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At Wagner, Veterans Village gave returning WWII servicemen a boost

by CLAIRE M. REGAN

As World War II drew to an end and veterans returned home to recover and resume their lives, Wagner College reached out a helping hand.

In September 1946, construction began on temporary barracks on the Grymes Hill campus to house servicemen who were looking to complete their college education.

Veterans Village, located off Campus Road on the site of today's Spiro Hall, consisted of one two-story hall and six one-story buildings manufactured by the War Department.

Like most colleges across the country, Wagner saw a surge in enrollment after the war. In 1945, enrollment was 440. It climbed to 1,164 in 1946 and peaked at 2,061 in 1949.

Wagner welcomed the veterans, most of whom were older than traditional college students.

"They had the incredible experience of serving overseas in combat, and meeting all kinds of people they would have never met," said Lee Manchester, Wagner's director of media relations. The veterans brought a global perspective into the classroom, he added.

Wagner dormitories had been accommodating servicemen in the year before the barracks were built, following V-J Day in September 1945. Families on Grymes Hill also opened their homes to the veterans attending Wagner.

It was a time when "everyone was pulling together," Manchester noted.

DESTROYED BY A STORM

Sadly, Veterans Village did not last long. A fierce storm on the post-Thanksgiving weekend of Nov. 25-26, 1950, damaged buildings across the campus and destroyed nearly all of the barracks.

New York City recorded a peak wind gust of 94 mph and Newark, N.J., recorded a 108-mph wind gust during the storm. Snow, heavy rain and coastal flooding impacted 22 states, killing 353 and ranking it "the storm of the century."

On the Grymes Hill campus, students were displaced when the roofs were blown off Luther Hall and Cook Hall residences. The Cook Hall roof smashed into Veterans Village, reported the Dec. 1, 1950 edition of The Wagnerian student newspaper.

Fortunately, most students and veterans were off-campus for the weekend because of the Thanksgiving holiday. Wagnerian reporter and English major Theodore (Ted) Lovington Jr. described the storm's aftermath poetically.

"The winds had whipped across the flat face of The Hill and scoured the small settlement of Wagner College," he wrote. "Now, the metallic water in the distant Narrows, that widened into the sun-glazed sea, looked calm and gentle, giving no hint of the fury that broke loose on that gray Saturday morning and stormed like a million demons up the forested hanks of the sleeping hill."

Lovington was a veteran himself, serving in the U.S. Army in Japan during the late 1940s. He went on to become an accomplished contemporary poet on Staten Island, and a frequent contributor to the Advance.

The lifelong Port Richmond resident died in 2009 at the age of 81.

(Photos accompanying this story came from the Wagner College Archives. [To view them, visit the Horrmann Library's Facebook page.](#))