World War II Air Force Cadets at Saint John's

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75 years ago this winter:
The Army Invaded Saint John’s

It was in the first week in March, 1943, that a troop train stopping at the little grey Collegeville station unloaded the first contingent of the 87th College Training Detachment at St. John’s.
Colman Barry writes in *Worship & Work, p. 294*:

With the advent of World War II normal academic life was interrupted. St. John's joined in the war effort as a member of the college training program for aircrews of the Army Air Forces Training Command. From February of 1943 until July of 1944, 1,500 air forces personnel received training at Collegeville at the rate of 300 every four months.

Colman Barry, *Worship & Work, p. 294*:
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/11244
Army Will Use Campus Facilities

This is a tribute to the men of the Army Air Corps at St. John's who trained hard and studied long during the preliminary stages of their aviation training so that they might be a credit to themselves, to their country, their corps, and to Saint John's. This 1944 SAGATAGAN gives recognition to the record of these men as future officers of the United States Army and as Christian gentlemen. We know they will "Carry on."

St. John's university has been placed on a list of educational institutions to be used for specialized military training, according to an announcement made last Saturday by a joint committee of the war department, navy department and war manpower commission.

The authorities at St. John's have already expressed their willingness to accept the government offer. Although no formal contract has yet been signed, the present arrangements call for one contingent of 100 air cadets to move into St. John's March 1, with a second group of 150 coming April 1.

In accepting the offer of the armed forces, St. John's emphasizes the fact that all present courses will be continued including those in liberal arts. It is planned that the first group of cadets will move into the upper floors of St. Bonet's hall and that the regular students now occupying those rooms will move over to St. Gregory's hall.
Since the college enrollment had fallen from over 500 to about 130 because of the draft, this remnant — 17-year-olds, pre-divinity students, and students deferred because of physical disability — could be accommodated in the dorms and study halls, and the cadets took over Benet Hall, the only dorm on campus with rooms for college students.
There were approximately 300 cadets in the contingent, nearly equally divided between those from California and those from Missouri, Kansas and Illinois.
...we were brought inside and after a night's rest and the great breakfast prepared by the German Franciscan nuns (a far cry from Army mess) we knew for sure we died and went to heaven. The food had to be the best I've ever had anywhere, although my mother always felt that I over-rated the Saint John's bread and the entire cuisine.

Anthony Bommarito, Abbey Quarterly, Winter 1990, p.8

...On 23 March 1943, we arrived at Saint John's and three feet of snow greeted us; ...
OCCUPATIONAL TRAINING (AIR FORCE)
ST. JOHN UNIVERSITY
COLLEGEVILLE, MINNESOTA

STUDENT REGULATIONS

1. Only government clothing will be worn.
2. All men will be clean shaven at all times.
3. Uniforms will be kept clean and will be pressed at all times.
4. Hair will be cut at least once each two weeks.
5. Nails will not be painted after lights out.
6. Smoking will be done only in your rooms.
7. Shoes will be ready for inspection at all times.
8. Students will not leave their rooms except to visit the latrines, drinking fountain, or authorized formations during call to quarters.
9. Nothing will be left on the walls, or on outside of lockers.
10. There will be positively no gambling at any time.
11. No liquor will be brought to the campus.
12. No one will talk to the officers without going through proper channels.
13. Meals will be eaten in a group and not individually.
14. Candy and cigarettes will be purchased only at the specified hours and eaten only in rooms.
15. No food will be carried out of the dining room.
16. Bulletin board will be read at least twice each day.
17. The Student Officer in Charge is authorized to assess a man from a formation.
18. There will be no running, or loud noises, and no littering in the halls.

