

The Whiz Kids

Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP)

Michigan State College, 1943

by Harry Steingrubey, 399-C

The Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) was an elite entity conceived by the Armed Services in 1942 while I was a senior at Wood River Illinois High School to furnish specialized college training to a select group of qualified high school graduates to perpetuate a pool of skilled officers with college level technical skills. The Army program was designated A-12, The Navy, V-12. Branch of service was a matter of choice.

To qualify for an entry exam one had to be in the top 10 percent of his graduating class and have a minimum Army AGCT score of 125 out of 160. The requirement of ASTP was between the score of 110 needed for Officer Candidate School and the 135 requirement for West Point.

Those receiving the top 10 percent of AGCT scores were placed in Engineering school. My 134 score placed me in this group. We became known in the service as the “Whiz Kids.” A notable from this program was Johnny Carson—host of TV’s “Tonight Show” for many years.

This was an honor for me. As a member of a large working class family just emerging from the Great Depression of the 1930s there was little chance of my continuing education. A small honor scholarship received from Illinois College and a church sponsored award at Elmhurst to pursue the ministry would now have to be shelved until the World War now engulfing us was over. This was a chance for me to receive a college education and serve my country. I would be the first of my family in three generations to attend college in the “New World.”

The curriculum was accelerated and difficult. The four-year course would be completed in two! Six hours of class daily—six days a week. A one-week furlough would be granted at Easter and Christmas. Upon graduation we would be commissioned a lieutenant and agree to serve two years of active duty.

It seemed too good to be true—and it was! After completing my first year Basic Engineering I on 1 January 1944 I was ordered to active duty 22 January, assigned to a training center, The Infantry School at Ft. Benning, GA to receive Basic Training.

The program was cancelled at the end of the 13 weeks training and we Whiz Kids were reassigned to the 100th Infantry Division at Ft. Bragg, NC, reporting for duty on or about 1 May 1944.

Lots of study—little recreation. The country boy from the rural high school was competing with such as the top 10 percent of Chicago’s schools, slide rules and all!

Friendly hassles with the Air Corps Cadets, we in our Reserve Uniforms with no military training, singing “Up in the air—junior birdmen” as they were marching opposite direction in disciplined ranks, knowing they could not reply.

The girls of AOPIE sorority who furnished an on-campus escort service for men in uniform—as tradition had it—were ugly! That’s the reason they needed the escort service.

The buses going to Lansing for extra-curricular activity were always packed with standing room only, with sweated coeds looking for unsuspecting soldiers they could sway with to the tune of the canned music as they held on to the overhead bus straps!

Tagging along with my friend Ken Soderblum, the sax man from Winnetka, IL on a gig as sideman with a visiting big band at the local ballroom—Coral Gables.

This brief excursion into the privileged world, college life, mingling with the social and intellectual elite, in an unfamiliar setting, miles from home, has always remained with me as a cherished memory, perhaps dream-like with the rest of my war time experiences, did they actually happen?

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