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[BACK TO CURRENT ISSUE](#)
[XU HOME](#) [SEARCH](#) [XU CONTACT INF](#)
[Features](#)
[Web Exclusives](#)
[Letters & Columns](#)
[News & Notes](#)
[Academics](#)
[Sports](#)
[Fund Raising](#)
[Alumni Profiles](#)
[Events](#)
[Class Notes](#)
[Archives](#)
[Write to the Editor](#)
[Submit Class Notes](#)
[Change Address](#)
[Subscribe](#)

Winter 2005

War & Remembrance

By Greg Schaber

Autumn 1938 was a season of promise for Xavier University. Just seven years past its centenary-and two years shy of its 100th anniversary as a Jesuit institution-the school was enjoying steady growth. As the summer shimmered into history, a record 514 young men were preparing to enroll in the day division. For a golden moment, all was well. But a third of the way around the world, clouds of war were massing. On Sept. 1, the German army stormed across the Polish frontier, and less than a month later-before football season had gotten into full swing-Hitler had taken Warsaw. Poland had fallen; World War II had begun.

In the course of the next seven years, the University would see its record enrollment decline to an almost-desperate low, then spring to previously undreamed of heights. But all of that was in the future in the fall of 1938.

On campus, at least for a time, the war remained distant. Certainly, developments in Europe were a topic of conversation. But in describing campus activities, the ROTC section of the 1939 "Musketeer" yearbook bore no mention of the European situation. The thriving University community, on the other hand, was much in evidence throughout the book. The evening division-then the school's largest, with classes held downtown-had grown 10 percent over the previous year to 829 students. And between 200 and 250 couples attended the junior prom, which featured the champagne music of an up-and-coming bandleader named Lawrence Welk.

The atmosphere shifted only slightly the next year. The first 10 pages of the "Musketeer" celebrated Xavier's first 100 years and the fourth centenary of the founding of the Society of Jesus. In print, only senior class president Paul Beckman mentioned "the critical condition of world politics" in writing of the past, present and future of his class. That summer, Celestin J. Steiner, S.J.-a former University vice president and then-president of St. Xavier High School-took the helm as Xavier's 27th Jesuit president. Writing in "Continuity and Change, Xavier University 1831-1981," Lee J. Bennish, S.J., recounted the tenor of the times this way: "While the Germans invaded the Low Countries and France, and the British evacuated from Dunkirk the Xavier campus remained remarkably quiet. There was, however, some evidence of military preparedness. In addition to the ROTC program a new civilian pilot training program for Xavier students, under the auspices of the Civil Aeronautics Authority, was in process at the Cincinnati Airport. The success of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's third-term election to the presidency was downplayed by the attention given to the Jesuit centennial jubilee dinner on Sunday evening, November 24, 1940, at the Hotel Netherland Plaza in the Hall of Mirrors. More than 1,400 guests attended at \$1.50 each."

Of course, the dam of reality burst on Sunday, Dec. 7, 1941, with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Recognizing that University students would soon be called to war, the administration accelerated classes to allow for early graduation. Steiner's forward to the 1942 "Musketeer" was titled "Xavier University's Status in the War Emergency Program." And the opening page of the senior-class section bore the dedication: "To the seniors of 1942 cooperating wholeheartedly in the accelerated program of studies about to take their places in a troubled world faithful to their religious and scholastic duties during four well-spent years at Xavier pledged to the honor of God and their country Godspeed."

In spite of the grim possibilities, Bennish wrote that, "in September 1942, the school administration viewed the academic future of the school with optimism and realism. Although the draft law affecting 18-year-olds had not yet been passed, it seemed likely that it would be.

It was also likely that a military training unit would be established on campus [During 1942] of Xavier's 530 students, 345 had joined the Enlisted Reserve Corps. All but five members of the junior class and three of the senior class were members. In a fieldhouse convocation on December 17, 1942, Steiner informed the student body that those enrolled in the Enlisted Reserve Corps would be called to active duty at the end of the semester in January."

Faced with this devastating loss of enrollment, Steiner contacted military officials proposing the University as a training site. The military accepted, and on March 1, 1943, the first group of 260 cadets of the 30th College Training Detachment Aircrew from Maxwell Field in Alabama arrived on campus. A second group of equal size arrived a month later. Their training combined college-level courses in physics, mathematics, history, geography and English with specific military courses conducted at two local airports. For the next 16 months, the ranks of Air Corpsmen marching to class were a part of day-to-day campus activities. They would soon march off to save the world, but for the moment, they were saving the University. To make room for them, the Jesuit faculty vacated Hinkle Hall, and students housed in Elet Hall moved downtown to the Fenwick Club, the Friars Club or the Harrison Hotel.

