

A Quest for Mental Ammunition

The Ninety-Third U.S. Army Air Forces College Training Detachment in Spearfish, 1943–1944

Paul Higbee and Terry Neil King

On 5 March 1943, more than a year after the United States entered World War II, two hundred soldiers arrived in Deadwood. From the train station, they rode buses sixteen miles to Spearfish, their station for the next five months.¹ These new trainees had completed basic training for the U.S. Army in Fresno, California, days earlier. Many were originally from Chicago and all hoped to become officers in the Army Air Forces and serve as pilots, bombardiers, or navigators in aerial combat. Training in Spearfish, specifically at the local college and an airport just east of town, would be their first step toward that goal. Over the next fifteen months, nine hundred more soldiers followed the first group to Spearfish, part of the Ninety-Third Army Air Forces College Training Detachment—one of 150 such programs established on college and university campuses across the country in 1943. Black Hills Teachers College (BHTC), which later became Black Hills State University (BHSU), in Spearfish was the only South Dakota school selected. The school’s president, Russell E. Jonas, pledged that the enlisted men in this program would acquire “mental ammunition so important in this global conflict.”² With Jonas leading the effort, the people of Spearfish pitched in to provide significant support for the Ninety-Third, which Jonas argued would help shape a better contemporary world and postwar era.

As hosts for the training detachment, both BHTC and Spearfish experienced transformations that influenced the community and the experiences of the trainees during World War II. The local population worked to welcome the potential officers and provide them with the comforts of home. Similarly, the trainees integrated into the local community, taking part in numerous events and ensuring they represented themselves well. This relationship highlights the significant role that

1. *Deadwood Pioneer*, 6 Mar. 1943.

2. *Spearfish Queen City Mail*, 4 Mar. 1943.

South Dakota communities played in contributing to the war effort, which directly touched both civilians and soldiers alike, between 1943 and 1944.

Shortly after arriving on the buses on 5 March, the men of the Ninety-Third “got their first glimpse of Spearfish.” The local newspaper, the *Spearfish Queen City Mail*, reported that the troops first saw the town “when a small group of them came downtown in a body.” Two days later, the outlet noted, the trainees were “free to roam the town as they pleased and local restaurants, soda fountains, and the theater were packed with local air crew students.”³ An unnamed writer mused that “we, who are not accustomed to military dress, can’t help staring—just a little. In the back of our minds, no doubt, we are picturing someone in the army whom we haven’t yet had an opportunity to see in khaki.”⁴

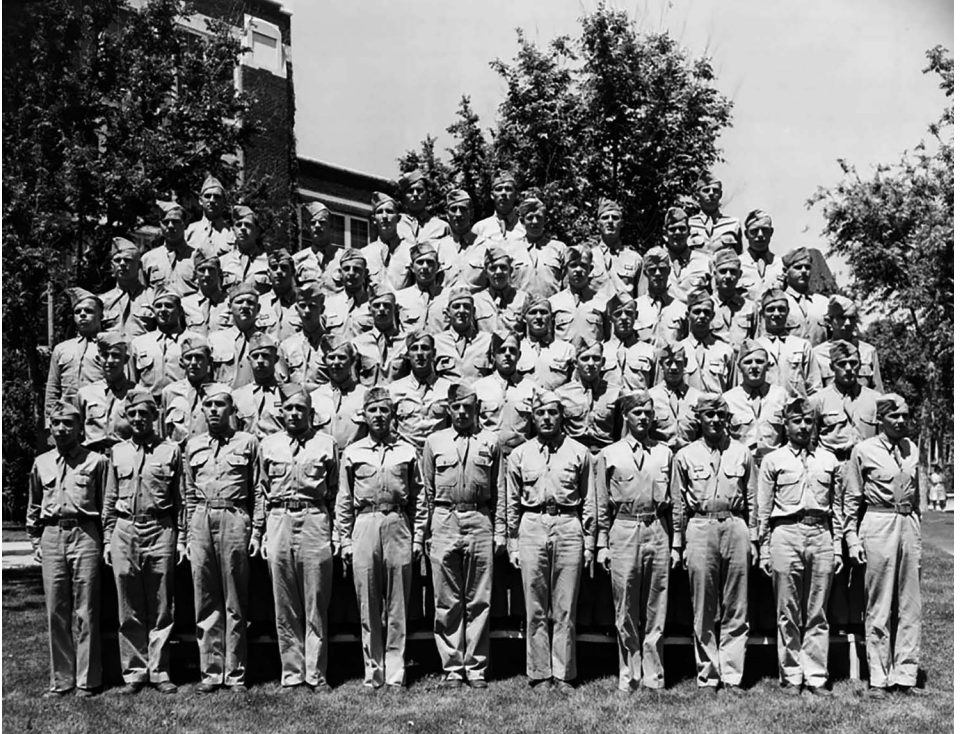
Although its residents were unaccustomed to seeing military personnel, Spearfish was well-represented in the U.S. military, as South Dakota had the highest enlistments per capita of any state during World War II. In fact, the army already had an active presence throughout the region. Fort Meade, twenty-six miles southeast of Spearfish, maintained a training facility for infantry enlistments. Fifty-five miles to the southeast, the newly established Rapid City Army Air Base—now known as Ellsworth Air Force Base—housed mighty B-17 Flying Fortress bombers that regularly flew training maneuvers over the Black Hills. Spearfish residents took in news about the war and unflinchingly considered its possible outcomes. The town’s Catholic priest, Wenzel Sobolewski, reflected this consideration when he observed, “We are peering into the future, hopeful that God in his goodness will make our crosses light.” Still, he kept an air of optimism, noting that even negative outcomes, “through the loving kindness of God,” could be “a blessing.”⁵ Even before the Ninety-Third came to BHTC, the residents of Spearfish were familiar with the military.

