G.I. Joe and Jane Go to College

By Gary R. Mormino

Sixty years ago, a revolution shook the very foundations of higher education in America. From the ivy-clad brick buildings at the University of Florida to the smoking parlors- turned- classrooms at the University of Tampa, tens of thousands of veterans flooded colleges across the state.

The source of such upheaval was a sheet of paper with the cryptic title, Public Law 346, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. It is better known as the G.I. Bill of Rights.

By May 1945, the war in Europe was over, but military officials dreaded an expected invasion of Japan. Two atomic bombs dropped in August 1945 altered the calculus of victory and defeat. The boys were coming home. What kind of homecoming could veterans expect?

Politicians dreaded that question almost as much as they feared the specter of 16 million angry and unemployed veterans flooding the labor market and voting booths. The ghosts of World War I still lingered. Doughboys had returned to an America whipsawed by domestic upheaval and a bankrupt peace. "We're not going to have our boys selling apples on street corners after this war," pledged a congressman in 1944.

Today, almost everyone praises the G.I. Bill for its generosity and vision. It promised--and delivered-- housing, medical, and educational benefits to veterans. It served as a springboard to a better life.

On the eve of Pearl Harbor, appalling numbers of Americans toiled in poverty or were mired in the working classes. By the 1950s, thanks to the prosperity wrought by WWII, the Cold War, and the G.I. Bill, millions of Americans had advanced to the middle classes.

Fostering egalitarian dreams in a deeply stratified and fragmented society, the G.I. Bill made possible the greatest educational stampede ever witnessed in American history. A private first class who had typed letters for four months at Drew Field received the same benefits as the marine who had fought his way from Guadalcanal to Okinawa.

A grateful government offered veterans generous benefits. Whether G.I. Joe was admitted to Harvard or St. Petersburg Junior College (there was no Hillsborough Community College), Uncle Sam paid full tuition plus the cost of books, and provided single men a stipend of $60 a month and married men $90

a month. Millions took advantage of this social compact, regardless of race or religion, class or gender.

Educational institutions also appreciated the infusion of cash. Decades of under-funding had taken a toll on America's colleges and universities. The Great Depression made college unaffordable to many, unimaginable to most. The war also stripped campuses of male students.

Stetson University's 1944 graduation class consisted of one male student. Wartime enrollment at the University of Tampa had hit bottom at 210 students. University of Florida's 1943 freshmen class consisted of only 130 students. The University of Florida's entire undergraduate population in 1944 never exceeded 700. So many Gators were fighting for Uncle Sam that the orange & blue discontinued football in 1943.

Perhaps even more astonishing than Floridians accepting the loss of football was the new-found acceptance of federal aid to public and private schools. The word "education" is not found in the U.S. Constitution, and Americans had long considered education a state and local responsibility. World War II broke down many such barriers.

No issue had divided Americans and Floridians for so long as the question of supporting religious and parochial schools with government funds. The G.I. Bill funneled funds to Baptist, Methodist, and Catholic-affiliated schools (Stetson, Florida Southern, and St. Leo). Florida Christian College opened its doors in 1946, taking over the abandoned buildings of the Temple Terrace Country Club on the Hillsborough River.

When Johnny and Jane came marching home, they could scarcely recognize the home front or their alma mater.

Somehow, the University of Tampa had survived depression and war. "Increasing the enrollment," said newly appointed president, Ellwood C. Nance in May 1945, "is our most urgent need." Nance wore his army chaplain's uniform his first day at work. He need not have worried about new students.

Tampa Bay was education -starved. With their closest four-year public university being Gainesville, Tampa Bay students had few options prior to the University of Tampa's opening in the 1930s. The college may have been financially threadbare and its faculty over-worked and under-paid, but local students flooded the campus in the fall of 1945, grateful for any opportunity to attend college.

By 1947, Tampa Tribune headlines announced, "Tampa U. May Have to Turn Away 200 More Applicants," and "Veterans Lead in Enrollment at Tampa U."

While still not accredited, the school witnessed an enrollment increase of 600 percent between 1945 and 1947, from 200 to 1200 students.

In 1946, the University of Tampa made a major announcement. Football, discontinued after the 1941 season, was returning. And in the feel-good story of the year, the university introduced its new coach, Paul Straub, a former Spartan fullback best known as the only University of Tampa player to score a touchdown against the University of Florida.

War-toughened marines returning to the grid iron was not news in 1946. Coach Straub was, however, the only coach in America who had lost both legs at Guadalcanal.

Compared to flying B-24s and being a prisoner-of-war in a German Stalag, reflected Marcelino “Chelo” Huerta, playing football at the University of Tampa “was a piece of cake.” To measure football prospects at the University of Tampa, Huerta used to shoot darts onto Straub’s legs to show how tough one a Spartan had to be.

The sheer size of the pre-war college campuses seemed idyllic when compared to the crowded institutions of the late 1940s. From a pre-war peak of 3456 students, the University of Florida swelled to 7500 by the fall of 1946, with enough applications to reach 10,000 by the spring semester. It was an academic world devoid of SAT exams or essay questions asking applicants to write what they thought about Wednesdays. A high school degree was tantamount to acceptance.

