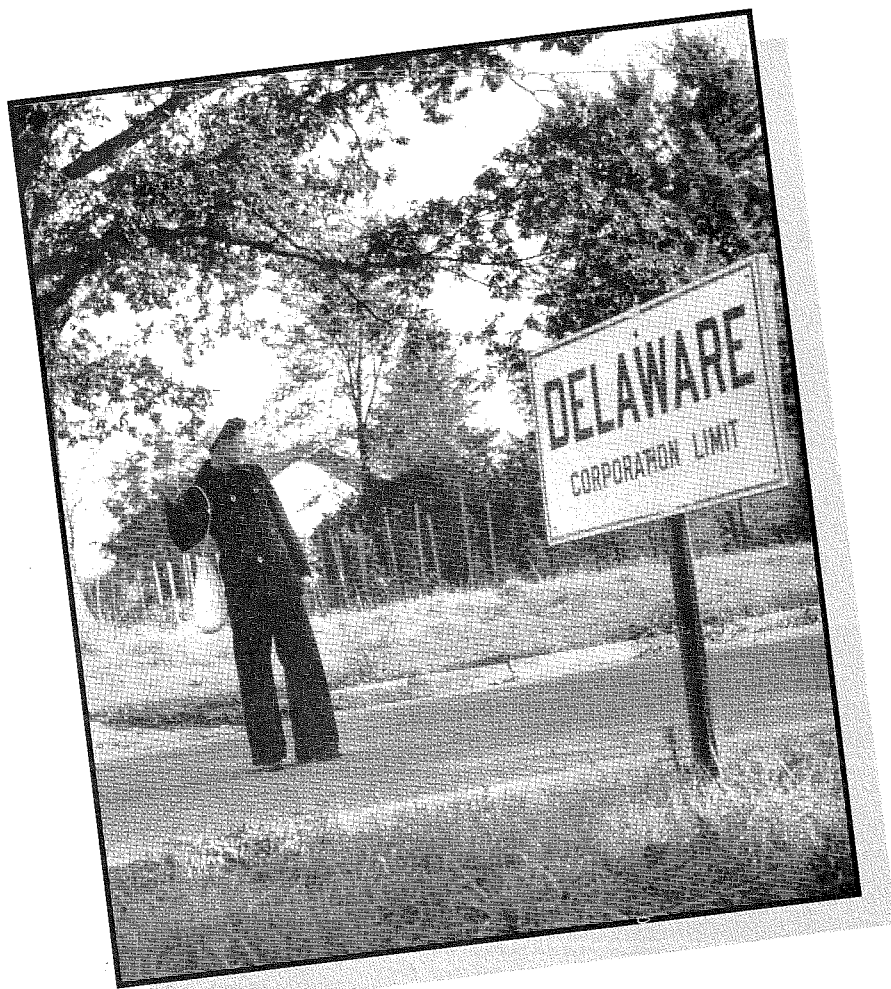




# Memories of the Navy V-12, V-5 Program

by Robert Reiss '48



Even though it is near no body of water large enough to float anything bigger than a canoe and at that time no airfield capable of landing military aircraft, Ohio Wesleyan University played a significant role during World War II as a training base for well over 1,000 U.S. Navy aviation and deck officers-to-be.

In turn the Navy provided Ohio Wesleyan with much needed students and income. It also brought OWU national, and in some cases international, publicity.

In the early days of World War II Ohio Wesleyan and much of the nation faced an uncertain future. Military needs created civilian shortages of such things as gasoline, tires, meat, butter, sugar and even cigarettes. Ohio Wesleyan had an additional problem, it faced a shortage of male students. All eligible men of college age faced the draft. Some male students were being called off the campus to military duty, even in the middle of a semester. Those who, for various reasons were ineligible for military service, were being urged to take jobs in war plants.

Dr. Herbert Burgstahler, OWU president, decided something radical must be done to help the war effort and protect the University. So he went to Washington, D.C., several times during 1942 and offered the campus facilities to the military.

The Navy accepted with not one but two contracts: one for a V-5 pre-flight training unit and later for a V-12 unit for future deck officers.

The first of the V-5 cadets arrived on campus January 11, 1943. The cadets, soon to number 600, occupied Stuyvesant Hall, then the freshmen women's dormitory. Just before the Christmas break the freshmen women had been transferred to part of Austin Hall where they doubled up in rooms. This created an overflow of upperclass women who moved in with the residents of Monnett Hall. If the coeds protested there is no record of it. After all, it was for the war effort, a popular feeling at the time.

