

WHEN WESLEYAN WAS A MILITARY BASE

The Air Cadet Training Program of WWII

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(Photo courtesy of Ralston Family Estate Collection)



December 7, 1941 is one of the most remembered days of the WWII era and perhaps of the 20th century. With the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the United States was thrust into a long dreary four years where it seemed that the entire world was turned upside down. Just about every aspect of daily life became reordered and what was once unheard of now became the norm. The nation sent every able bodied man and many women into some aspect of the war effort. Nearly twenty percent of the population of this country was called into active duty in some branch of the military. That many or more of the “home front’s” population went to work in the war production centers. The population of West Virginia was no exception. Most domestic industrial production ceased and every factory was converted to producing for the military. For the

first time, on a major scale, women tied back their hair, put on trousers, and went to the factories where they built airplanes and ships. There was a shortage of young males on every level of this country’s home front.

One of the least noted consequences of this shortage of young men was that colleges and universities across the nation had a difficult time keeping their doors open during “these trying times.” West Virginia Wesleyan College was no exception to this plight.

Following the lean years of the “Great Depression” but prior to the beginning of WWII, West Virginia Wesleyan’s enrollment had steadily been increasing each year. The July 31, 1941 issue of the *Republican Delta*, a special issue dedicated to WV Wesleyan on the occasion of Dr. Roy McCuskey’s retirement, made several observations about the growth of the college and what the institution meant to Buckhannon and the Upshur County community. The following facts were presented: the enrollment

of the school stood now at near the 450 student mark; if the projected expanded enrollment reached 700, then additional facilities and personnel would be added; and students currently enrolled spent \$150,000 a year in Buckhannon, adding to the local economy (Plummer 77).

However, by the fall of 1943, the effect of the war was being felt heavily on this little Buckhannon campus. The local newspaper reported that the autumn enrollment was down to around 230 regular students, with 160 of them female and the remaining 70 males mostly in the lower classes. In fact, the entire Junior class had only three males registered and out of 124 Freshmen, only 24 were male (*Buckhannon Record*, September 24, 1943). But this was the “regular” student enrollment and it was by no means the “entire” student body and hadn’t been since early in the spring semester of 1943 when 350 additional male students had arrived to be a part of the 49th College Training Detachment of the Army

Air Cadet Training Program.

Some time before the beginning of 1943, WV Wesleyan administrators had been approached by officials of the Maxwell Air Field in Alabama discussing Wesleyan as a possible site for training cadet students (*Buckhannon Record*, February 19, 1943). In 1939, a federal law had been passed allowing the War Department to send servicemen to colleges and universities for academic and flight training. By March of 1943 there were over fifty colleges and universities throughout the country participating in this program. By the end of the war the program had spread to nearly double that number

(canisius.edu/archivers/armyaircorps.asp). Along with WV Wesleyan, other campuses in the state having this program included those of West Virginia University, Davis and Elkins College, and Concord College in Athens (*Buckhannon Record*, February 4, 1944).

Final approval for the Wesleyan program was made by the War Manpower Commission "after it was learned that the Officers of Maxwell Field were especially impressed with the mathematics and science department, and by the spacious campus of Wesleyan College" (*Buckhannon Record*, February 19, 1943).

Of course the campus had to be totally revamped to accommodate this new student population and staff for its duration. The cadets were housed in "Agnes Howard Hall,"

Wesleyan's oldest residence hall and its only female dormitory. Obviously, the female students were shuffled off



(Photos courtesy of Ralston Family Estate Collection)

to various other campus and town facilities. Senior girls were moved to the president's residence at the corner of Sedgwick and College Avenue, the Freshmen to the Kappa Alpha fraternity house on Florida

Street, Sophomores to the "Goodwin residence" also on Florida Street, and the Junior girls to the former home of Dr. A. A. Schoolcraft. Each of these moves necessitated the move of the original occupants including the president of the institution. The Kappa Alpha boys were also promptly farmed out to friends and smaller dwellings (*Buckhannon Record*, February 26, 1943). The young ladies were allowed to continue taking their meals at Agnes Howard but they were to enter by the Meade Street entrance with the dining room "being completely blocked off from the rest of the dormitory" (*Buckhannon Record*, February 19, 1943).

Other changes to campus were made to accommodate the Air Cadets. Regular classrooms were used for the cadets but not in conjunction with the regular students. The gymnasium and athletic fields were used for the physical education and military training. The cadets ate their meals in the "new student center" of the gymnasium. Today's reader will realize that this gymnasium is

the one now long gone from campus. Interestingly, a wide wooden boardwalk was constructed from the dormitory to the gymnasium at the rear of the Administration building "so that there will be a minimum use by the cadets of the regular campus walks which are used by the Wesleyan

students” (*Buckhannon Record*, February 19, 1943). Of course, you will remember that the great majority of “regular” students were female.