The complexion of the student body changed, as well. From its origins as East Florida Seminary and Florida Agricultural College in the 19th century to its emergence as the University of Florida in 1905, the school had functioned as a bastion of masculinity. Legions of Gator alumni in the state legislature--and their wives-- preferred that males and females be segregated: the former at Lake City and Gainesville, and the latter at the Florida State College for Women in Tallahassee.

But new pressures began to erode old ways. In 1945, state legislators passed a bill permitting student wives of discharged servicemen to attend the University of Florida.

Angry that the state could not accommodate all male veterans seeking space in Florida classrooms, politicians petitioned Florida State College for Women’s president, Doak Campbell, asking that males be admitted to the all-female institution.

Governor Millard Caldwell and President Campbell agreed to allow a few hundred veterans to enroll, but Florida Attorney General Tom Watson, a fiery,

red-headed lawyer from Tampa who desperately wanted to become governor, blocked the move. Politicians and educators out-maneuvered Watson by establishing a “branch campus” of the University of Florida in Tallahassee.

Over 500 veterans enrolled at TBUF (Tallahassee Branch of the university of Florida). Barracks of the former Dale Mabry Air Field, the site of today’s Tallahassee International Airport, served as dormitories for married students. The “O Club,” once the officers’ club, functioned as the student union. “When we got there,” remembered Bill Tanner, “It looked like a bombed out city.”

The experiment marked an interesting chapter in Florida co-educational history. The presence of the veterans/male students made FSCW administrators nervous. A May 1946 headline, “GI’s at Miami University Not Interested in Co-Eds” was not universally shared, regardless of students’ gender, sex, or military experience. Nor was the 1943 observation of the Apalachicola Times, “Show a soldier a ping pong table and he will forget all about love.”

When a Tallahassee coed was asked by a reporter what she thought of the prospect of young men on campus, she replied with the voice of experience: “What’s the difference? There’ll be plenty coming over from Gainesville on weekends, anyway.”

James S. Pavy and Jessie Liles met in Seattle during the war, married, and then enrolled at TBUF. He enrolled as a pre-med major, but after two babies arrived the first two years, he became a phys-ed major. He later coached basketball in Northwest Florida.

“They lived in converted barracks,” writes their daughter Sandra Howsare. “The men’s bathroom was at one end of the hall and the women’s was at the other end. There was one pay telephone in the hall. And, of course, they did not have a car.”

On several occasions, the G.I. Bill checks arrived late. “My mother got a job typing at night for the legislature. She would ride the bus home at 2:00 or 3:00 a.m.” remembered Sandra, who was born at the so-called “Fertile Crescent.”

Jessie Liles Pavy, a Georgia native and a WAC during the war, also enrolled at FSCW

Mary Frances Tonello was a junior in 1947 when FSCW welcomed the first male students. “Some who were majoring in hotel and restaurant management even enrolled in our food preparation and nutrition classes,” she fondly remembers. She added, “I appreciated the guy who often helped us beat our cake batters, etc. by hand (no electric mixers in class!).”

Veterans certainly brought new attitudes to institutions that clung to tradition. Historically, upper-classmen enforced a code of behavior that included hazing hapless freshmen. First-year students at the University of Florida wore an orange "rat" beanie/hat.

With good reason, 21-year-old seniors wisely allowed 25-year-old freshmen who had fought at the Battle of the Bulge, a beanie pass. One such student told the Gainesville Sun's society editor, "Listen sister, I've had enough military training to last me the rest of my life. "'Do I look stupid?'"

Curiously, for all of the military trappings that adorned campus—including the wearing of fatigues, by some—most traditional students shunned ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corps), which had been so popular before the war. In the spring of 1946, only 18 UF students from an eligible pool of 1000 signed up for ROTC.

The Tampa Tribune dispatched state editor James Clendinen to Gainesville to cover the 1946 Homecoming. Everything seemed to have changed. Prior to the war, married students were rare and housing for couples was nonexistent. "Now," 2000 students sported wedding rings and "You'll see diapers flying in the breeze."

"The University of Florida will be glad to have old grads back," wrote Clendinen, "but please don't plan to stay overnight." He explained that "Gainesville is jammed from attic to basement." Moreover, the campus was "thick" with cars.

The Boys of Old Florida also encountered new fashion trends. Clendinen described "a new type of student costume consisting largely of one T-shirt (a short-sleeved white athletic slipover) and one pair of tan twill pants." Officers' uniforms fashionably adorned with red suspenders were also the rage.

Students scrambled to find a place to sleep. Flavet Village became the campus's first home for married students. Students also scurried to find space in the trailer village located near the Gainesville airport. Throughout 1945 and 1946, carpenters were busy dismantling army barracks at Hendricks Field in Sebring and wood-framed structures that had housed shipyard workers in Panama City, loading them onto flatbed trucks, and ferrying them to Gainesville to be reassembled as student housing.

Florida State College for Women also greeted a record number of new students, 2575 in 1946, although unlike the University of Florida, relatively few female veterans enrolled.

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Gary R. Mormino holds the Frank E. Duckwall professorship at the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg, where he co-directs the Florida Studies Program. He is presently writing a history of Florida and WWII.