

From the UCA Archives XLIX  
**UCA Alumni in Battle**

Second in a Four-Part Series

By

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**Part 2**

University of Central Arkansas (UCA) officials from the World War II era estimated that as many as 12,000 UCA alumni served in uniform during the war. However, that number has never been confirmed and in all likelihood we will never know how many actually served.

An effort was made by UCA officials to remember those who were serving by adding their names to a Roll of Honor, created by the head of the UCA Art Department, Marie Schichtl. The Roll of Honor was kept in Ida Waldran Auditorium but soon ran out of space for additional names. Due to the vast number of UCA alumni who were serving their country in uniform, it was deemed impractical at the time to attempt to keep track of all those in the U.S. Armed Forces.

As reports came in concerning UCA alumni, the Echo (UCA's student newspaper) relayed this information to its readers. At the time the institution was known as Arkansas State Teachers College (ASTC) and a column in The Echo was, "ATC'ers In The War" and carried news about veterans. That column was later replaced by another column, "Alumni in Action." Some names appeared more often than others in The Echo and Paul Douglas was one of those names. He served in the Army Air Forces, the former name of the U.S. Air Force. From June 20, 1941 to September 17, 1947, the Air Force was known as the Army Air Forces.

Paul Douglas, a UCA alumnus from Paragould, Arkansas, entered the cadet program of the Army Air Forces in 1941. In December 1941, Douglas graduated as a second lieutenant at Victoria Field, Texas. During World War II he was a fighter pilot and flew the powerful P-47 Thunderbolt, the heaviest and largest single-engine fighter of that period.

The P-47 Thunderbolt was powered by the Pratt & Whitney R2800 Double Wasp 18-cylinder engine that produced 2,000 to 2,500 horsepower (depending on model) and was equipped with eight .50 caliber machine guns. The heavy Thunderbolt had a maximum weight of approximately 17,500 pounds and had an amazing ability to dive.

Douglas was assigned to the European Theater of Operations and became one of the most decorated American Aces of World War II. He shot down eight enemy aircraft and destroyed another 27 enemy aircraft on the ground. He flew 136 combat missions with 337 combat hours in the P-47 Thunderbolt.

In one of his encounters with the enemy, Lt. Colonel Douglas led the 395th Fighter Squadron on a dive-bombing mission to bomb a supply depot near Frankfurt, Germany. From information provided by Lt. Colonel Douglas' Encounter Report that was supplied to this author by Robert Manno, who maintains the 368<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group Portraits of Valor website <http://www.368thfightergrouppov.com/396th-FS-Lt--Col--Paul-Douglas.html>, and information from the 368th Fighter Group Website, [www.368thfightergroup.com/douglas](http://www.368thfightergroup.com/douglas), the following action took place on March 14, 1945. After bombing the supply depot, the four Thunderbolts (Douglas and three more Thunderbolt pilots) gained altitude to gauge the effectiveness of the attack. It was then that Colonel Douglas noticed six German FW-190s at about 3,500 feet. The FW-190 was a very capable German fighter-bomber aircraft.

Colonel Douglas and his men pursued the FW-190s and they began climbing. The Thunderbolts were equipped with water injection and could attain the higher horsepower rating mentioned earlier and they were gaining on the fleeing enemy aircraft. After breaking through the haze, Colonel Douglas and his men saw they were not up against six FW-190s, but a combined force of Me-109s and FW 190s that totaled 50 enemy fighters.

Although outnumbered by 50 to 4, Colonel Douglas led his men into battle and the Thunderbolts attacked. In a relatively short period of time the Thunderbolt pilots shot down 10 enemy aircraft, with no losses of their own. In an attempt to gain speed, increase altitude, and improve maneuverability, the German pilots jettisoned their drop tanks (fuel carried for extra range) and their bombs. After running out of ammunition, Colonel Douglas broke off the attack and the remaining 40 German fighter-bombers headed for home, and were prevented from inflicting any damage to American troops on that occasion.

