

A Harvard Class in World War II

Edward Tabor

“Farewell to a Flyer”

*Be still, dear restless heart, broke like thy wings, and
breaking mine;
The genius from thy poor cracked skull is flown,
The deep eyes closed, that strained at knowledge
And saw worlds beyond the stars,
But see not me now: the long limbs still,
And all thy light gay grace, and mischievous smile,
Gone from this darker world, as when the sun has left.*

– Lucie Bigelow Rosen, mother of Walter Rosen, Class of 1937, who died on active duty, August 18, 1944

Even before the United States entered World War II in December 1941, war-related changes were in the air at colleges and universities throughout the US. The beginnings of World War II had been ongoing in China since July 1937 and in Europe since September 1939. Although some people in the US failed to notice the warning signs, many university administrators, including those at Harvard University, spent the tense months of 1940 and 1941 listening to war news and wanting to help the US prepare.

Harvard before Pearl Harbor

Harvard’s president, James Conant, was one of those who was concerned. He contacted Vannevar Bush, head of the Carnegie Institution, to get him to give President Franklin Roosevelt his idea for creating a government science committee to give contracts to universities for science research for military preparedness. This led to formation of the National Defense Research Committee (NDRC, which Conant later chaired. Harvard began focusing on war-related research throughout its science facilities.¹ Beginning in 1939, Conant also organized sending an entire prefabricated hospital to England to assist them in the war, the first physicians arriving from Harvard Medical School in August 1940, and the hospital being fully functional by September 1941.²

Harvard alumni of the Class of 1937, attending their reunion in 1940, recounted in their *Class Report* disturbing experiences while travelling during 1937-1940 that indicated they might have a war in their future.³ One classmate who travelled to Danzig, Poland, after war broke out there in 1939 spent five and a half days in a prison for having filmed German troops there. Another arrived in Shanghai on the first day of the war there and was “machine-gunned and bombed.” Another visited Europe in 1937-1938 and wrote that “Europe on the eve of war had all the fascination of a dread, chromatic poison.” One classmate wrote (in a later *Class Report*) that he joined the Navy before Pearl Harbor and survived the crippling explosion on the USS *Kearny* in its October 1941 battle with German U-boats in the North Atlantic, almost two months before US entry into the war. One classmate who had spent a year at Oxford on a Henry Fellowship, was now “engaged in reading the war obituaries” of his former Oxford classmates.

Fifteen men from the Class of 1937 had already joined the armed services and thirteen had joined the reserves or National Guard by 1940. A few of these indicated they joined in order to have a more favorable situation when the war eventually came, which they clearly anticipated.

Changes on Campus When War Began

On Harvard’s campus, most war-related changes began after Pearl Harbor. Many students were drafted, particularly after the draft age was lowered from twenty-one to eighteen in November 1942; many faculty were drafted as well, and many students and faculty also volunteered for military service.

Harvard adopted a year-round academic calendar. Beginning in 1942, civilian freshmen could enter in either June or at the start of any semester, and they could graduate after two years and three months.⁴

In Harvard College, there had been 1,400 civilian (male) freshmen in the fall of 1942; in the fall of 1943 there were only 500.⁵ In part because of the smaller classes, Harvard began allowing women from Radcliffe College to enroll in upper level courses for the first time in 1943. The daily student newspaper, *The Harvard Crimson*, was replaced by the semi-weekly *Harvard Service News*. The student-run radio station offered some Morse code training. Formal intercollegiate

football was suspended from spring 1943 until the end of the war.⁶

Uniformed students marched in drills in Harvard Yard, inside Memorial Hall, and on the baseball diamond at Soldiers Field. Sometimes, as “formations marched to class, martial music wafted over the Yard.”⁷