Soon after the Imperial Japanese Navy attacked the U.S. Naval Station in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on 7 December 1941, numerous American military leaders recognized that aviation likely held the key to victory. Un-

3. Ibid., 11 Mar. 1943.

4. Ibid.

5. Annual Reports and Letters to Parishioners, 1942, St. Joseph Catholic Church Archives, Spearfish, S.Dak.



The cadets of the Ninety-Third arrived on the campus of Black Hills Teachers College (BHTC) in 1943 as part of the college training detachment program. BHTC was the only institution in South Dakota selected for the program.

like Germany and Japan, the United States did not face material shortages, which would allow the nation to outproduce its enemies, especially when it came to airplanes. Despite this advantage, the Army Air Forces lacked the necessary number of qualified pilots, bombardiers, and navigators. The branch reserved these positions for officers with at least two years of college education out of the belief that college-educated men made the best crew leaders.

Fearing a shortage of manpower for these roles, army leadership decided that accelerated coursework at established colleges and universities could solve the problem. Professors at chosen institutions would prepare these cadets in physics, mathematics, history, physical conditioning, geography, and English. Meanwhile, officers would continue military indoctrination for the cadets in the program. In addition, ca-

dets would gain ten hours of flying instruction based on Civilian Aviation Administration (CAA) procedures.⁶ Dating back to 1939, BHTC, like other South Dakota colleges, offered CAA training to its civilian students. At BHTC, 355 students enrolled in this course before the Ninety-Third took over. Decades later, local residents sometimes confused the two programs, but no one in 1943 and 1944 did, as the men of the Ninety-Third were enlisted, wore uniforms, and drilled on campus athletic fields, something the civilian CAA students called the “war service program.”⁷

To start the program, BHTC needed the backing of prominent figures to host the detachment. Francis Case, who represented the state’s second congressional district in the U.S. House of Representatives, first recognized the college might be a good fit for a training detachment. During the conflict, Case, a World War I veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps, pushed to have western South Dakota host multiple projects. He supported the establishment of the Rapid City air base, the Provo munitions storage facility, and a veteran’s hospital at Fort Meade. Additionally, he backed the creation of Black Hills National Cemetery near Sturgis. Case’s support and recognition for the college brought the training detachment to Spearfish in 1943.⁸

A federal commission focused on addressing military manpower announced the formation of the Ninety-Third immediately after army inspector H. W. Dorr visited Spearfish and rated the campus “excellent” in February 1943. According to Dorr’s report, the college consisted of four buildings located a mile outside of town. These structures contained twenty-five classrooms, one physics lab, and one chemistry lab. The college had forty-two instructors to teach the potential officers. Dorr estimated that the campus could house as many as eight hundred cadets if they converted the women’s dormitory, known as Wenona Cook Hall, into barracks. Dorr also found Spearfish attractive for flight instruction. The region averaged 303 clear flying days annually and

6. *Spearfish Queen City Mail*, 11 Feb. 1943.

7. Black Hills Teachers College, *Eociha* (Spearfish, 1943), p. 22.

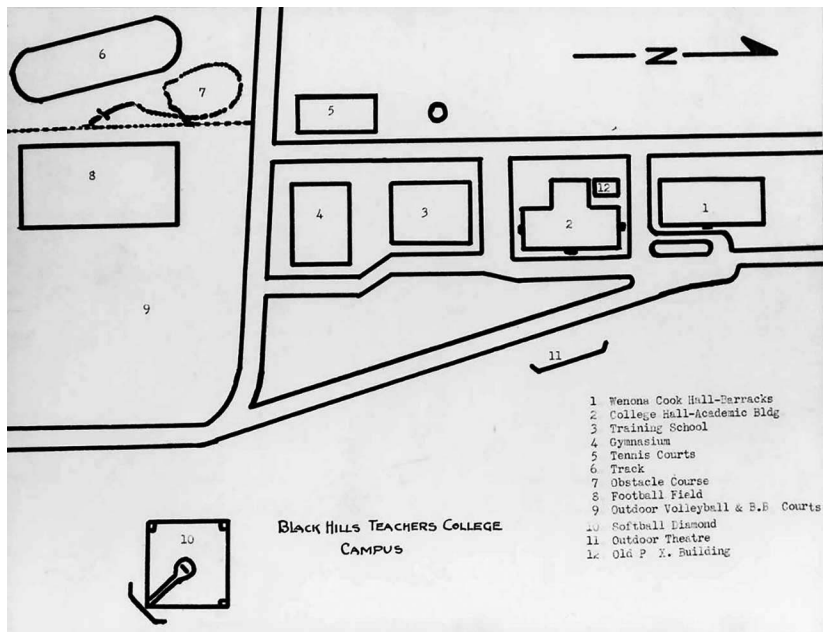
8. Robert Lee, Homer Lewis, and Neil King, *History of the 93rd Army Air Forces College Training Detachment* (U.S. Army Air Forces, n.d.) p. 3; Richard R. Chenoweth, “Francis Case: A Political Biography,” *South Dakota Historical Collections*, vol. 39 (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society, 1979), p. 328.

