

From the UCA Archives XLVIII

Bears in Battle

First in a Four-Part Series

By

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Part 1

The Campus in War

The day after Japan's carrier-based aircraft struck a devastating blow against Pearl Harbor, Hickam Field, and other U.S. Military targets on Oahu, Hawaii, the president of the University of Central Arkansas (UCA) called a meeting of the entire student body, faculty and staff. On December 8, 1941, President Nolen Irby held a "war assembly" in Ida Waldran Memorial Chapel (now called Ida Waldran Auditorium) and told the students to carry on in a "business as usual" fashion.

According to the Log Cabin Democrat, President Irby told a hushed audience, "It is necessary to have leaders after the war and leaders must come from the college group. Women have much to do since they must do whatever is necessary to make men available, if and when it comes." A female member of the Department of Mathematics spoke up, Professor Lula Caraher, and reminded the female students that this was an opportunity for them to teach mathematics since the men were being used in other fields where math was needed.

Afterwards, Marie Atwater, a reporter for The Echo, interviewed several students to get their impression of the meeting. The question about which Ms. Atwater sought opinions was whether things could be continued in a "business as usual" fashion as President Irby had earlier requested. Two of the students she spoke with were Ralph Sims, Jr., a sophomore from Hazen, Arkansas and Pete Atkinson, a freshman from Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

Sims was quoted in The Echo as saying, "Business as usual should not be carried out, because these are unusual times. Business as usual would not work for this reason – a nation at war needs a patriotic people behind it, and mounting patriotism cannot be obtained by business as usual." Pete Atkinson was quoted as saying, "I don't believe that everything should go along as usual, because there is no use trying to make ourselves believe that this whole country is not going to be affected by the war. Even this campus is going to be affected. Why try to fool ourselves?"

At the time, neither Sims nor Atkinson knew what the future held for them, but they were both convinced that "business as usual" was not a realistic expectation. Atkinson was right on target when he said, "Even this campus is going to be affected." Approximately three years later both men were killed in action while fighting for their country. Private First Class Sims died on a battlefield near Meclueves, France, on November 18, 1944, and Sergeant Atkinson was killed in the crash landing of a B-25 bomber on which he served as a radio operator/gunner on December 27, 1944, near Calcutta India.

After the “war assembly” things began happening on campus at a rapid pace. As expected, enrollment began to quickly decline, but surprisingly, the biggest drop occurred in the number of female students leaving campus. This was due to a large number of women who dropped out of college in order to fill some of the 1,170 teaching vacancies in Arkansas’s public schools.

After the first year of the war the number of male students dropped dramatically. In the fall of 1941, UCA had an enrollment of 764. Enrollment began to decline each year until the low point was reached in 1943, when 289 students were enrolled in classes, and only 49 of those students were men.

It was not just the students who were going to war; members of the faculty went too. Some of the UCA faculty left their posts to serve in the U.S. Armed Forces. Those faculty members included George L. Connell, Leslie P. Bigelow, Ted Worley, Loyd Roberts and Sam Hindsman. Possibly no one had to make a bigger adjustment to Army life than Dr. Bigelow, who was the former chair of the UCA Department of English. Bigelow was a buck private and in one of his letters home stated, “Believe me, only a soldier can honestly make the old excuses for dilatory correspondence. I used to think and declare, quite convinced of it, that I was too busy to write; nowadays, I am too busy.”

Just as their counterparts had done during World War I, the female students of World War II sprang into action by organizing support groups on campus. Just a few days after the attack on Pearl Harbor the women had organized themselves along military lines for better efficiency. According to The Echo of January 9, 1942, “The organization is built along military lines with a general over the entire campus, majors for each dormitory, and captains for each floor or wing...Students living in the town have adopted a dormitory as their campus home and are working on the project.”

The women soon began knitting sweaters and sewing pajamas for the American Red Cross. They made pajamas in the sewing laboratory that was located in the E.E. Cordrey Science Building, UCA’s first building. According to The Echo, “It is not necessary that everyone be able to use a machine since there are many other things which must be done before the pajamas will be completed. Buttons must be sewed in place, draw strings inserted in the belts, and some basting must be done.”

UCA’s volunteer group of female students numbered more than 200 and according to The Echo had the distinction of being the first unit of its kind organized on an Arkansas college campus. Knitting sweaters and sewing pajamas was nothing new for many of the women.