Captain J. B. Hupp was the officer in command of the cadet program and he established his center of operation in the Administration building. By early March, 1943 the first 350 cadets had arrived in Buckhannon coming from Miami Beach, FL by train. On the day of their arrival, the mayor of Buckhannon, John Anthony, issued a proclamation, sirens sounded, and the high school and Wesleyan bands played. The temperature was near zero but hundreds of local residents gathered at the depot and along the streets to welcome the cadets. Although these cadets had been in training for about four weeks in Florida, most were originally from Pennsylvania and New York (*Buckhannon Record*, March 5, 1943).

The training was a rigorous five-month program with classes in mathematics, physics, English, current history, geography, physical education, and military science. Two weeks of the training period were to be spent in flight training at a nearby airport (*Buckhannon Record*, February 19, 1943). Unfortunately, the only such facility locally was a grassy meadow on Brushy Fork which had been in use as a landing strip for some years. One of its hazards was a ditch that ran across part of the runway area. That was about to change.

Wesleyan’s president, Dr. J. W. Broyles, announced in mid March that two diagonal runways, of packed soil and each a half mile long, would be constructed under the auspices of the Civil Aeronautics Authority, but at the expense of the college, on that

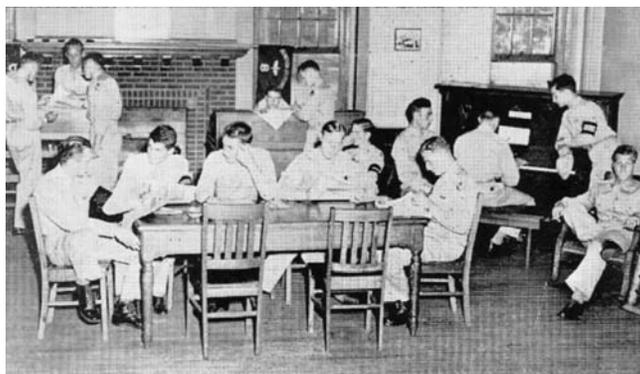
same grassy meadow land of Brushy Fork. The college leased land from “Lum” Lewis and Frank Smith for the duration of the war and in turn rented it to the CAA. The work was begun immediately with a projected completion date of April 1. In addition to the runways, a hangar

instructions but would not fly solo. Thirteen “Army cub airplanes” were brought in and twelve were to be in the air at all times in order to accommodate the 350 cadets. Plans had even been made in the original design that the airfield could be upgraded to handle eighteen planes and 500 cadets in training (*Buckhannon Record*, March 19, 1943).

According to the local newspaper, activities began very near schedule with the first training starting the week of April 9th. “The hangar, machine shop, and waiting rooms are practically completed at the airport...and a number of airplanes are stationed at the field. The runways have been graded and rolled, and are in first-class condition,” according to Lieutenant John O. Sholar, public relations officer (*Buckhannon Record*, April 9, 1943).

Various non-military personnel were employed to make the operations at the airfield run smoothly. George Brinkerhoff served as flight contractor and Marvin McKee was the general field manager and flight instructor. Chief pilot was A. D. Patterson along with six additional flight instructors Layton R. Ward, Eugene William Ross, E. R. Bruder, Henry R. Bergman, Casimir S. Butnoris, and A.A. “Tut” Zorzi, with only Ward being local from Elkins. The plane mechanics were James T. Stanford, James Click, and Kent Smith. Click and Smith were both from Buckhannon. Jim Click had been an Upshur County school bus mechanic prior to his employment at the airfield in March, 1943. Kent Smith was the mechanic’s helper.

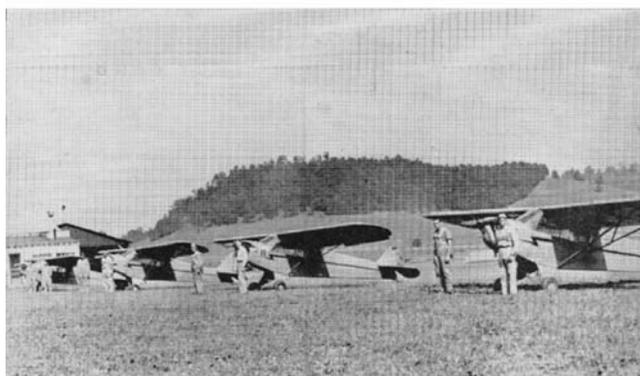
Two young ladies were also employed at the field. Ellen Lou Brown, daughter of Dr. and Mrs.



