



Photo courtesy of UNL Archives

Members of Pershing Rifles, a ROTC honorary which still exists, shake hands in 1955.

ROTC of 1950s was bigger; some think better

By Alice Hrnicek

The ROTC cadet of 1950 often was seen striding across the University of Nebraska campus in uniform, proudly wearing a medal or two if he had served in World War II and facing the prospect of serving again soon in the Korean War.

He was one of more than 3,000 male students who were required to serve in the Army, Air Force or Navy Reserve Officer Training Corps during their freshman and sophomore years. All land-grant colleges were mandated by federal law to provide such training at the time.

The student requirement could also be met by joining the ROTC band. An advanced voluntary program was offered for those who had finished the first two years.

A cadet's benefits varied with the program. He could be given the minimum \$50-a-month stipend or much the same stipend plus free tuition and books.

And, in every case, he was male.

THIRTY YEARS later, the ROTC cadet is one of about 300 NU students, or roughly 10 percent of the 1950 number. Although proud of his status, the cadet may not put on his (or her) uniform until he reaches the Military and Naval Science Building for a training session.

Involvement in the program is no longer mandatory, the stipend has increased to \$100 a month, scholarships are readily available and no cadet has been involved in a major war.

In a growing number of instances, the cadet is female.

The American military services are struggling to upgrade their images, which were badly warped by the Vietnam War.

Veterans of the 1950-era ROTC at NU agree that post-Vietnam sentiment still colors the tone of today's program. But they differ on whether the changes have been damaging or simply appropriate for the times.

Dwight McVicker, cadet captain of the university's 1950 Army ROTC, and now the West Coast marketing manager for U.S. Gypsum Company, said that ROTC lacks

"knowledgeable leadership" because of its voluntary nature.

PEOPLE ARE not as gung-ho about the service and ROTC as they used to be," McVicker said. "If we do not maintain our guard, we could find ourselves in an embarrassing situation."

Louis Keesler, a 1953 NU graduate who served in the Navy ROTC, said that the services now have trouble retaining people once they learn a trade. Keesler is currently the program manager for Brunswick Defense Division in Lincoln.

Ray Coffey, a 1948 Army ROTC graduate and now business manager for Business and Finance at UNL, said that those who do not join ROTC are "missing something."

However, Col. James Dubois, professor of aerospace studies at UNL and a 1955 Air Force ROTC graduate of the Municipal University of Omaha (now UNO), said that the voluntary system produces enough quality recruits to make it work.

"Because of the shrinking of numbers, the quality is superior to when there was a cast of thousands," Dubois said.

William Kinsey, a 1950 cadet captain of the Air Force ROTC and now an associate broker for MEGA Corporation in Lincoln, said that more people would join the military if pay were raised to match civilian pay. The voluntary system is not the problem, he said.

THE ADVENT of women into ROTC in the early 1970s has transformed ROTC as much as its voluntary nature.

Sergeant Jean Huginin, who teaches aerospace studies, is the only female instructor in the ROTC program. But, she said, she finds "little room for discrimination" in the program because of strict rules.

"Women have been integrated as they make the service a career," Huginin said. "It's been a real equal experience."

Coffey recalls when the most highlighted involvement of women with ROTC was when they ran for "Honorary Colonel" at the annual military ball. One woman from a sorority was elected by cadets for the

honor.

Women also were allowed to participate in Angel Flight, a branch of the Air Force ROTC community service group called the Arnold Air Society. Both groups still exist today, nationally headquartered at UNL, and have volunteered for such activities as cardiopulmonary resuscitation training and visiting nursing homes.

Dubois said that women, more than men, have given the groups the impetus for service accomplishments.

ANOTHER GROUP headquartered at UNL is Pershing Rifles, an Army honorary organization. Other honorary societies which find their roots in pre-1950 days include Phalanx and the Scabbard and Blade. ROTC today has evolved into a more

academically oriented program with course requirements in military history, foreign and domestic political affairs and business and personnel management.

"Contrary to popular belief, cadets don't do much marching," Dubois said.

Previously, cadets were trained more toward a vocation, he said. But now they are instructed in career-service options, but not necessarily taught a service trade.

Although scholarships are hard to receive when first joining ROTC, Dubois said chances greatly improve if a cadet sticks with it.

Dubois said he thinks society is slowly forgetting the heartache of Vietnam, and he senses a conservative shift in attitudes nationwide which may improve the ROTC image.



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The 1980 ROTC program includes women in all phases—such as physical tests like going down the side of the Military and Naval Science Building with a rope, and a lot of self-confidence.