Getting ready for the Navy required a lot of effort on the part of University officials. For example, D. B. Watkins, OWU's purchasing agent, had to locate and buy 310

double deck bunks, double that number of mattresses and pillows, even larger numbers of blankets, bedspreads, sheets and towels. He had to find metal mess trays because the Navy didn't want its men eating off plates.

One thing Watkins couldn't find at any price was 3,200 metal coat hangers. An appeal in the *Delaware Gazette* brought them from the closets of local residents.

Twenty-four classrooms in Edgar and University Hall were assigned to the V-5 unit. OWU hired 13 additional instructors to teach math and physics. The Navy furnished instructors for courses in navigation, aircraft recognition, signaling, theory of flight and physical education.

The V-5 program was strictly military. The cadets rose at 5:45 a.m., had physical exercises before breakfast, marched in formation from Stuyvesant to the main campus, attended their exclusive classes and marched back to Stuyvesant, six days a week.

Laura Gnagi Newman '46, director of alumni relations, recalls that when the cadets came marching along the sidewalk, civilians were expected to step aside.

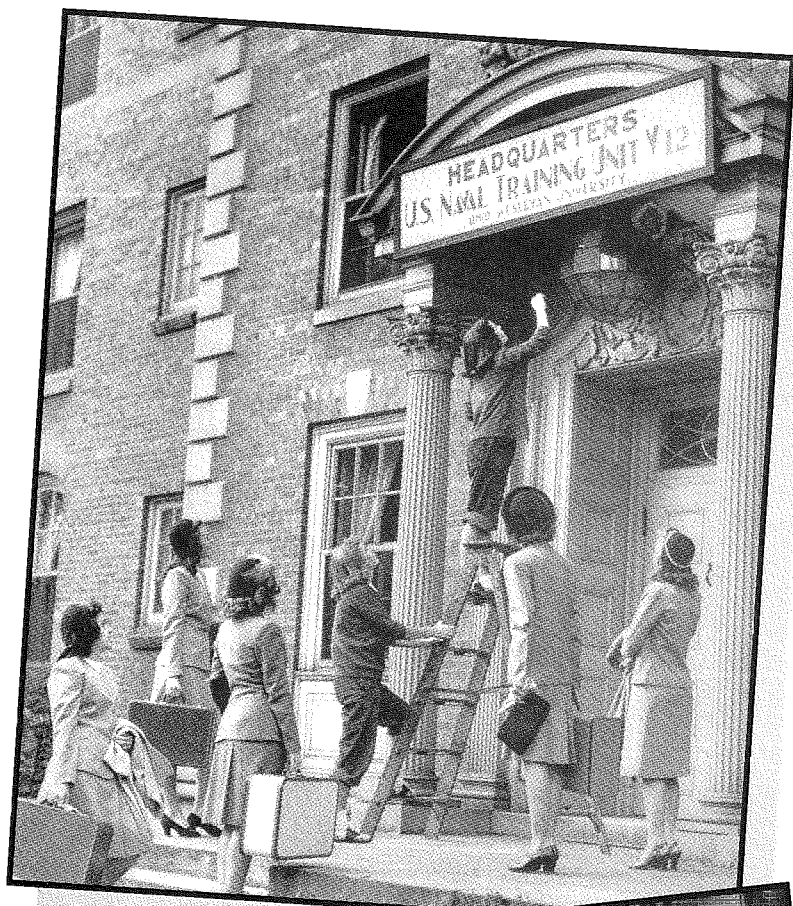
What social life there was for the cadets consisted of a few hours liberty on the weekends. Many left the campus for Columbus or, if close enough, their homes. Those who remained were invited and urged to share the social life of the coeds and men still on campus. Within a week after their arrival the cadets were invited to a mixer at Edwards Gym, according to the January 19, 1943 issue of the *Transcript*.

If the V-5 program was strictly military, the V-12 program was quasi-military at best.

The 412 V-12 seamen arrived on campus July 6, 1943 and were housed in fraternity houses the University had taken over. On that date the University went to three 16-week semesters a year, moving the starting date for the fall semester to October 27.

Most of the V-12 seamen had been in college before volunteering for the Navy and had completed at least their freshman year. Many of that first V-12 class were Ohio Wesleyan men who returned to campus,





this time in uniform. Thirty-three members of that first group had been brought in from the fleet, having been on active duty with the Navy.

Delaware residents and coeds could easily identify the different units. The V-5 cadets wore khaki officers' uniforms without insignia of rank. The V-12 sailors wore the traditional enlisted men's white or blue uniforms and carried the rank of apprentice seaman.

