

Essay on Queens College World War II Alumni Commemoration Project

During the Spring semester of 2008, Queens College finished some construction on the front side of the campus facing Kissena BLVD. Above the newly constructed gates reads the College's motto "We Learn So That We May Serve." It has come to my attention that many of my fellow students do not understand the significance of the motto selected for our institution. Granted, it is not something that is discussed often on campus, or introduced to us at freshman orientation. However, an institutions motto can reveal a great deal about its history and early experiences. Harvard's motto, "veritas Christo Et Ecclesiae" or "Truth for (the sake of) Christ and the Church", reveals the historical reality of their foundation in Puritan New England, likewise our nation's motto "E Pluribus Unum" or "Out of Many, One" reveals the unique nature of our nation's formation. Similarly, Queens College's motto is just as telling of its early history.

If there can be one defining moment in this institutions history, it would have to be the Second World War. Queens College was created in 1937. Just four years from its conception, the college faced the most significant event of modern history that threatened its very existence. The pioneer class of our college entered into a world plagued by a conflict of unprecedented magnitude. Studying Queens College during the war years provides more than just a case study of a particular community on the home front, but also reveals a unique situation of a body of students, faculty, and a local community wrestling with conflict and existential questions which in hindsight seem foregone, but in the present seemed uncertain.

The story of Queens and the war begins much earlier than Pearl Harbor. The student body and the college had begun reacting to the world crisis long before America's official involvement in the war. A perfect example is the story of one particular individual, Robert Minnick.

Minnick was a part of the first experimental group of students here at Queens College. While studying here at Queens, turmoil was boiling in Europe, as we are all aware. As war seemed inevitable in Europe, the issue was less pressing in the U.S. Even after Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939, the majority of Americans, particularly young Americans, were not in favor of jumping into war. While some students thought it would be a good idea to start preparations in the event that war did occur, the majority felt that there were more pressing domestic issues to deal with, being we were still in the midst of a crippling economic depression. The student body here at Queens originally allied itself with the American Student Union, an organization that was fervently against entering the war. Neither Queens, nor the United States more over, were ready to embark on the road to war. Nevertheless there were a few who were. A few Americans realized that this war would affect the world over, not just Europe, and saw things from a larger ideological perspective. Robert Minnick was one of those individuals.

Minnick left Queens in 1939 (?) and made the long journey to Canada. Robert Minnick enlisted with the Royal Canadian Air Force. His stay in Canada would be short though, as the demand for men and pilots in Britain increased rapidly.

He began his training in Scotland in the beginning of 1940. On April 1st, 1940 Robert Minnick died in a training exercise. Exactly 25 days after his death a group of students at Queens College organized an anti-war rally held in the auditorium of

Jefferson Hall. Evidently, there was no monolithic American opinion when it came to the war in Europe. It is easy to criticize and condemn opponents of the war in hindsight, however from the perspective of the individuals living at the time, preventing the United States involvement in the war may have seemed like the best option. Minnick represents the type of character that makes this generation unique and memorable, but what is most remarkable about men like Robert Minnick is that they took their course of action at a time when the future was unclear and America's involvement in the war was still hotly debated among the population.

Opinion on campus quickly changed after the incident at Pearl Harbor in December of 1941. On the day of the Pearl Harbor attack, Dr Klapper called an emergency assembly. Approximately 400 students gathered at Jefferson Hall to hear Klapper's address. "War has come to us..." he solemnly informed the student body, "...a war we have prayerfully sought to avoid..." he was interrupted by some one whispering in his ear a rumor that a German aircraft carrier had been sighted in Long Island Sound. The president reacted visibly and ordered all the students to disperse and leave campus for the sake of safety. He never finished his speech.

. QC students from the beginning answered the call to arms, and by the end of the first week many had either enlisted in the armed services or auxiliary services. It is estimated that 70% of that first, pioneer class joined the military after war had been declared, which is impressive and shows great assertiveness on the part of the community.

How would the home front address the war? Queens College was a new institution, and the survival of the College was threatened by the war. What kind of role

would the college play in the community during the war years? These questions plagued the minds of administrators as well as students not yet ready to enter the armed forces.

In February of 1942 students began addressing the issue publicly. “When will Queens College Declare War?” read the headline on the front page of *The Crown*. Clearly the community had to address the war, and both faculty and students quickly needed to rise to the occasion, assert themselves, and take on some of the hard but necessary tasks that would greatly impact the war overseas. Towards the end of February, beginning of March 1942, a massive amount of activity on campus pertaining to the war effort emerged.