Group in Detachment Day Room



Aviation Student First Captain's Quarters



Students and Instructors Before Trainer Planes on Airport

(Photos courtesy of Alice Light Collection)

and a “completely equipped machine shop” was a part of the plan. The plan was that each cadet student would have ten hours of flight training over the two week course at the actual airstrip. During this time, cadets would become familiar with flight

Ralph C. Brown of Buckhannon served as clerk-stenographer and Avis Beer, also of Buckhannon, served as bookkeeper and secretary (*Republican Delta*, March 2, 1944). In a recent interview with Avis (Beer) Reed, she once again reminded us that the major intent of the ten hours flight time was to screen the cadets for the ones most likely to go on to the regular flight training following their time at Wesleyan. She indicated that cadets who got air sick, fearful, or dizzy, didn't have much of a chance of going on to the real training following their academics (Reed Interview).

By the end of March, 1943, life for the Air Cadets settled into a routine of academics and flight instruction. The days might have been long and great effort made to keep the military and civilian students each on their own turf, yet, by the end of the first month recreational activities were in the works. The first dance, in a series of dances, was announced with "no civilian men admitted and the 'girls' by special invitation only." The dance was to be formal with the orchestra composed of air corps students and local musicians who had already been practicing together. The decorations were in keeping with a patriotic theme of red, white, and blue and..."All of the 350 aviation students will be guests at this opening dance, and spectators will be admitted to the balcony for a small admission fee" (*Buckhannon*

Record, March 19, 1943).

By the following week, application had been made to the national council to establish a USO Club in Buckhannon for the use of the aviation students at Wesleyan College. The Buckhannon Rotary Club offered the use of its rooms for the USO club for three evenings a week. Of course committees were formed to oversee the operation of the club and included that of chaperones, refreshments, and hostesses. Remembered names



(Photo courtesy of Ralston Family Estate Collection)

included those of Mrs. H.D. Potter, Mrs. Eleanor Williams, Mrs. C. E. Fretwell, Mrs. C. Edmund Neill, Mrs. William C. Manser and others, all complete with the official USO flag, a supply of servicemen's stationery, and a window sticker. The club appeared to be well utilized during the time the air cadets were in town (*Buckhannon Record*, March 26/April 2/April 9, 1943).

By the summer of 1943, the new airfield on Brushy Fork had been dedicated with more than 2,000 in attendance and the aircrew students had received physical training outfits consisting of long blue trousers with gold stripes, white tee shirts, white sweat shirts, gym shoes, and tan shorts. (*Buckhannon Record*, May 28/June 11, 1943). Air Cadet students became an ongoing component in the Buckhannon community by participating in USO sponsored dances, presenting "variety shows,"

speaking to local organizations, having meals with local families, hosting an open house of the college quarters, and planning public demonstrations of military maneuvers and flying skills for "particularly the youths between 18 and 26 years of age" (*Buckhannon Record*, June 11/June 18/June 25, 1943).

By July, 1943 additional aviation students had arrived on the Buckhannon campus and more were to follow (*Buckhannon Record*, July 2, 1943). By fall of that year, the *Buckhannon Record* newspaper had begun including a special section entitled the "Cub Flier: Army Air Forces 49th. C.T.D."

This effort allowed a more consistent and constant publicity to the general public as well as a device of communications between various other campus programs across the nation. Letters and quotes from other campus program publications soon showed up in the Buckhannon edition. "Tips For Hot Future Pilots," and "Air WAC Still Needs Thousands Of Enlistments" as well as

constant jabs directed toward other campus companies were just some of the news items reported to the general public and this particular Buckhannon population (*Buckhannon Record*, November 16, 1943).