Many campus facilities were turned over to the military (under contracts), including classrooms, laboratories, dormitories (Harvard Yard buildings, as well as Eliot, Kirkland, and Leverett Houses, and most of Winthrop House), and dining halls. Harvard President Conant moved out of the official president’s house on Quincy Street to allow its use for the headquarters of Navy training programs on campus. By the fall of 1942, more than 3,000 armed forces personnel were taking courses at Harvard, both military and academic.⁸

Military courses added included navigation, camouflage, meteorology, and the economic aspects of war. Military training programs in material procurement for supply officers, contracts (at the Harvard Business School), radar, and chaplaincy (in the Germanic Museum) were formed, as was a “School for Overseas Administration.” Language courses were expanded. The Harvard School of Public Health taught tropical medicine to Navy physicians.⁹

Six members of the Class of 1937 were pleased to find that their Navy service began with a return to Harvard for two, three, or five months of training in the Navy “Electronics School,” “Communications School,” or “Supply Corps School.” Three classmates who had graduated from the Harvard Business School (HBS) returned to HBS for the Supply Corps School. One arrived there one week after graduating from HBS, and another was “billeted in almost the same room in McCulloch Hall I had left two years earlier -- but this time under Navy surveillance and strict Navy discipline.”¹⁰

The changes brought by World War II to the Harvard campus have been described in articles and books, but the experiences of Harvard alumni fighting that war have not. These can be learned by an analysis of the experiences of one class, the Harvard Class of 1937, as told in their autobiographical essays in the 1947 *Class Report*.

An Example of Harvard Alumni in Combat: The Class of 1937

From the Class of 1937, 651 men out of 1,029 in the class (62%) served in the armed forces of the US or its Allies during World War II (Table 1); 26 (4% of those on active duty) died in wartime service. They were among the more than 24,000 alumni of Harvard College and Harvard graduate schools who served in the armed forces during World War II, of whom 697 (2.9%) died during the war.¹¹

The members of the Class of 1937 had had time to reflect on their experiences by the time of their tenth reunion in 1947. For this reunion, in a tradition followed for all Harvard reunions, they wrote autobiographical essays that were published in a bound *Class Report*. For those who did not submit essays (including those who had died), biographies were written by others.

This *Class Report* opened with a somber two-page dedication to the twenty-six classmates who died “for the cause of the Allies in the Second World War,” including a poem written by the mother of a classmate who died on active duty (Figure 1), which “expresses ... our innermost feelings about friends and classmates who did not return from war.”

Battles and Other Duty Assignments

The Class of 1937 fought in many of the war’s major battles. Thirty-four classmates received eighty-two military awards for valor or meritorious service. Two members of the class were in the US Navy at Pearl Harbor when the Japanese surprise attack occurred on December 7, 1941. One was on the USS *Tangier* and mentioned that his ship was the first to open fire on the Japanese planes; he was later an Attack Group Commander in the Allied invasion of Saipan.

In Asia, thirty-eight classmates fought in the Philippines. The actual number might be larger, since many others wrote that they had served “in the South Pacific.” Six fought at Iwo Jima, including one who was the commanding officer of a tank landing ship (LST) in the initial assault, and nineteen fought at Okinawa. Some fought at Saipan and Tarawa; participated in the first carrier attack on the Inland Sea of Japan; served on multiple missions in B-29s over Japan; underwent kamikaze attacks (a classmate on one ship endured eighty-three air attacks in fifty-two hours, including kamikaze attacks); and one served in the Pacific on a submarine that sank two transports, two destroyers,

and two freighters.