The students realized that if they were going to impact the war effort at all, they would have to be organized. A war committee was formed to “coordinate student defense activities.” The committee helped organize blood drives on campus, collect precious materials, and organize other war activities designed to help transform the extra-curricular agenda at Queens College, and produce a war-centric student life. Nearly every club and organization participated in this cultural revision on campus. For instance, The Queens College debating society began a campaign across the borough to promote civil defense awareness. Twenty students each gave 5-minute speeches about what average Americans at home could do to protect themselves in the event of an invasion or bombing, and how they could support the war overseas. These so-called “five for freedom” speeches were delivered around the borough in cooperation with Mayor LaGuardia. The Debate team canceled their ordinary match schedule and replaced it with a series of round table discussions pertaining to the war. The first of such round tables was held with Penn State on “the Youth’s part in the war.”

The faculty was faced with an enormous challenge as the war developed. One of the major questions looming over the administration was, “how can a college, especially such a young institution like Queens College, contribute to this war?” During these hard times, going to college didn’t seem reasonable to many people. Upon graduating from high school, it only seemed logical that one would prepare to join the military and look for a job after. What could Queens College offer a young man, expecting to enter the armed services in a few short years? In these uncertain times, one thing seemed certain; college did not initially appear to be a massively important investment of one’s time. However, the QC Administration led by Paul Klapper, set out to change this mentality.

The college realized it would have to adapt to the changing times or face an existential crisis only a few short years after its foundation. In this instance, the college realized that the characteristics of the college that had previously marginalized the institution would actually become vital to its survival. Being a small and young school allowed for drastic changes in the curriculum and approaches to education, across the academic spectrum, to adapted to the needs of this particular generation, and particular community.

. Perhaps the individual who understood this more than anyone else was the Chairman of the Physical Education Department, Dr. John Dambach. He realized how the college could be utilized during this unique time. He began by offering courses in Military drills on campus. The course was designed to inform the students of the modern, recently revised “military movements and corresponding command drills.” The course was also designed to give Queens College students the upper hand when entering the armed forces. As Dr. Dambach, a former captain in the Army Air Corp during WW1,

explained, “ Those draftees who show immediate aptitude for giving and executing commands are promoted rapidly...”

Dambach was also responsible for started a campus wide movement to encourage students to write to their friends overseas. This was always seen as an important part of civil life during the war, and the QC student body responded very well. In September of 1942, Dr. Dambach would leave his position as Chairman of the Physical Education Department to reenlist as a captain of the Army Air Corps. Indeed it was not just QC students who answered the call to arms, but faculty as well. Records from after the war show that forty-eight QC faculty members served in the military during WWII. Aside for military drills, the Queens College administration began to adapted new areas of study, and revise old ones, to promote knowledge that could be useful while serving in the military. Classes in naval history, spherical trigonometry, engineering, radio communications, international Morse Code, and navigation were offered as well as emphasizing the importance of learning European languages that would be important while overseas. Also offered were a series of non-credit courses designed to help the average civilian deal with the growing demands of the war at home. The one class I found most interesting was called ‘defense nutrition.’ Designed by the Red Cross and the department of Home Economics to help inform students of the best way to eat healthy and nutritious meals during wartime shortages.

Despite the efforts of the administration Queens College enrollment dropped significantly during the war years to dangerously low rates, which is what the College feared. Nevertheless, QC continued to provide quality education and attempted to meet the needs of its students and community. Before the beginning of the war the growing

school could expect some 900 applications for incoming freshman and transfers. In 1942, they had trouble mustering up 500 applications, and the trend became exponentially worse during the war years. This created a temporary scare for the college.

This significant decrease of enrollment was not even across the demographic board. Men, for obvious reasons, were less likely to enroll in classes and Queens College quickly became a predominantly female school. The numbers were so lopsided that they had to cancel campus dances because of a lack of male students. Being a male student at that time was not easy. As Queens graduate Charles Fine (class of 48) explained in a recent interview with Q Magazine “It was embarrassing on the buses. I felt people were thinking ‘why wasn’t I in the service?’ Of course, I was too young.”

Being a predominately female school meant that women organized many of the contributions made towards the war effort. It was likely to see WAC recruiters on campus. Women organized events to collect scrap metal, blood drives, as well as organizing dances and socials to entertain the reserves. From personal anecdotes, I can tell that relationships between men and women on campus continued as usual, the only difference was there were a lot less men to pick from, perhaps not a bad thing for the few boys who stayed on campus. The girls certainly took advantage of every opportunity they could to mingle with the boys in the service. The Alpha Alpha Sigma sisters were known to invite some cadets for the occasional Saturday night mixer.