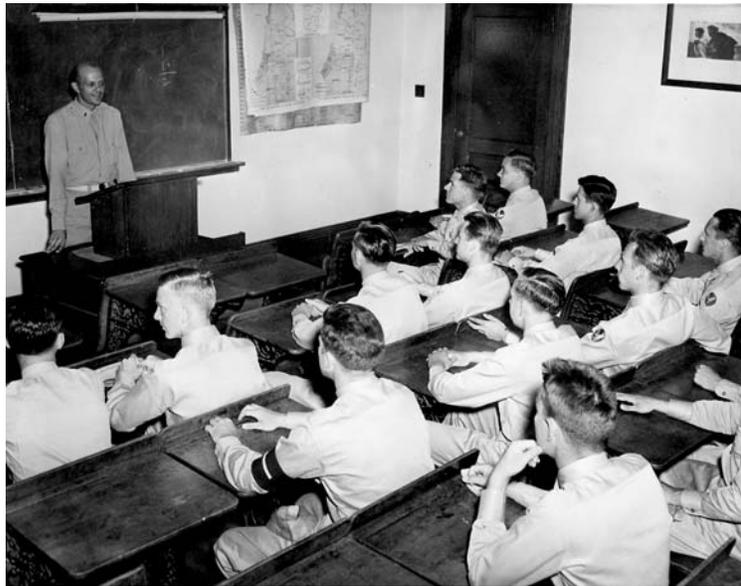
By December, the local Buckhannon newspaper carried one other very interesting piece of information in that a “Wesleyan Trained Wright Field Trainee” was “First Woman to Participate in Test Flight.” A Miss Mildred Strelitz participated in an official test flight during Wright Field’s long history as a research and development center (*Buckhannon Record*, December 3, 1943). In reality, Miss Strelitz was not an Air Cadet while at Wesleyan but a student in one of three other important educational, but government sponsored programs conducted on the Buckhannon campus.

Even before the first aviation

were in the drafting programs, the students were mostly from local areas. The engineering aides program was extremely demanding with courses in algebra and trigonometry. Both programs were taught by Wesleyan instructors and local teachers. The drafting program was under the sponsorship of the West Virginia State Vocational Education for National Defense system while the engineering program was under the supervision of the U.S. Engineering Science and Management War Training program (*Buckhannon Record*, January 8, 1943).

These programs were an intense, ten week certificate training and the individuals successfully completing the program as engineering aides were assigned

to take place on Wesleyan’s campus for at least the summers of 1943 and 1944 was the nurse cadet program in conjunction with St. Mary’s Hospital Nurses Training School in Clarksburg. At Wesleyan, these students were provided with academic pre-nursing scientific courses that lasted three months. Following this academic effort on campus, students continued specific nurses training at



(Photos courtesy of Ralston Family Estate Collection)

group of students arrived on campus, a group of more than sixty engineering and drafting aides enrollees began a course of study that would be entitled “Defense Studies.” Made up of mostly females, although a few 4-F classified males (meaning not physically fit for military service)

at Wright Field replacing men who had been called to active duty. WV Wesleyan was the first college, not offering an engineering degree, to be approved for this type of training (*Buckhannon Record*, February 5, 1943). These programs continued at Wesleyan until the end of the war.

The third special training program

directly to the Army Air Force experimental laboratories at Wright Field, Dayton, OH. During training, students received \$105 per month for their efforts, and upon completion of the program, they received \$164 per month while working

St. Mary’s. The local newspaper recounted that “St. Mary’s has one graduate class of cadet nurses corps now in foreign service in Italy. Every young woman who takes up this cadet nurses training releases a graduate nurse for service in the national emergency” (*Buckhannon Record*, May 5, 1944).

By early spring of 1944, notice was given to Wesleyan that the Air Cadet training program on its campus would be terminated. Indication was made that the program closing on this campus was made, not due to any “dissatisfaction relative to the performance” of the Wesleyan program but rather because “as the war continues, emphasis will naturally shift from training of vast numbers of new men to the training of replacements.” Wesleyan was one of seventy colleges and universities across the country where the Air Cadet programs were ending and the institutions would be returning to civilian users (*Buckhannon Record*, February 4,

1944).

By May, 1944 the program of training Aid Cadets in both academic and pre-flight training at WV Wesleyan and its airfield at Brushy Fork would be relegated to history. Over 700 soldiers had gone through the program. According to a local news account, not a single accident or injury occurred in the entire program effort. Almost immediately, attention was drawn to what would become of the Brushy Fort airstrip and facilities, but within the week

an ad appeared in the local paper that "The Brinckerhoff Flying Service is now in a position to give flying instructions to civilians at the Lewis Flying Field at Buckhannon" and that "Passenger Flights" could be arranged for civilians by contacting the school by phoning 533" (*Buckhannon Record*, May 12/May 19, 1944).

By the end of May, 1944 the last of the Air Cadet students had departed Buckhannon and the now, commanding officer, Captain Sholar, expressed his gratitude by stating that

Our relations with Wesleyan have

been most pleasant. Dr. J. W. Broyles and his splendid faculty have been very kind to us and it is with regret that we sever our ties here. I would like also to take this opportunity of thanking all of our many friends in Buckhannon whose many kindnesses to the personnel and students are things that we will never forget (*Buckhannon Record*, May 26, 1944).

A rumor has it that some Air Cadets married local girls and returned to Buckhannon later on.



(Photo courtesy of Max and Avis Reed Collection)

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