



A TIME TO

Remember

In 1945, the world was at war and UB medical students were in uniform. Instead of starting the day with stethoscopes slung around their necks, they lined up in formation for roll call. Instead of enjoying summer vacations, they were sent to military camp. And rather than relying on student loans to pay for their tuition and textbooks, they could count on Uncle Sam to shoulder the bills.

BY NICOLE PERADOTTO

Remember

MEMBERS OF THE CLASS OF '45
HAVE AN ENDURING BOND

“WE LOOK AT IT AS UNUSUAL NOW, but at the time that was the way the country managed,” says Norman Chassin, MD '45. “Nobody objected to being in the military because everybody was pleased to be able to continue their studies.”

To be sure, the exceptional circumstances made for an extraordinary era in medical school annals. What's more, they created a bond among members of the Class of '45 that has endured through six decades and a vastly altered medical, social and cultural landscape.

“We are a tight-knit group,” acknowledges Herbert Joyce, MD '45, former interim chair of the Department of Family Medicine and one of the 28 surviving members of the class.

“The reunions are every five years, but we frequently have held informal ‘mini-reunions’ in the fall. We’ve always done things differently. We’re very, very close, and that goes all the way back to medical school.”

In April 2005, Joyce and 12 other alumni from the Class of 1945 celebrated their sixtieth reunion at the medical school’s annual Spring Clinical Day and Reunion Weekend.

Back when they were aspiring physicians, they probably never imagined they’d be sitting around a table at Spring Clinical Day 2005, swapping stories about grandkids and retirement. After all, the idea of a sixtieth reunion was the stuff of science fiction in 1945, when life expectancy was just 63 years of age.

STUDENTS IN FRONT OF
OLD MAIN BUILDING, 1945

“It was a different day,” Joyce says. “This was wartime, and people were working in the factories 12 to 14 hours a day, six to seven days a week. There were so many of the young men, young fathers, going down to the draft board. Gas was rationed, sugar was rationed—so much was rationed.”

DRAFTING MEDICAL STUDENTS

THE CLASS OF 1945 WAS THE FIRST to enroll in UB’s medical school after the United States entered World War II. Their medical education formally began in July of 1942, six months to the day after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Like many of his peers, Joyce joined ROTC during his freshman year. Then, midway through his sophomore year, all of the able-bodied men were given the option of enlisting as army privates, assigned to the medical school, through the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP).

“The government was interested in medical students not so much because they wanted to make them soldiers,” Joyce explains, “but because

they needed them to replace the doctors already drafted out of civilian life.”

For these children of the Great Depression, the incentives to enlist were too palatable to pass up: In exchange for their service, they would receive a monthly stipend of \$120. In addition, the government would cover all of their education expenses, right down to the microscopes.

“It was great because everything was financed, so it relieved my father of a big expense, and we even had money to spend,” adds Jacob Steinhart, MD ’45, who joined the V-12 program, the navy’s equivalent of the ASTP. “We were in uniform, and we learned to column march and so forth,” he recalls. “The unit would meet occasionally, and we’d go through some drills.”

The army recruits, on the other hand, were required to stand formation daily. Joyce can still see himself before the start of classes on the High Street campus, lined shoulder to shoulder with classmates, all of them standing at attention and sporting the same khaki uniform adorned with a patch bearing the lamp of knowledge.

“When you were a civilian, nobody cared if you didn’t show up for a lecture,” he points out. “But in the army, you were expected to. Roll call was at 7:30 in the morning.”

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Making the grade was imperative in those days. Beyond feeling the sting of dashed dreams, students who flunked out were vulnerable to the draft. “It was a threat,” Joyce says. “If you didn’t produce, you were going to be out on the next banana boat, we used to say. So if someone was in danger of failing, you’d work together. Maybe that’s why our class has been so cohesive. There really was a sense of cooperation and camaraderie. We didn’t compete with one another; we were buddies.”

“It was our duty to go to school,” notes Chassin, who also joined the armed forces through the ASTP. “I didn’t expect that I’d be winding up in school and in the military, but I don’t think anyone thought that much about it. About 95 percent of the class was inducted into the service, so just about all of us were in uniform.”

Other than a military medicine course added to the class schedule, the curriculum remained unaffected by the war; however, the war did dramatically alter the school calendar. In yet another attempt to replenish the physician population, all students were placed on an accelerated three-year track.

They attended school year-round. Christmas break lasted a week. If you were in the army, you spent your summer vacation—all two weeks of it—shooting rifles (many of the ASTP students qualified as expert marksmen), crawling under machine guns and sleeping in the barracks at Fort Niagara.

“I did find it extremely grueling,” Steinhart says of the schedule. “By the time I got to the latter half of my senior year, I was really tired of studying.”

Still, he and his classmates felt profoundly appreciative that their lives hadn’t been even more disrupted during such tumultuous times. “I think we were all kind of grateful because here we were being allowed to continue with our ambition and there was a war going on,” says George Ellis, MD ’45. “So, we felt privileged.”

Steinhart adds, “I recall a welcome statement by the dean, Dr. Edward Koch. He said: ‘You all have been carefully selected, and I look forward to all of you graduating.’ That made me feel very good.”