However entertaining it might have been for the cadets and residents attending Queens College, these joyful moments were often overshadowed by anxiety and concern about what was happening overseas. The Queens College community was very well informed not just about the big picture that was unraveling itself in Europe and the

Pacific, but also about the adventures and situations of the friends and classmates who were off serving their country. The student paper then called the Crown, the early predecessor of today's Knight News, played an extremely important role at home by providing constant updates and information pertaining to the war, whether it be the latest news about a former classmates action overseas, or the latest information concerning the reserves or raft requirements. One monthly column entitled "Students in Arms" listed the names of the most recent students to go off to war, as well as providing information about where they were serving and in what branch of the military. Keeping a close communal feeling went beyond the campus as students regularly wrote letters to their former classmates with words of encouragement.

Queens College students certainly saw their fair share of action overseas. Many people think of Queens as a destination where people from all over the world gather. In this case, it was the reverse situation. QC students saw action in just about every theater of war, from Europe, to Africa, to the Pacific Islands. As diverse as the efforts of the campus were, so are the stories of the individuals who served overseas. There was no monolithic journey or experience; each individual during this time period had difficult decisions to make, and faced varying circumstances, that led many down different paths.

Leo William Levine was a QC graduate from the class of 42, who was known as an active guy on campus, a member of the history club, the boxing team, and majoring in Mathematics. Levine joined the military after graduating and was a radio operator on a Boeing B-29 Superfortress in the India-Burma Theater. In October 14, 1944 Levine was involved in a bombing mission to Japan, but was killed in action over China before his team was able to reach their destination.

Arthur J. Foley, another QC student saw action in both the India-Burma Theater and the Pacific Theater. He left QC at the mere age of nineteen to enlist in the service, in 1943. He became a Second Lieutenant of the 493rd bomber squadron, 7th Bomber Group. His Squadron was the first to test the newly AZON, radio guided bomb which was used primarily used to hit Japanese railways, airfields, and supply lines. Foley would actually live through the duration of the war, but died after the Japanese surrender while serving a 6-month post-war requirement.

Arthur Liblit saw action and died in Tunisia, John Morrell perished during the invasion of Normandy, and Peter Renzo was distinguished for his service in Italy, Germany, Central Europe, and the Balkans- his final resting place can be found in France.

Arnold Franco was an average QC student during the war years. He was a history major and gifted in languages. Franco thought it would be wise to finish his degree but was eager to join the military. So Franco decided to combine 42 credits in a summer and fall semester, back in 1942. Despite his effort Franco was short 10 credits short. Queens College decided to award him those 10 credits for what he would learn in the military, and before you knew it he was off to train in Georgia.

As I mentioned, Franco had a knack for languages, and this talent of his kept him moving through the system until he wound up in code-breaking school where he was trained as a cryptanalyst. Franco was apart of the 3rd Radio Squadron Mobile unit operating out of France. His Squadron was one of the most successful in Europe. Franco's Squadron was responsible for the shooting down of the entire staff of the

German 19th Army, which earned him and his group a Presidential Unit Citation. A more extensive account of Mr. Franco's experiences can be found in his book, Code of Honor. Bill Green is another veteran who found an alternative way to serve his country. Bill Green, class of 49, left Queens College as a freshman to serve in the Navy. Green, being a music major, felt it only appropriate that he contribute in the best way he knew how, by playing music. Green studied music in the Navy school of music in D.C. before serving aboard many vessels that took him all over the world. His most notable action did not take place at sea however. Green was a part of the band that played at President Roosevelt's funeral, which was described as an extremely emotional service as one could imagine, losing a President is hard enough, let alone during a war.

Green eventually returned to Queens College, but apparently, had played his fair share of music in the navy, so he switched his major to English. Bill Green currently is an English professor here at Queens College, and has been teaching here for nearly half a century since.

Queens was very supportive of their friends and classmates overseas, but the college's contribution was not just emotional and symbolic. Aside from the fundraisers, blood drives, and man power contributions I've mentioned, Queens also contributed their physical facilities to the military. In 1943, an Army Special Training Program (ASTP) arrived on campus; bring the war ever closer to home. Queens College had volunteered to house and teach an ASTP unit consisting of approximately 360 soldiers. The idea was that QC would educate the men in languages and science. Mayor LaGuardia was skeptical at first, saying "I know you can teach, (and) you can probably meet the standards of housing, but you cannot feed the Army." Well, Queens never backs down

from a challenge. The College campus was turned upside down; the C and I buildings were converted into housing and the cafeteria was closed off to students, in order to accommodate the needs of the soldiers. The soldiers participated in campus life, and were well integrated into the community. They could be seen attending dances and socials and being active in student organizations, clubs, or playing basketball with some of the local students. This gave the unit a chance to go about life in somewhat of a normal setting. It also gave the girls on campus something to get excited about, since men were in such high demand. In March of 1944, this unit was deployed from the college and began preparing for the D-day invasion, which they took part in.