In Europe, one piloted a B-25 for fifty-four combat missions over Italy; another served as bombardier on forty-two combat missions. One shot down Luftwaffe torpedo bombers from a ship in the Mediterranean; others fought in the invasions of North Africa and Sicily, in the Ardennes (including two at the Battle of the Bulge) and at Remagen Bridge. One conducted advance landings behind enemy lines in preparation for the Anzio invasion; and one served with the "Special Allied Airborne Reconnaissance Force." Eleven classmates were part of the Normandy invasion and the battles to secure it.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Jr., one of President Roosevelt's sons, was in the Harvard Class of 1937. He served on destroyers in the Atlantic, Pacific, Caribbean, Mediterranean, and on the Murmansk run, and participated in the invasions of North Africa, Sicily, the Philippines, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. He was executive officer of the destroyer USS *Mayrant*, and later was commander of the destroyer escort USS *U.M. Moore*. His essay modestly omits mention of his four awards for bravery that have been recounted elsewhere, including the Legion of Merit and a silver star for carrying a wounded sailor to safety under fire during the invasion of Sicily.

Fifty-five classmates worked in intelligence or counter-intelligence. Ten were assigned by the military to the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and forty were in military intelligence and counter-intelligence services. One of these was an army psychiatrist working with OSS to select secret agents. Three civilian classmates also worked in OSS and two civilian classmates worked in other intelligence services.

Some classmates served on the staffs of prominent leaders, including the staffs of General George Marshall, Admiral Chester Nimitz, General Douglas MacArthur, Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery, and with Averell Harriman (US Ambassador to the Soviet Union) at the Teheran Conference. One classmate who was in the Free French Forces spent some time as General Charles De Gaulle's driver. Another was in the Military Police guarding President Roosevelt's home at Hyde Park.

As the war ended, some classmates were among the first US troops entering Tokyo, Yokohama, and Nagasaki, or were present

in Tokyo Bay when Japan surrendered. When the fighting ended in Europe, one classmate was in charge of the military government of forty towns in Italy for two months in 1945.

Killed, Wounded, Sunk, or Captured

Twenty-six classmates died on active duty (4% of those on active duty). Thirteen (50%) of these died in plane crashes. Six died in land battles, two died in sea battles, one died of acute poliomyelitis and one died of scrub typhus. Twelve of the dead left behind a wife; seven also left behind one or more children.

One was killed by a sniper while leading his men through the woods in Germany. Another was killed while on a bombing mission over Yugoslavia. One classmate was in the Battle of Midway Island on the destroyer USS *Hammann*, which was sunk by a torpedo while fighting fires on the carrier USS *Yorktown*. He went into the water and was able to float clear of the sinking ship, but another explosion on the *Hammann* as it was going down killed him and other survivors in the water. Subsequently, a destroyer escort was named in his honor (USS *Lovering*) and served in the Pacific war.

Most of the war dead from the Class of 1937 were buried overseas. The entry for one classmate, who died in the crash of his fighter-reconnaissance aircraft and was buried in France, reported that "Father Maurice Colbert, the Parish priest, has reported to Wolf's father that his grave [in the Parish Cemetery at Cerisy-Belle-Etoile] is always well cared for and covered with flowers by the parishioners."

Nine other classmates were wounded in battle, including two seriously wounded during the Normandy invasion, and one who was wounded near Metz and required sixteen months of hospitalization. Five classmates were on ships that were sunk in battle, four of whom survived.

Three classmates were captured by the enemy. One was captured by the Germans in the Ardennes and was sent as a POW to Poland, later was marched to Bavaria when the Russians were approaching, and eventually was liberated by US troops; he required hospitalization for four months thereafter. One was captured by the

Germans for nine hours in February 1945, possibly in Belgium, but then escaped, “unharmed, except for hurt dignity.” One civilian classmate was a prisoner of the Japanese in Hong Kong for six months.

Civilian Classmates

There were 379 classmates (37%) who were not on active duty during the war. Seven had died before 1940. Others had medical deferments. Four were conscientious objectors who reported having performed alternative public service in national forests, state mental institutions, and elsewhere. One other was initially a conscientious objector but later “finally decided I was no longer a pacifist at all,” joined the army, and was assigned to OSS. Eighty-three were doing work that might have exempted them from military service, including four FBI agents (one of whom did intelligence work in France and Germany), three in OSS, two in other intelligence services, five in the US foreign service, twenty-two in various military or government offices, seventeen working or supervising in factories making aircraft, tanks, or other military hardware, two in the merchant marine, and eighteen in war-related research on radar, chemical warfare, burns, or malaria.

