

Kansas City Kansas Community College and “The Greatest Generation.”

by
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Abstract

World War II veterans are dying at the rate of 1,000 per day. Children and grandchildren of these veterans are taking a renewed interest in just what this “Greatest Generation” did to insure our freedom. This article examines the contributions made by members of Kansas City Kansas Community College both on the home-front and on the far-flung battlefields in the fight to win World War II.

Editor’s note: *This essay does not reflect the Sumner Branch of the Junior College which served black students until the KCKCC merger in 1951. The author is currently researching the World War II experiences of the African-Americans who attended the Sumner Branch of the Community College.*

Introduction

Tom Brokaw named them “The Greatest Generation” in 1994 and since then interest in those Americans who helped their country triumph in World War Two has found a renewal. The children and grandchildren of these veterans are looking at their exploits for the first time. Popular culture has tried to focus attention on them through such movies as: *Saving Private Ryan*, *Pearl Harbor*, *Band of Brothers* and *Flags of Our Fathers*. With the realization that the ranks of the members of “The Greatest Generation” are thinning at the rate of 1,000 per day, Ken Burns presented his newest documentary *The War* in September of 2007. Made specifically for television, *The War* presented the stories of members of “The Greatest Generation” from four different American towns.

With this new spirit of interest, the question arises as to what the contribution of the Kansas City Kansas Community College to the winning of World War II was.

From its founding in 1923, Kansas City Kansas Community College has provided an opportunity for urban dwellers to experience college life. Located in downtown Kansas City, Kansas, the college brought students from different neighborhoods and backgrounds together to experience the challenges of higher learning. In 1940 the student population had grown to 240 full time students and the faculty population stood at 26. One of the more popular courses offered during this time was the Private Pilots class. By 1941, 97 KCKCC students had fulfilled the requirement for a private pilot’s license.

America’s entry into World War II, after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941 resulted in a patriotic fervor swelling up across the land. Thousands of young men and women volunteered to serve in the United States military. The students at KCKCC caught this patriotic fever and by the end of 1942, 196 students and alumni had entered the service. This trend continued as illustrated in the following cumulative chart:

<u>Year</u>	<u># of Students & Alumni In Service</u>
•1942	196
•1943	575
•1944	850
•1945	886

These numbers included 20 women who served, 5 male faculty members who served and 1 female faculty member who served.

Changes brought on by the war were being experienced by all parts of American Society. Campus life at KCKCC was changed in many ways. One example was the college's yearbook *The Jayhawk*. Prior to the war the yearbook covers showed happy students in front of buildings on campus. With the arrival of World War II, the covers of *The Jayhawk* assumed more patriotic themes and stories about students, alumni and faculty who had answered their country's call began to appear. Examples of the patriotic covers follow: Patriotic cover of the 1942 edition of *The Jayhawk*)

(Patriotic cover of the 1943 edition of *The Jayhawk*)

On the Home Front, students and faculty at KCKCC began to experience hardships such as rationing of sugar, meat, coffee, gasoline and tires. The pages of *The Jayhawk* are a time capsule filled with stories about on-campus activities designed to support the war effort. One of the more interesting tales is about the "Vendors of Victory" which is reproduced here just as it appeared in 1943.

(*The Jayhawk*, 1943, n. p.)

"The Jayhawk" attempted to keep students and faculty posted on alumni in service who came back to Kansas City on leave or furlough to visit "these ole halls." Lists of Service visitors were published. An example is shown from the 1945 edition of *The Jayhawk*:

(*The Jayhawk*, 1945, n. p.)

As more and more service members from KCKCC deployed overseas, visits to the campus became very difficult. *The Jayhawk* met this challenge by publishing letters from service members sent to the campus. Many of these letters were filled with comical anecdotes and others filled with the futility of war. Some letters received in 1943 included:

From John Suptic, stationed at Fort Francis E. Warren, Wyoming:

We stayed in Leavenworth ten days. On Saturday before last we got on a train and rode for twenty hours. We are stationed about one and one-half miles out of Cheyenne. I keep saying 'we' because Bob Roberts of J.C. (KCKCC) is still with me. He is the only one. All the rest separated at Leavenworth.