By Order of the Commanding Officer,

2nd Lt. Thomas Greenwood
1. Our haircuts had to be maintained: every 5 to 7 days one had a haircut. Cost, 25 cents. Time to implement the cut: about 5 minutes. A portly barber was moved in from Saint Cloud and set up in the basement of Benet Hall—virtually the only building then for non-religious to stay in; the Army had the whole building.
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/19716/rec/2
List from the SJU Archives: O:\...\Digital Archives\Depts&Programs\Army Air Force\1801f2 StudentRegulations.pdf

http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/19716/rec/2

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1944 Sagatagan, p.67
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/18472/rec/24
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/19693/rec/1
4. Our training was intense. Free time was from about 3 o’clock Saturday to noon on Sunday. If we went into Saint Cloud or Saint Joseph, we had to be back by lunchtime Sunday because of Sunday afternoon parade on the ground; Sunday evening we were at our studies.

MARCHING—in review before Capt. Casey, Father Abbot, Lts. Mensman, Green and Greenwood on the football field; the students found this an interesting substitute for the regular Saturday football games; when these pictures were taken another Flight "E" was about to leave.
5. In our 300 cadet contingent, there was exceptional musical talent; many had played professionally before entry into the service. I played clarinet and sax, but had aspirations of becoming a concert violinist—before I decided to eat regularly. Saint John’s music department provided most of the instruments for us.
6. Do you remember this period—there was a ‘man’ shortage, as the song had it, ‘They’re either too young or too old’? Anyway, the Sisters at the nursing school in Saint Cloud had a dance and asked that Catholic boys (only) attend. I remember one of these; it was a most delightful event though it was chaperoned by about as many nuns as there were girl partners (let me assure you those girls were well guarded).
9. The cleanliness and hygiene of this period has probably never been surpassed at Saint John's. Our rooms were inspected daily, beds made tight enough to bounce a quarter. Shoes, lined up and shined, clothes hung one inch apart, floor spotless. Latrines were immaculate, too; white glove inspection every Saturday. Yes, tops of doors and even the drains in the wash basins were wiped with the white glove—the Army had a way of making you wish they remained white. Like the Brothers and Fathers of the abbey, our lives were very structured.
This was no snap course the Air Corps was giving its future pilots; English, history, geography, mathematics, physics, and first aid were all on the day's slate—courses that had to be covered and covered fast, a year's work in two to five months' time.

Aviation Students marching to and from classes in the Science Hall, where the Physics classes recited.
Image & caption from 1944 *Sagatagan*, p.61
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/18469/rec/24
Schedule from the SJU Archives: O:\...\Digital Archives\Depts&Programs\Army Air Force\1772f8 AviationStudentSchedules.pdf
However, classes only consumed party of the day; George Durenberger and Joe Benda, besides teaching first aid, had to see that cadets were put through a few stiff periods of Physical Training. During the summer the fledglings ran the obstacle course set up on the Johnny gridiron; in winter PT was held in the gym, or outside on skates and skis.

PHYSICAL TRAINING—or “PT” as it was called, may not have been the aviation students’ idea of a good time, but there is no doubt that Durenberger and Benda and Luckemeyer did not let up until their men had reached the physical fitness that won such high praise later.

Photo and caption from 1944 Sagatagan, p.70-71
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/18474/rec/24
Upper text from p. 60.
SJU Archives Ascheman (sesquicentennial) collection, LP128.1936.StadiumEnt.jpg.
1944 *Sagatagan*, p.65
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/18471/rec/24

*Up and down the roads around the buildings, student officers led squads to the lusty singing of “I’ve Been Workin’ on the Railroad,” and “The Air Corps Song.” It was hard work, this learning to be a pilot, but with the goal kept in mind time seemed to fly. Taps sounded at 22:00, and the old double bunks looked good.*
In February, 1944, the news was made official that Army Air Corps College Detachments in Minnesota would be discontinued. The announcement found the 87th CTD with a record of twelve squadrons graduated and four more to go. It was a record of work well done; in little more than a year almost a thousand men had been prepared for their parts as U. S. airmen. St. John’s University had contributed well to the war effort, and for everyone connected with the Detachment or University there were fine memories of a full and exciting year.