According to the 368th Fighter Group website, [www.368thfightergroup.com/douglas](http://www.368thfightergroup.com/douglas), Lt. Colonel Douglas received an award for this action. The citation that accompanied the awarding of a Bronze Oak Leaf Cluster stated in part, "For extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an armed enemy while serving as Pilot of a P-47 Fighter Airplane in the 396<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron, 368<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group, NINTH Air Force, in aerial combat against enemy force on 14 March 1945. On this date, with only three aircraft supporting him, Colonel Douglas attacked a force of more than fifty enemy aircraft carrying bombs toward the American lines in the Remagen Bridgehead. Completely disregarding the enemy's overwhelming numerical superiority, he attacked relentlessly, compelling the hostile aircraft to jettison their bombs. In the ensuing combat Colonel Douglas destroyed three enemy planes while the aircraft he was leading destroyed seven additional enemy planes with no loss to themselves. The extraordinary heroism and determination of this officer to destroy the enemy are in keeping with the highest traditions of the Armed Forces of the United States."

For his service during World War II, Lt. Colonel Paul P. Douglas was awarded two Distinguished Service Crosses, three Silver Stars, the Distinguished Flying Cross, 35 Air Medals, two Purple Hearts, the French Croix de Guerre with Etoile de Vermeil, the British Distinguished Flying Cross and the Belgian Fouragere. Colonel Douglas later served as Commanding Officer of the 395th Fighter Squadron, 396<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron and 36<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group. After the war ended, Douglas remained in the Air Force and retired as a Brigadier General on February 1, 1970.

Another UCA alumnus was also an Army Air Forces standout, Harley T. “Keg” Barlow, from Booneville, Arkansas, who enrolled here in the fall of 1939. He joined the Arkansas National Guard and was a member of the 153<sup>rd</sup> Infantry. His unit was mobilized and sent to Alaska with Brigadier General Heber McAlister, UCA’s third president, as the commanding officer. Barlow was later admitted to flying school and graduated from Luke Field in Glendale, Arizona in 1943. He was trained to fly the P-38 Lightning, a fighter that distinguished itself especially in the Pacific. Its two engines came in handy, especially over water, and the Lightning had outstanding single-engine performance.

For his World War II service Lt. Colonel Barlow received the Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross, 11 Air Medals, Air Force Commendation Medal and various other medals. Following the war, he received a Master of Science degree in Meteorology from the University of Chicago, and soon began work as a meteorologist in the Air Force. He served as commander of Air Force Base weather stations at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base and Thule Air Base in Greenland. He retired from the Air Force in 1965. After receiving a teaching certificate from UCA, he taught math at Lakewood Junior High School in North Little Rock until he retired in 1983.

Many UCA alumni served with distinction and returned home as heroes to grateful families and welcoming crowds. Other UCA alumni also served with distinction but never returned home, having made the ultimate sacrifice. The following paragraphs were written to give readers a better understanding of the many contributions made by UCA alumni who did not survive the war, and the circumstances under which they lived, fought and died.

Navy pilot, Lt. (j.g.) James DeBell, was at UCA from 1941 to 1942. He joined the Navy and was assigned to the USS Bataan, a light aircraft carrier. The Bataan (CVL-29) displaced 13,000 tons full load, carried a crew of 1,400 men and 45 aircraft. DeBell’s plane was the Navy’s F6F Hellcat fighter, one of the Navy’s best fighters, whose pilots were credited with destroying more than 5,200 enemy aircraft during World War II.

According to The Echo, Lt. DeBell was the first pilot from his carrier to shoot down a Japanese fighter plane. The Echo reported, “According to information received by his family in North Little Rock, he was on patrol on the 17<sup>th</sup> of June and spotted seven Japanese “Bettys” (medium bombers made by Mitsubishi) headed for his task force. He shot down one and made several runs on the others, leaving one in a trail of smoke. He was not allowed to break radio silence in danger of further giving information to the Japanese. He returned to his carrier, as he was out of ammunition... Later, he shot down two more planes at Truk and Palan, respectively. He was reported missing in action after a raid his squadron made on the Kazan Islands.”

