly-trained military men. (Photograph from Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College.)

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Awkwardly placing new sea bags containing military issue over our shoulders, we “sort of” marched to our newly assigned quarters, formerly dorms for regular college students. Hagerman Hall, Howbert House, Jackson House and the Sigma Chi, Kappa Sigma and Phi Delta Theta fraternity houses became military quarters.

Sergeant Lilley, a tall, slow-talking man from Louisiana, was built like a coiled spring, ready to pounce on us for the slightest mistake. We were under his immediate control even though we were “out of control” when it came to marching and following his hard to understand, barked out commands. I do remember him saying: “You boots...better...learn...how...to...march...or...you...never...will...become...officers.” He made certain we heard every word, and most of what he said in those early days became imprinted on our minds forever. We did learn to march quickly and take orders readily. We soon realized our college indoctrination would be unique.

Colorado College, like 150 colleges and universities throughout the United States, became part of the war effort, providing a training ground for developing young officers for the Navy and Marine Corps. For male students, uniforms replaced informal civilian attire, with military headgear replacing “beanies.” We experienced close order drill, reveille at 0600, beds made before chow, formation in the early morning, and regular inspections of quarters. The fraternity rush parties were a thing of the past, and a military routine was the order of each day except Saturday and Sunday. It was a far cry from the college atmosphere many had envisioned.

Registration seemed to be no more than going through a chow line and being told what courses we would take and where to go. I asked if I could take a course not part of the V-12 curriculum. I was told: “You take what we tell you to take.” We did - with a few electives.

The prescribed curriculum was heavy on Physics and Math, including a course on Military Orientation. With a personal preference for English, Literature and creative writing, I found the Math and Physics courses far from stimulating and kept wondering how calculus would make me a better Marine Corps Platoon Leader. Many of us, however, were fortunate to be sitting in a Physics or Math class rather than a foxhole in the South Pacific.



CALISTHENICS

U.S. Navy and Marine Corps V-12 students received their physical training on Stewart Field behind McGregor Hall at Colorado College during World War II. (Photograph from Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College.)

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Although I was not aware of it at the time, Colorado College had undergone a dramatic change. Classes were larger. There were more teachers and the curriculum had been expanded. Colorado College would never again be the small, elite school it was before the war. Having experienced a dramatic growth during World War II, it continued to grow. Now, in the year 1999, Colorado College is recognized nationally as a top-flight liberal arts college.

The period between July, 1943, and July, 1946, should be recorded in the history of Colorado College as one of the most important because it gave birth to such dramatic change. It was one of a select number of colleges and universities to train Navy and Marine Corps officers in support of the nation's war effort. This was a unique situation for Colorado College and for many young men who would never have had the opportunity to attend college, let alone attending one with such a fine reputation as Colorado College.

Besides being in uniform and under the watchful eyes of Navy and Marine Corps officers and enlisted personnel, life as a college student was not materially different. There were college dances, cards and socializing at the student union (Lennox House), and college theater.

A number of the officer candidates had experienced combat in the early battles of World War II. The students who participated in the dramatic production *My Sister Eileen* will never forget the almost incongruous situation where young veterans from the South Pacific, not too far removed from bloodshed and violence, entertained fellow students in a zany comedy. The V-12 program did offer its officer candidates the opportunity to participate in regular college activities.

Physical fitness, a crucial part of wartime training, was pursued to the utmost by military personnel assigned to duty at Colorado College. They brought together and coached college athletes from other colleges and universities, developing a football team which may go down as one of the greatest teams ever produced at Colorado College.

After an undefeated football season in 1943, including two victories over Colorado University at Boulder, Colorado College was invited to attend six post-season football bowl games. The College did not send its winning football team to play in a bowl game because of wartime restrictions on travel.

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SERVICE FLAGS FLYING ON CUTLER HALL

The Gold Star Flag told the number of military men connected to Colorado College who had been killed in World War II. The Blue Star Flag told the number who were serving. At the time this photograph was taken, 17 had been killed and about 1,050 were serving. (Photograph from Special Collections, Tutt Library, Colorado College.)

COLORADO COLLEGE AND WORLD WAR II

An interesting footnote: Colorado College's great team was no accident. Colonel Davies, former President of Colorado College, played a major role in the selection of V-12 colleges. Although it is not a matter of record, Davies made certain some of the best athletes in the West were sent to Colorado College, including All-Conference players from Stanford and other universities.

One of Colorado's great athletes, John Ziegler, was a football star at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He was transferred to Colorado College, even though the University of Colorado at Boulder had a V-12 unit. President Davies was proud of Colorado College and proud of the outstanding football team he assembled, thereby further advancing Colorado College on the national scene.

I returned to Colorado College in March of 1946 as a civilian. I noted that many former Colorado College V-12 students, who had become officers, elected to return to Colorado College instead of attending home-state colleges or universities. Many commented about the quality of life and education at Colorado College. Most were highly motivated to get on with their lives and highly dedicated to pursuing their educations.

Others on the GI Bill, the national legislation that paid for college for war veterans, were primarily interested in drinking and girls. They were a minority. Having served on the Inter-Fraternity Council, I was aware of Dean Lloyd Edson "Lew" Worner's concern about drinking and partying on campus. I remember him saying: "I'm so proud of the students who served their country and returned to this campus to better their educations."

The class of 1946, approximate 250 students, may have been Colorado College's largest graduating class up to that time. They came from every strata of society, from many states. This diversification continued into the future....

The time that Colorado College "went to war" between 1943 and 1946 was extremely memorable for students at Colorado College during that period. In retrospect, it may be one of the most dramatic periods in Colorado College history, one unlikely to soon be repeated. It was a time ... of terrible conflict throughout the world, a time of emotional upheaval worldwide, and certainly a time of change for Colorado College and other universities and colleges throughout the United States....

The changes made by Colorado College ... became the foundation for the development of one of the great liberal arts colleges in the United States.

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Those who went through this period of change are proud to have been a part of Colorado College's historic legacy.