GRATEFUL TO GIVE BACK

WHEN THE CLASS OF 1945 traded their khakis and navy blues for caps and gowns on June 23, the war was winding down. Victory in Europe Day had taken place on May 8, while Japan would surrender on August 11.

Graduation day marked a major milestone in both their medical and military careers. Upon receiving their diplomas, the army enlistees were discharged as privates and commissioned as first lieutenants in the medical corps. Soon thereafter, they were called into active duty.



Left to Right: JOHN ROBINSON, ROBERT SCHOPP, FREDERIC REGAN



HERBERT JOYCE

GEORGE ELLIS

JACOB STEINHART

NORM CHASSIN

“There was a period of a couple of weeks there where we thought, ‘Well, the war’s over and we’ll be able to go ahead with residencies or the start of practice or whatnot,’” Ellis says. “But then it was decided that since we had been subsidized through school, we had a service obligation after the war, which we indeed did. I had to agree with that.”

The majority of students were sent to Veterans Affairs hospitals around the country. That group included Ellis, who was assigned to a hospital in Dayton, Ohio, not far from where he had been interning in Toledo, his hometown.

In 1948, Ellis moved to Connorsville, Indiana, building his general and surgical practice out of his great-aunt’s former home and remaining there for the rest of his career. Since then, he has served as unofficial secretary for his class, keeping its members current on each others’ lives with detailed, humorous, handwritten letters.

For his part, Chassin was assigned to a VA psychiatric hospital in Canandaigua, New York.

“There was no questioning these assignments,” he says. “We didn’t know how long we would be there and what would come next. Every few weeks they’d start assigning people to different hospitals outside Canandaigua, and it was understood that all of us would be distributed somewhere. But as it happened, after six months, those of us who were left remained there for two years.”

Meanwhile, Steinhart took a naval internship in Long Beach, California, but was temporarily reassigned to United States Naval Hospital in Aiea Heights on Oahu, Hawaii. There, he tended to veterans of the Pacific Theater who were suffering from a variety of war-related maladies, including tropical disease and hepatitis.

“We saw some sad cases,” recalls the retired pediatrician. “The burn ward was the worst. When you went into the ward you saw guys who were blinded from burns. The whole ward smelled because of the infections they had from the burns.”

AROUND THE SAME TIME, Joyce, then six weeks into an obstetrics residency at Deaconess Hospital, was to make good on his military obligation. First assigned to an Alabama hospital, he was later transferred to Fort Sam Houston. From the Texas military post, he was shipped to the Panama Canal Zone, where he remained for two years as a quarantine officer.

“I crawled up a ladder on these ships in the middle of the night to make sure that there was no contagion getting into the Canal Zone,” he says. “I had a 42-foot launch with a captain and two seamen with me. We had lots of military traffic, and they’d have to cut the gun turrets off the side of the ships with a welding torch so the ship would fit through the locks.”

While many of the men’s military service was related to the war and its aftermath, they emphasize that members of the two preceding medical school classes were more directly involved. As Chassin puts it, “I put in my time, but I can’t tell my grandkids about my great military adventure.”

Still, these military assignments, as brief as they were, left a lasting imprint on the men’s personal and professional lives.

Chassin found himself “enthralled” with psychiatry during his two years in Canandaigua. Afterward, he was accepted to a psychiatry residency at the prestigious Menger Institute in Kansas. Ultimately he decided to pursue a residency in internal medicine at the Edward J. Meyer Memorial Hospital in Buffalo (now Erie County Medical Center), making a personal pledge that he would hold on to the lessons he had learned at the VA hospital.

“I knew that I would never just throw the psychiatry

away. I would find some way to incorporate that into my medical practice. And I did, because all ill patients have some degree of the emotional component to their illness.”

Following his two-year stint in the Panama Canal Zone, Joyce joined the Air Guard Reserves in 1952, becoming a flight surgeon and fulfilling a lifelong dream to fly planes.

In Buffalo he established himself as one of the forefathers of the burgeoning family medicine movement. In 1950 he founded the Highgate Medical Group, now the largest clinical family practice and primary care practice in Western New York. He retired from private practice in 1995 and currently serves as medical director for Independent Health.

“I often think about how different my life would have been if I had gone to medical school and been a civilian all the way through,” he says. “I would never have had the

experience of overseas duty in Panama, and I wouldn’t have become a flight surgeon.”

He’s not alone in his gratitude. It seems to have permeated the Class of 1945. In addition to being known for their strong ties to each other and their robust attendance at class reunions, they have established themselves as some of the most generous and consistent donors to the school.

For Joyce—who has served as the class representative and agent since the twentieth reunion—there was also another reason to celebrate this special reunion year. Not only did he graduate from medical school 60 years ago on June 23, he also got married that day.

In March, Joyce and his wife, Ruth, feted their diamond anniversary a few months early by taking a two-and-a-half week cruise that culminated with a sail through—where else?—the Panama Canal. **BP**



Pictured above, left to right, are IVAN KUHL, JOHN ROBINSON, GEORGE ELLIS and ROBERT SCHOPP. Seated is their “REVERED AND BELOVED” ANATOMY PROFESSOR, O.P. JONES.

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