Discussion

From the Harvard College Class of 1937, 651 men served in the armed forces in World War II (62% of the entering class of 1,029), and twenty-six died on active duty (4% of those on active duty). The classmates described these experiences in essays for the 1947 *Class Report* that were written while the memories were still fresh. Their wartime contributions also can be considered as representative of the war service of alumni from other Harvard classes, and probably also of alumni of other universities. Their service was important for the success of the US war effort.

Table 1. Approximate Distribution of Armed Forces Enlistment of the Class of 1937 in World War II¹²

Branch of Service	Number of Classmates	Percent of Those on Active Duty
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Army ¹³	374	57%
Navy	238	37%
Marine Corps	8	1%
Coast Guard	14	2%
US Public Health Service ¹⁴	2	<1%
Armed forces of US Allies	9	1%
American Field Service ¹⁵	2	<1%
Unspecified	6	1%
Total	651	

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Notes

1. J. T. Bethell, *Harvard Observed: An Illustrated History of the University in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 133-72.

2. E. Tabor, “Long before Pearl Harbor, an entire hospital was sent to help England in World War II” *Hektoen Int.*, Spring 2022, <https://hektoen.org/2022/05/26/long-before-pearl-harbor-an-entire-hospital-was-sent-to-help-england-in-world-war-ii/>.

3. Harvard Class of 1937, *Triennial Report – 1940* (Boston, 1940). In that era, the first reunion for each class occurred three years after graduation instead of the five-year interval that was used later. In addition to autobiographical essays, this volume contains biographical summaries written by family members or reunion staff for classmates who did not respond to essay requests or who were deceased.

4. Bethell, *Harvard Observed*, 133-72.

5. Harvard Class of 1937, *Triennial Report – 1940*.
6. Bethell, *Harvard Observed*, 133-72.
7. Bethell, *Harvard Observed*, 133-72; quotation in M. Keller and P. Keller, *Making Harvard Modern: The Rise of America's University* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 165.
8. Bethell, *Harvard Observed*, 133-72; and Crimson News Staff, "College life during World War II based on country's military needs," *The Harvard Crimson*, December 7, 1956, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1956/12/7/college-life-during-world-war-ii/>.
9. Bethell, *Harvard Observed*, 133-72.
10. Harvard Class of 1937, *Decennial Report of the Harvard Class of 1937* (Cambridge, MA: 1947). In addition to autobiographical essays, this volume contains biographical summaries written by family members or reunion staff for classmates who did not respond to essay requests or who were deceased. In addition, some information in this volume was obtained by the reunion staff in 1947 from the "Harvard War Records Office" that existed during World War II.
11. Crimson News Staff, "24,476 Harvard men now in U.S. services," *The Harvard Crimson*, January 23, 1945, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1945/1/23/24476-harvard-men-now-in-us/#:~:text=Figures%20complete%20through%20January%206,Harvard%20Alumni%20Association%20announced%20yesterday;> and Bethell, *Harvard Observed*, 133-72.
12. The numbers in this table were compiled from multiple sources, including the autobiographical essays in the *Class Report* for 1947 and data from a questionnaire sent to classmates in 1947, and thus may be subject to minor inaccuracies. The total number on active duty, 651 classmates, is derived entirely from the autobiographical essays of 1947.
13. Including sixty-four in the Army Air Force; there was no separate air force at that time.

14. The US Public Health Service was “militarized” during World War II.

15. Two classmates in the American Field Service were listed here as active duty because 1) these volunteer ambulance drivers were in uniform, 2) they served in the front lines, 3) one of them was killed by a mortar shell and was included in the list in the *Class Report* of those killed “for the cause of the Allies.” A third classmate also was in the American Field Service until the fall of France in 1940 and later joined the Canadian army.