Queens College's contributions to the war effort did not go unnoticed. Obviously, the community itself recognized the college, but also towards the end of the war, by the federal government and military. On May 12th 1945 the S.S. Queens Victory, a 10,800-ton tanker, was officially launched on the west coast. Queens College was picked as one of 30 or so colleges in the nation to be recognized for their contribution to the war with the naming of a ship.

When we speak of military casualties in history, all too often we dehumanize the individuals by using them as a mere statistic, and we do not attempt to understand the impact that even one death could have on a family or a community. The students at Queens College did not want that to happen. Queens College from the beginning of the war wanted to remind everyone at home, and everyone in the generations to come, that these were real people.

The task of remembrance began as early as 1943. The annual "Dedication Day" assembly on campus honored 8 Queens College students who had fallen in service to

their country, including Robert Minnick, David Gottlieb, and Chase Andrews. At the dedication ceremony, President Klapper "...We honor those who are now vivid and beckoning memories- ever potent memories which inspire us to rededicate ourselves to the cause for which they died..." Plans began at that point to construct a "permanent honor roll plaque" after the war. Unfortunately, as one Crown article said, the honor roll kept growing. Individuals like Christian Gabriel, once an engineering major, were mourned and honored with articles outlining all his achievements which included a purple heart, a bronze star medal, and praise his heroic actions as he was a part of the first division to cross the Rhine.

Perhaps the most moving piece we found was a poem printed in the Crown from October of 1944. It was a poem to honor the fallen private John Morrell, a former student at Queens. Morrell died in France, although the Crown said he was lost in the South Pacific. Despite the confusion over where he was stationed, this piece we found was maybe the most humanizing of all the documents. The unknown author describes his frat brothers as a wonderful singer and performer. He was always involved in Variety Shows, singing groups, and choruses. It becomes so easy to empathize with the pain but at the same time encouraging to see the strength and will of the generation. As the author says in the poem, "...Do not ponder with the brave, There is a greater will, That finds more honor in this grave, than all the hurt that blood can spill."

Aside for poetry, other forms of art were used to honor the war dead on campus. In 1947, a musical performance was held in honor of the fallen. The Queens College Coral society and the Queens College orchestra performed sacred music, including Mozart's "Requiem Mass." Emotional reminders of the fallen students were everywhere

and massive efforts were made by this generation to remember them. Queens college did its part to remember their casualties with art and a memorial plaque, The United States military did their part as well, issuing the college a memorial flag, with a star frequently used by families to signify the death of one of their family members in war. Under the star was listed two numbers, 58 and 1235. These numbers signified that Queens College had sacrificed 58 young men, and 1235 members of the college community had been wounded during the war. Although the number of dead was inaccurate, it was a symbol not just of the sacrifices made by this particular community, but also testimony to the cohesive nature of this community. Queens College was such a vocal and outspoken contributor to the war effort that these soldiers had to be recognized not just as Americans and New Yorkers, but as members of the Queens College community as well.

Yet as time went on, the significance and reality of the war drifted off campus as the Second World War generation moved on and was replaced by another generation. As the years proceeded, current events took center stage and memorials concerning World War 2 seemed to be the last thing on people's minds. The plaque that was dedicated to the QC War Dead was removed during a construction project and lost forever. The flag that was a symbol of QC's sacrifice was put away in storage. For 4 decades Queens College continued without a testimony to that generation and those fallen soldiers. In 2006 however, Arnold Franco approached the QC History department to suggest the construction of a memorial for the war dead here on campus. It was also his idea to have students do the research, since no one had preserved the records of the fallen. I was a freshman when we began the research with a core group of 8 students, which eventually withered down to 6, lead by Joel Allen of the history department. At that point in time we

had nothing to work with but the military issued flag, we estimated that the number of dead was 60 and we began with that number in mind. What began as a project to find the names of these students really transformed into an amazing historical experience. The best resources available to us were the Queens College newspapers kept on microfilm. The fact that the Queens College student body during the 1940s was so involved in the war effort, and so connected to their friends and fellow students overseas, made our job of researching these individuals enormously simpler and more plausible. The paper also provided a human aspect that military records lack, giving us stories about student activities on campus, and the lives of the war dead. Other useful resources included the Long Island Press and other local papers.

After the initial research was conducted, the project was handed over to Bob Wintermute, who was recently hired as Queens College's resident military historian and has taken over the leadership role of the History Honors Society and History Club activity on campus. Under Wintermute the project has continued to expand.