More than a year before the U.S. entered the war, in October 1940, the UCA women were knitting sweaters for war refugee children in England, United Kingdom. After the sweaters were completed, they were given to the American Red Cross for distribution to the war refugees. The only thing that slowed production was when the women ran out of yarn and had to wait for another shipment.

Recycling, often thought to be a modern-day invention, was a primary focus of the female students who collected waste paper, tinfoil and scrap iron. They also had “heat cops” a term given to students whose job it was to make sure that steam-heated radiators were turned low and that windows of dormitory rooms were not left open. The women also collected reading material for the military men, and by February 1942, they were holding dances once-a-month for the Army soldiers who were stationed at Camp Robinson in North Little Rock, Arkansas. Both female and male students held scrap iron drives and collected as much scrap iron as they could possibly find.

The female students of UCA were also involved with raising money for the war effort. One student who excelled in this area was Faye Sneed, a senior from Clinton, Arkansas. Many readers know her now as Mrs. Faye Hunnicutt of Conway, Arkansas.

During the 1943 “Bond Queen Contest” Mrs. Hunnicutt raised a huge amount of money for that time and under those conditions. She sold \$6,141 worth of War Bonds and War Stamps. The total raised by her and the other contestants combined was \$9,391. Mrs. Hunnicutt raised 65% of the total amount and of course was the winner of the “Bond Queen Contest.” As a point of interest, \$6,141 in 1943 U.S. dollars has the same purchasing power as \$77,400 in 2010 dollars, according to www.measuringworth.com.

In a telephone interview, this author asked Mrs. Hunnicutt how she sold so many War Bonds and War Stamps, she stated, “I played the piano for the Kiwanis Club and they were very helpful in helping me sell so many bonds. They were eager to help and I rode to Kiwanis Club meetings with either Mr. C.C. Calhoun or Dr. Hubert Minton, who both worked at UCA. And the people of the community supported the war effort and wanted to buy war bonds.” To encourage the purchase of War Stamps, the U.S. War Department advertised in The Echo that two 25-cent War Stamps (50 cents) paid for enough fuel oil to drive a destroyer for one mile.

Athletic competition between colleges was soon curtailed and in September 1942 the presidents of colleges in Arkansas voted to abolish athletic competition between colleges until the war was over. According to The Echo of September 15, 1942, “By a unanimous vote yesterday, the presidents of all Arkansas Colleges who have been prominent in college football, voted to abolish all athletics between colleges in the state for the duration of the present war...in order to comply with the government requests that all unnecessary use of rubber and gasoline be eliminated, and in order to use their resources in developing a better physically-fit student.”

Instead of competing with other colleges, the administration of UCA gave a much greater emphasis on intramural sports. Intercollegiate football, basketball, tennis, golf and track were replaced by intramural sports, including softball, basketball, boxing, track, tennis, swimming, ping-pong and volleyball.

Football was also played on an intramural basis with the freshman class playing against the sophomore class. According to the 1943 Scroll, “Football for Arkansas State Teachers College was all summed up and displayed in one game for the entire season, due to the restriction of football between colleges for the duration. The first war-time game was staged November 19, 1942, between the sophomore class and the freshman class and lacked none of the

traditional college spirit...Enthusiasm among the spectators ran high and the cheering of rival sections added color to the game.” The sophomore class won the only game of the season, 7 to 6 and each team had 15 players.

An important contribution made to the war effort by UCA was the use of UCA’s physical plant by the Navy, Marine Corps Reserves, Army Air Forces, Arkansas National Guard, (for a 10 day period) and the Women’s Army Corps. Due to the great increase in the number of buildings built during the Great Depression, that was made possible because of New Deal legislation, UCA had unused space in several buildings. Add to that the fact that student enrollment had significantly dwindled, and UCA now had enough room to rent some of it to the U.S. War Department.

President Nolen Irby and George Bachelor, chairman of the UCA Board of Trustees, went to Washington, D.C., and signed a contract that allowed U.S. Armed Forces personnel to be trained at UCA. UCA was soon home to the Women’s Army Corps Branch No. 3. From March 1943 to the end of February 1944, approximately 1,800 women were trained at UCA to fill the position of men who were serving in non-combat roles. The purpose of the WACS was to use women to fill non-combat military positions, thus allowing the men who had been assigned non-combat duties, to go into battle. WACS from UCA served at bases in the United States, North Africa, England, India, Egypt and other nations.