I hope you impress upon the boys to be drafted, the importance of useful and diligent study so they won't disappoint themselves, unless all they want to do is carry a gun.

From Belfour McMillen, at Camp Barkeley, Texas:

I'm deep in the heart of Texas (clap four times, but I don't know why!). This is the worst place I have ever been in. Junior College (KCKCC) was bad, Leavenworth was worse, but this place---oh! 'Peter' Moore and McVeigh are with me. We are all in the same hut, and when I say 'hut' I mean hut. Tell Mr. Reese the soddies are still being used, and the West is still unsettled. I'm looking for an Indian raid at any time, and all we have to defend ourselves with are hypodermic needles, Band-Aids, and a club, for we are the Medical Corps.

From Don Benson, at Fort Riley, Kansas:

What's new at school? Do the girls still ask for me or have they just gone out and committed suicide? Tell them to keep their chins up, for I'm going to end the war soon.

(*The Jayhawk*, 1943, n. p.)

The mailbags from 1944 brought even more interesting letters to KCKCC from alumni in the service. The 1944 edition of *The Jayhawk* published several:

From Sammy Gibbons, U.S. Coast Guard:

The first day that I got back I asked a Brooklynite how to get to a certain street in Brooklyn. He told me to "Go to the El!" At first I thought the old boy was pulling my leg and wanted his face re-arranged. But he meant the Elevated Subway. Ah! Brooklyn!

From John Lane, U. S. Navy:

Got my uniform today. According to the shape of my hips, the legs go to the floor up to my knees and start down again.

From Pvt. Thomas Rupert, Camp Barkley, Texas:

It was so dusty today that each instructor we had made a joke about it. One fellow said we didn't have to travel any more over Texas because we could just stand still here in Camp Barkeley and see all of Texas go by. The winds come from the Gulf.

Today two other fellows and I volunteered for some work that we didn't know what it was until we started. I'll bet you can't guess what we did. We made a flower garden for the colonel. It was a lot of fun and he joked with us all the time."

From Karl Anderson, U. S. Army Air Corps:

Yesterday I flew an hour of solo formation and it was really fun. I flew on the right wing of my instructor and we had a big time. He kept motioning me in closer. I didn't want to get too close, but I went anyway. I was flying with my wing about 3 feet from his horizontal tail fin. After we came down I was talking to him and he told me I was close but not very. Formation flying it (sic) more fun that I've ever had in my life.

From Richard Day:

There are seven now in our squadron. I'm really proud that I'm flight leader of our group. You never saw such sweltering days as here in Texas. I am beginning to think that home is located in the ideal spot of the universe; it is neither too hot or too cold.

(The Jayhawk ,1944, n. p.)

One student, Lt. Fil Munoz, sat down and wrote a letter back to KCKCC describing an incident that occurred during combat in Italy. He uses the British slang word "Gerries" to describe some German soldiers:

On the first attack I was ever in I captured two Gerries. Right away and at the same time I heard two others on the other side of the stone wall. After disarming the two, I sneaked up to the wall and aimed my rifle. It was jammed. One Gerry ran away; the other fired at me. His bullet went over my head. I threw a rock to simulate a grenade, when I saw him reach for one of his. The rock scared him enough to make him aim poorly and his grenade fell short about five yards. Then he took off – believe me I was mighty thankful for that. Incidentally, the two Gerries I captured weren't over sixteen but not all of them are that young.

(The Jayhawk, 1944, n. p.)

Not all the news at home was good. The students at KCKCC experienced those empty feelings that only the realization of loss through death could bring. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the only president that these young college students had ever known and to those in the service he was also their Commander In Chief. His sudden death in April 1945 brought a wave of grief over the campus. Students realized that the end of the war might be very near and yet "their" president would not be there to enjoy the hard fought for victory. The Jayhawk reported on the very moving memorial service held on campus for President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Here reproduced just as it appeared in 1945 is the coverage of that event:

(The Jayhawk,1945, n. p.)