Army Captain Opie Chick, who originally enrolled in UCA in 1928, joined the Tennessee National Guard on September 15, 1940. He was later activated and eventually sent to France, going ashore on June 6, 1944, D-Day. He participated in three major battles and on July 26, 1944, was awarded the Bronze Star. Four days later on July 30, 1944, Captain Chick was killed in action during heavy fighting near Saint Lo, France. He was buried at Normandy American Cemetery in Colleville-sur-Mer, France.

In an interesting coincidence, Troy Deere, who enrolled at UCA in 1939, served in the Navy as a Torpedoman Second-Class, aboard the U.S. aircraft carrier Saint Lo (CVE-63). The Saint Lo was named for the town in France where the Allied Powers and Axis Powers had engaged in a terrific struggle and where Captain Opie Chick was killed. The Saint Lo was a Casablanca-class escort carrier that displaced 7,900 tons, carried 28 aircraft and was fighting in the Pacific Theater of Operations.

The Battle of Leyte Gulf was considered the biggest naval engagement in history and the Saint Lo fought in that historic battle. Previously known as the Midway, it was renamed Saint Lo in honor of the men in that battle on October 10, 1944, 15 days before it sank. On October 25, 1944, a pilot flying a TBM Avenger from the Saint Lo spotted a Japanese task force of four battleships, (the task force included the giant 73,000 ton Japanese battleship Yamato) six cruisers and at least 10 destroyers headed for the Saint Lo and the other escort carriers in her group.

The entire group of U.S. ships steamed east at full speed trying to run into the cover of a rain squall, but the larger and faster Japanese ships closed the gap quickly. Only protected by destroyers with five-inch guns, who laid down smoke screens, the Saint Lo launched all of her attack aircraft, as did her sister escort carriers, and they attacked the advancing Japanese task force. Eventually, the Japanese ships stopped their pursuit after repeated attacks by the planes from the escort carriers. Even though the Saint Lo managed to dodge the big shells thrown by the Japanese battleships and cruisers, she was struck at 10:53 a.m. by a Japanese kamikaze.

It was initially thought that little damage was done to the Saint Lo. But, according to the ship's log, small explosions turned into medium explosions and then larger explosions and the Saint Lo became a raging inferno. By 11:25 a.m. that same day, the Saint Lo sank and Torpedoman Second-Class Troy Deere was reported missing in action and was never found.

Private First Class Ralph Sims, Jr., was one of the two students mentioned in Part One of this series who thought UCA President Irby's request for business as usual was unrealistic. Private Sims went through basic training at Camp Fannin in Tyler, Texas. While at Camp Fannin he made friends with Mrs. Lois Whiteman, a native of Tyler, Texas and someone who loved to help other people and befriended many of the troops at Camp Fannin.

According to "The Fitzgerald House" by Kim Groff, Mrs. Whiteman stated, "My favorite people – my parents, the late Judge and Mrs. J.W. Fitzgerald taught me that a day should not pass without doing something for someone. They not only taught that principle, but they both lived each day showing how it could be done."

It was through Mrs. Whiteman's connection to Marvin United Methodist Church in Tyler that she met Private Ralph Sims, Jr. While going through basic training at Camp Fannin, Sims visited Marvin United Methodist Church and met Mrs. Whiteman. She asked Sims if he would like to have Sunday dinner with her and her family, something she had asked many other soldiers who had attended her church. Sims accepted the invitation and went to dinner with the Whiteman family and a friendship developed that lasted the rest of Sims' short life.

After leaving Camp Fannin, Private Sims stayed in touch with Mrs. Whiteman and wrote her regularly. Sometime after her death in 1988, a cache of letters was discovered that numbered close to 1,000 letters from almost 100 soldiers; several of those letters were from Private Sims. Due to developments of the past few days, and the kindness of Robert and Becky Wangner of Tyler, Texas, UCA now has copies of the letters Private Sims wrote to Mrs. Whiteman. The letters were sent to this author by Ms. Kim Groff, author of "The Fitzgerald House."