The Navy and Army Air Forces sent personnel to UCA for pilot training. In September 1939, UCA was selected as a training site for the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) that was sponsored by the Civil Aeronautics Authority, a federal entity. The CPTP was designed to teach aviation to civilians, and one did not have to be a member of the military to take the course, nor did one have to enlist in the military after taking the course. Obviously, having training bases such as the one at UCA would have a direct bearing on military aviation and give military flying units a larger pool from which to select its pilots, if war did come. Hendrix College also had a ground school and was involved in the CPTP.

There were two major parts of the CPTP, the ground school and the flying school, with the ground school a prerequisite to the flying portion of the program. The courses taken by the military flyers were considered advanced courses in aviation. UCA faculty members taught the ground school on the UCA campus. Initially, four professors were teaching in the ground school, but when the Navy and Army Air Forces flying students arrived, the courses were more advanced and additional faculty had to be added.

Nine faculty members were ground school instructors. They were, Jeff Farris, physical training; Dr. W.C. Ferguson, engines; Alger E. Burdick, aerology and communications; O.L. Hughes, aerology and communications; Guy Dan Estes, coordinator; B.A. Lewis, navigation; Dr. J.B. Wilson, civil air regulations and recognition; Lewis Cooper, engines, navigation and aerology and Dr. H.L. Minton, navigation, communications and recognition. During the early part of the training, Professor E.E. Cordrey taught instruments, radio uses and forms.

According to records compiled by the federal government, UCA did a good job of training pilots. Out of eighty-five colleges in the United States involved in military training, UCA was rated seventh overall. In aviation and ship recognition, UCA was first in the nation and third in the nation in navigation.

The flight portion of the training took place at the Conway Municipal Airport, now known as Dennis F. Cantrell Field. Kenneth Starnes Aviation Service was the authorized pilot instructor center, and after the arrival of the Navy and Army Air Forces personnel the student pilots were now men in uniform. According to “A History of Aviation In Conway, Arkansas, 1917-2010” by Robert Hoyt, Al Hiegel, Stuart Hoyt and Harrell Clendenin, “When the United States did enter the war, the CPT changed to the War Training Service (WTS).”

According to Hoyt, Hiegel, Hoyt and Clendenin, “When the WTS ended in 1944, more than 2,000 pilots had received more than 100,000 hours of flight lessons at Starnes Aviation Service. Pilots from all over the country came to train in Conway. Many became war heroes, as was the case with Major George D. Mobbs, a Faulkner County native and the first American Air Force pilot to bring down a German plane over North Africa.”

During World War II, UCA seemed more like a military base than it did a college. The large military presence on campus was very apparent with men and women in uniform going about their daily business. The Governor of Arkansas, Homer Adkins, was acutely aware of all the military activity taking place at UCA and sought to rename the college. Governor Adkins proposed that UCA be transformed into a military school and given a new name, “MacArthur Military College.” He wanted to name the school after American Army General Douglas MacArthur who was born in Little Rock in 1880.

President Irby disagreed with Governor Adkins’ proposal and argued that the presence of military personnel on campus would soon diminish when the war was over. The institution would then return to its pre-war character, absent uniformed military personnel. Governor Adkins relented and the change to “MacArthur Military College” never took place.

After the United States entered the war, a renewed sense of patriotism quickly swept across the campus. UCA men and women alike were intent on doing their part for their country. The Echo noticed this newfound display of sincere patriotism and commented on it. A reporter for The Echo, Marion Cooper, reminded readers that “Old Glory” had been displayed at various locations on campus during UCA’s history.

President Irby had promised the students a flagpole and while the students were at home on Christmas vacation in 1942, President Irby had a new flagpole erected in the circle in front of Old Main. According to The Echo, “When students returned to the campus after the Christmas holidays, “Old Glory” waved a patriotic greeting to them from the circle in front of the Administration building. The campus never looked better than with the flag standing there, and it seemed to beckon and say, ‘May I ever remind you that I float over the land of the free and the home of the brave; and it’s your duty to keep it that way.’”

Next week’s article will focus on UCA’s fighting men in action.

Author's Note: Sources for this article include The Echo, Log Cabin Democrat, Mrs. Faye Hunnicutt, Mary Ferguson, the Scroll, "A History of Aviation In Conway, Arkansas, 1917-2010" by Robert Hoyt, Al Hiegel, Stuart Hoyt and Harrell Clendenin, "A History of Arkansas State Teachers College" by Ted Worley and "The Centennial History of the University of Central Arkansas" by Jimmy Bryant.