The 1945 edition of *The Jayhawk* listed the names of 46 servicemen from KCKCC who had given their lives so that victory could be achieved. The final count of those who had paid the final sacrifice would grow to 60 dead once the war was ended and final accounting completed. They fell in such far off places from Kansas as England, Italy, New Guinea, Dutch Guiana, Germany, Holland, The Aleutian Islands, Leyte Island, The Solomon Islands and Iwo Jima. These lost heroes were called the "Gold Star Men and Women." The name dated back to a practice that was common in World War I and also became common in World War II. This was the displaying of a blue star emblem at one's front window or door to show all who passed that a son or daughter was in the service of our country. If the service person was killed, the blue star on display changed in color to become a gold star. Time and space do not permit a retelling of all their deeds of valor, nor are all of their stories known. However, it is important to share a few of the Gold Star Warriors stories that are known.

FLIGHT CAPTAIN MURRAY B. DILLEY, JR: Attended KCKCC in 1931. He realized that fascism was evil and had to be stopped. He joined the British Royal Air Force and served in the Ferry Command. He was responsible for flying new aircraft from the factories to the front lines. He was a "Yank in the RAF." On August 14, 1941 Flight Captain Dilley died, 4 months before the United States entered World War II.

FIRST LEUTENANT FRANCIS N. HUEBEN: Attended KCKCC in 1935. With the US entry in World War II, he was commissioned in the United States Army Air Forces. He served as a Navigator with the 17th Squadron, 71st Recon Group in the Pacific Theater. He was one of the members of an elite group who flew behind enemy lines taking pictures of potential enemy targets. These men flew “alone, unarmed and un-afraid” since they jettisoned any armament aboard their aircraft in order to carry more fuel and film. 1LT Francis N. Hueben was lost over New Guinea on June 8, 1944. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

FIRST LEUTENANT ROBERT A. TOMSHANY: Attended KCKCC in 1939. With the US entry into World War II, he was commissioned in the United States Army Air Forces. He flew on B-24 Liberator Bombers with the 343rd Bomber Squadron, 98th Bomber Group (Heavy). He died after a bombing mission over Germany from his base in Italy and was awarded the Air Medal with two oak leaf clusters and the Purple Heart.

Several service members from KCKCC were listed as either “Missing in Action” or as “Prisoners of War.” Those listed as missing included Lt. Alfred R Lyth, Lt. James Miller and T/Sgt Robert W. Stegner, Jr. Those listed as Prisoners of War were Pfc. L. G. Main, Jr., Pvt. David Mankin, Lt. William Olson, Lt. Richard Sacks and Capt. Clarence Bess. After World War II ended the story of Captain Clarence R. Bess became one of inspiration: Having attended KCKCC in 1932, Bess joined the US Army and was commissioned an officer in the Infantry. He was stationed with the 31st Infantry Regiment in the Philippine Islands as of 1940. With the entry of the United States into World War II, Bess found himself as the commanding officer of the Service Company of 31st Infantry Regiment. In April 1942 Bess was captured by the Japanese Army and survived the Bataan Death March. He was shipped to Japan and was held at the model Prisoner of War Camp at Zentsuji Camp, Shikoku Japan. In 1945, he was liberated by the Australian Army. Promoted to Major he attended the Infantry Officer Advanced Course in 1947 and wrote a monograph about his wartime experiences as a Company Commander.

Captain Clarence R. Bess is shown in this Australian War Memorial photo at the far right. With the conclusion of World War II, life quickly returned to normal on the campus of Kansas City Kansas Community College. Eight Hundred eighty-six men and women had served their country and had brought credit to their Alma Mater. Sixty had paid the supreme price and had given their lives for their country. In December 1945, the current students at Kansas City Kansas Community College gathered to hold the first peacetime candle lighting service. The service has been a tradition at the college since its founding in 1923. Many of the students who participated in the ceremony felt that the spirit of the Gold Star Men and Women hovered over the ceremony as “though adding their blessing to the peacetime rituals.” (*The Jayhawk*, 1946, n. p.)

On May 1, 1946, a special ceremony was held at KCKCC. A wooden plaque financed by the student body was dedicated to the memory of the sixty who died in World War II. The name of each of the dead was engraved on a small copper plate and affixed to the plaque. The plaque was then hung in the lower hall of the Horace Mann building. Unfortunately, when Kansas City Kansas Community College moved to its new campus in the mid-1970s the Memorial Plaque vanished. (*The Jayhawk*, 1946, n. p.)

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