Following the allied invasion of Sicily and Italy in 1943, the Air Force extended its contract with the University to June 1944. In the spring of 1944, confident the war was reaching its final phase, the government opted not to extend the contract further. At this point, Bennis wrote, "Steiner met with his trustees to discuss proposals on how the University was to continue until the war ended ... The enrollment problem was acute. When the Air Corps moved out of Elet Hall in the summer of 1944, the entire group of civilian resident students who moved in numbered 14."

One of the solutions was to transfer the entire senior class of St. Xavier High School to the campus for classes conducted by University faculty. Still, when Germany surrendered in May 1945, fewer than 100 undergraduates remained on campus.

It was now that Steiner's hard work would pay off. Thanks to the G.I. Bill, which provided benefits to help servicemen readjust to civilian life, thousands of former soldiers had the opportunity for a college education. And the University was ready. The 1947 "Musketier" reports that, "Even before the downfall of Germany and of Japan, Xavier began to plan for the future. Determined to retain in the ensuing peace the additional prestige that she had gained from her service during the war, she planned to accommodate the greatest possible enrollment she could accept. She increased her faculty both in numbers and in quality, and announced the opening of a graduate division. From the 85 undergraduates who were attending classes when hostilities ceased in 1945, her registration zoomed in September 1946 to 1,500—an increase of almost 200 percent over her normal pre-war enrollment. The evening division reported 1,200 part-time students, and the graduate division had a summer and first-year matriculation of 170."

Looking at this remarkable growth, one faculty member observed that while Xavier needed more than a century to acquire 500 students, it had "grown in four days from 500 to 1,500."

In preparation for this anticipated enrollment spike, the University also planned several new buildings, even contracting with the government to construct 10 military barracks on campus as temporary student housing. As the school year approached, however, it was evident that all of the buildings would not be completed on time. School officials, faced with finding alternative housing or delaying the start of classes, decided to turn the Schmidt Fieldhouse into a temporary dorm, arranging 194 army cots in rows, with lockers, chairs and study tables nearby. Five weeks into the semester, the barracks were completed and the students were able to move in.

Enrollment figures continued to rise in 1947, with more than 1,800 undergraduates on campus, along with 1,000 in the evening division, 200 in the Milford division and 200 in the graduate division. On March 1, ground was broken for a new armory—the first building in what would become a post-war construction boom.

In the decade between 1938 and 1948, the world had changed in unimaginable ways, yet the

University's sense of promise was undiminished. The 1949 "Musketeer"-the first to include color photos-concluded with a section titled "Xavier Looks into the Future." There on the pages were architectural drawings of six buildings-Elet Hall's north wing, a physical sciences building, a classroom building, the Chapel of St. Robert Bellarmine, S.J., a student union, and a natatorium and student health center.

Most of these would come to pass, albeit in very different form. But they served notice the University had begun to dream of a very bright future. Like the rest of the world, Xavier had been shaken but had endured to become stronger than ever before and now stood poised on the brink of greater things to come.

Committed to Serve

It may or may not be true that history repeats itself, but some parallels are just too striking to ignore. In 1941, Xavier's strong Reserve Officer Training Corps program was full of enthusiastic cadets. With the attack on Pearl Harbor, those young men knew their lives would soon be forever changed. Sixty years later, in 2001, the ROTC program won its second Gen. Douglas MacArthur Award as the best in its class nationally, and following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, the cadets-men and women this time-knew war was in their future.

Lt. Col. Timothy Gobin, chair of the military science department, is well aware of the parallels. And the 20-year U.S. Army veteran is also aware of Xavier's ROTC tradition-a tradition he recognizes as the core of the program's successes. Gobin says that while the University's small size results in fewer cadets, Xavier retains twice the number of cadets as the national average. And like their World War II predecessors, today's cadets are strong in their convictions and their desire to serve. It's that commitment that most impresses Gobin.

"I think it goes hand-in-hand with Xavier's mission," he says. "A lot of people say 'I'm behind you' and 'We appreciate what you do,' but they don't want to be the ones doing it. And these young people are willing to step up and do what's necessary."

In Loving Memory

It's easy to miss unless you purposely go for a visit. But Our Lady, Queen of Victory and Peace is one of the most stirring reminders of the University's role in modern wars. The shrine, originally dedicated on June 2, 1946, looks out over Victory Parkway from a niche just below University Drive in front of Edgecliff Hall. Bronze plaques at the base of the shrine list the names of the 75 Xavier students who died in World War II, as well as one student killed in World War I, three lost in Korea and seven who died in Vietnam. In his book, "Continuity and Change," Lee J. Bennish, S.J., says the plaques also originally included the names of 65 Air Corpsmen killed during World War II who trained at the University. The shrine was rededicated in 1999 with an inscription that reads, "To the greater glory of God and to the sons of Xavier who serve in the armed forces of our country, especially to those who gave their lives in our cause, this Shrine of Our Lady, Queen of Victory and Peace is humbly dedicated by the alumni and friends of Xavier University."

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