In his letters to Mrs. Whiteman, Sims did not hold back any of his thoughts or feelings about his future in the military, his plans after the war, or about the possibility of being killed in combat. In a letter to Mrs. Whiteman dated August 26, 1944, about three months before he died, Sims stated, "At times it grieves me to know that so many of us who love life must give it for our country. But I have a philosophy that helps so much. I believe that just being born in this country gave me a privilege that would count for a life time in another country. Then too, my 22 years have been full of happiness. I've found true friends, realize the joy of Christianity, and benefited in so many ways from our democratic way of life."

"Some of the boys seem to feel that death would cheat them of the future, but if my number should be up in the near future, I wouldn't feel that way at all, instead I'll be thankful for the life that I've had. To me, death seems to be more of an opening of a door than the end of things. Of course I want to live and experience the joy of having a home of my own, and of taking a more active part in the life of our nation. But to me all of this seems to be a preparation for that which we will find in eternity. It seems strange for me to be writing this, as I've never discussed it before, but somehow I feel that you will understand." Private First Class Ralph Sims Jr., was killed on a battlefield near Meclueves, France, on November 18, 1944, and was buried in Lorraine American Cemetery, St. Avold, France.

UCA lost 46 alumni during World War II, 45 men and one woman. The lone female was Lt. Elizabeth Donner McGuire, who attended UCA in the mid 1930s. She was killed when the American Air Lines DC-3 on which she was a passenger crashed into the Mississippi River during a heavy thunderstorm.

A letter dated October 5, 1944, from Lt. McGuire's mother, Mrs. A.J. Bonner, to Dr. Ada Jane Harvey of UCA stated in part, "Our only daughter enlisted in the WACS (Women's Army Corps) on January 30, 1943. She was called to report for active duty February 15<sup>th</sup>, 1943, and left for Fort Des Moines, Iowa on February 16, 1943, where she took her training...She passed the board for Officer Candidate School in July and entered O.C.S. the first of August in Des Moines...She was sent first to New York, Baltimore and then stationed in Philadelphia, Pa. She came home on leave the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February, 1944, and was returning to Philadelphia to her work on February 10, 1944. She was a passenger on the American Air Lines commercial plane that crashed into the Mississippi River below Memphis the nite of the 10<sup>th</sup> of February, 1944, killed all aboard."

"Elizabeth volunteered in this work to serve her country & do her bit. She enjoyed the work and did the job well as she had always done any undertaking. Of course we feel very proud of her – not only for the big & noble job she did to help but for every day of her fine, loyal &

unselfish life. We think it was very thoughtful & nice for the school to honor the former students in this way. We appreciate you writing us and will attend the service if possible.”

Throughout the war UCA officials held a memorial service every few months for those alumni who had been killed in the war, or were missing in action, prisoners of war, or injured. The family of the fallen sat together in a reserved section of Ida Waldran Auditorium and each family stood up when their relative’s name was called.

Letters from those families who attended the periodic memorial services showed that they were grateful to the UCA administration for remembering their loved ones.

Author’s Note: Sources for this article include The Echo, Log Cabin Democrat, “A History of Arkansas State Teachers College” by Ted Worley, “The Centennial History of the University of Central Arkansas” by Jimmy Bryant, UCA World War II Alumni collection-M06-05-UCA Archives, “The Fitzgerald House” by Kim Groff, “Jane’s American Fighting Ships of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century” compiled and edited by Captain John Moore USNR, “The American Encyclopedia of Battleships” by Tony Gibbons, Robert Manno, the 368<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group Portraits of Valor website, <http://www.368thfightergrouppov.com>, the 368<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group website, [www.368thfightergroup.com/douglas](http://www.368thfightergroup.com/douglas), Robert and Becky Wangner, “The Battle of Leyte Gulf” by Adrian Stewart, “The Battle of Leyte Gulf 23-26 October 1944” by Thomas J. Cutler and “The Strategic Bombing of Germany” by Alan J. Levine.