The V-12ers also started their day with physical exercises and military formations but when class time came the similarity ended. The V-12ers were required to take regular college courses in math, physics and other subjects which would later aid them in their military service but the remainder of their time was spent in elective courses, sharing classes with the almost 800 coeds and fewer than 100 civilian men then enrolled in OWU.

The V-12ers were also free to take part in extracurricular activities, much more so than the V-5ers. Photos in the 1944 *LeBijou* show Navy men involved in most campus activities, including fraternities and athletics. Though most of the fraternities had turned their houses over to the university for Navy barracks they had rented social rooms in the community. A photo of the Beta Theta Pi chapter shows all the members in Navy uniforms.

To provide more space for socializing, the University rented the Kappa Sigma house on Winter Street and staffed it as a student union.

The sororities and other student organizations included the Navy men in their planned dances and the Navy units held Ships Balls, converting Edwards Gym or the local armory into a ship for a few hours.

While the V-5 cadets were on campus only four months before going on to flight school, most of the first contingent of V-12 seamen spent a year on campus before being assigned to midshipmen's schools.

The V-5 unit, first to arrive on the campus, was the first to leave. It closed in August 1944 and the V-12 unit moved into Stuyvesant until it

folded October 26, 1945. The end of the Navy on campus came about the same time the first of the veterans arrived, soon to fill the campus to overflowing.

Although the Navy did not provide a financial bonanza for OWU, it certainly kept it from suffering large financial losses. According to University records, the Navy paid \$1.2 million for the time it was on campus and it is estimated it cost the University \$1.3 million to provide the housing, educational facilities and additional faculty.

Integrating military and college lifestyles was bound to create some problems but apparently they were few.

At the time of the Navy's arrival students were not permitted to smoke on campus except at Nicotine Gate, as the brick entrance to the campus from Sandusky Street was called. The Navy wasn't interested in the tradition. It wanted a convenient place to "light the smoking lamp." The compromise was a smoking area south of University Hall where college officials installed upturned sewer pipes filled with sand for discarded cigarette butts.

Civilians tolerated, with humor, the Navy's insistence on using shipboard terminology. Thus walls became bulkheads, floors were decks, dining rooms were mess halls and walking upstairs became going topside.

Seamen in the V-12 unit were allowed to go anywhere within the city limits without special passes so the captain decided, "for better organization and discipline," that the entire city was his ship. This move bothered some civilians but entertained most.

Lt. Trusdell Wisner, captain of the V-12 unit, took exception to some unidentified columnist's comments in the *Transcript* and in a speech during chapel referred to the writer as a "female Walter Winchell." Jackie Staats (Cobbledick), editor of the *Transcript*, responded with a signed editorial May 10, 1944. She pointed out, and documented, that the majority of references to the V-12 unit were complimentary, that the captain had failed to identify which column he found offensive, that the columnists stood



behind their writings and that censorship would not be tolerated. Perhaps the captain was offended by a reference to "bathtub sailors." There is no record of his reply, if there was one.

The arrival on campus of the Navy also proved a challenge and opportunity for Gerald W. Young, the young man who had arrived on campus in 1940 to be in charge of publicity for the 1942 centennial celebration. He also taught journalism courses and was adviser to the *Transcript* and *Le Bijou*.

In 1943 Young started *The Ohio Wesleyan Log*, a picture magazine depicting life on the campus with the Navy there. It claimed to be the first college picture magazine in the days when *LIFE* and *Look* enjoyed huge circulations. He recalls it was successful, both on campus and beyond. Many of the Navy men sent copies home.

Young took the best pictures and ideas from the *Log* and submitted them to magazines, newspapers and wire services. They were reprinted across the nation, always mentioning Ohio Wesleyan. Some of the pictures with pretty coeds were published in the overseas edition of

*Stars and Stripes* and it was reported they graced the foxholes of GIs in faraway battle zones.

Young, who retired to a farm near Tipp City, Ohio, after heading his own public relations firm for 25 years, left Ohio Wesleyan in 1945.

Those Navy experiences provided the University with some unexpected benefits. Some of the V-5 and V-12 men returned to campus after the war to complete their degrees. Others, who eventually got their degrees elsewhere, have remained loyal and interested alumni, according to Ms. Newman. Robert Simonds, a V-12 seaman who got his degree after the war at the University of Illinois, was president of the OWU Alumni Association from 1974 to 1976.

Love bloomed from some of the meetings between the Ohio Wesleyan coeds and the Navy men, bringing marriages and creating families who sent their sons and daughters to Ohio Wesleyan where few now recall the Navy years.

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