maintained the CAA-approved Black Hills Airport, located five miles from campus. Managed by nationally renowned aviator Clyde W. Ice, the airport also offered fifteen civilian flight instructors.⁹

The army and BHTC came to an agreement quickly. At first, the college would receive \$1.08 per man per day for mess. To ensure enough housing, the school implemented a plan to transform the women's dormitory into a barracks at a cost of \$11,833. Women who lived in the dormitory moved into private homes or tourist courts, which had been built recently to help lodge the large audiences that the town's annual passion play attracted.¹⁰ The cadets of the Ninety-Third knew the school was

9. *History of 93rd Army Air Forces College Training Detachment*, pp. 3-8. Today, residential neighborhoods surround the campus, all of which developed after the war.

10. Some Spearfish residents recognized the town's connection to 1930s turmoil in Europe. Actor-producer Josef Meier (1904-1999) brought the passion play to the United States from Luenen, Germany, in 1932. He initially toured it as a German-speaking production. He later translated it into English and decided to remain in the United States. Local performances were eventually suspended when war gas rationing reduced tourist



This map of BHTC shows the campus layout as the cadets would have found it. Wenona Cook Hall, seen here at far right, became the cadets' barracks.

an institution for preparing teachers, and thus assumed that women outnumbered men in enrollment. They guessed correctly. Of the three hundred students enrolled prior to the war, 75 percent were women, a fact that intrigued the cadets. As a community service, the *Queen City Mail* published the new addresses for the women students. In response, one cadet inquired, “Why didn’t they publish the phone numbers?”¹¹

The city of Spearfish quickly welcomed the new residents. The week the cadets arrived, the *Queen City Mail* published a four-page tabloid supplement targeting the new students. “Make Yourselves at Home, Aviation Cadets,” read the front-page headline, “Spearfish Boasts of its Beauty, Climate, Friendliness—and of its Flying Cadets.” It also included special messages from local business leaders, elected officials, clergy members, and educators. The feature displayed photographs and biographical profiles of twenty-one teachers that the men would meet on campus, as well as a description and history of the airport.

The town used this publication to emphasize its status as a prominent vacation spot, calling itself “The Paradise of the Black Hills.” The supplement was full of suggestions for outdoor recreation. South of town, it advised the men, lay Spearfish Canyon, which provided “twenty miles of scenic grandeur, a world of color, crags, sparkling water and stately pines and spruce.” The canyon also offered “excellent trout fishing in the stream and interesting hiking trails [that] branch off from the main highway.”¹² While the cadets were there for training, they could also enjoy the tourist attractions.

From the viewpoint of army leadership, the dual identity of the cadets as soldiers-in-training and tourists created problems. According to the officers who wrote the official history of the detachment, when the first class of cadets arrived, “the people of the community were more than anxious to show the ‘Army’ a real welcome, but were woeful-

travel. Representative Francis Case helped Meier gain gas rationing exemptions for his play’s vehicles, allowing the production to tour major American cities and attracting national attention. Outdoor summer performances resumed in Spearfish in 1948. When the play closed permanently in 2008, more than six million people had seen it in Spearfish. Interview with Johanna Meier, 16 Dec. 2020. See also James Campbell Wright, “Development of the Black Hills Passion Play in Spearfish, South Dakota and Lake Wales, Florida” (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1974).

11. *Spearfish Queen City Mail*, 11 Mar. 1943.

12. *Ibid.*, 4 Mar. 1943.



Spearfish Canyon, one of the most scenic places in the Black Hills, offered the cadets ample opportunities for recreation.

ly lacking in knowledge of what the Flying Training Program required of a man.” For the most part, the officers noted, the residents never understood “why students were expected to live up to certain standards,” including following a curfew. As a result, “On several occasions well-meaning citizens were contributing factors in the late return of students.” Incidents of late return greatly decreased after the first class of cadets graduated. Subsequently, the detachment leadership created a designated military police force that patrolled off campus and local civilians became increasingly aware of army policy.¹³

Cadets who explored Spearfish could see that there was more to the town of 2,500 residents than just its natural beauty. Spearfish had been laid out illegally during the Black Hills gold rush of 1876 in defiance of

13. *History of 93rd Army Air Forces Training Detachment*, p. 51.

the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, which promised the region for the exclusive use of the Lakota people. Certain elements of Spearfish, such as its wide main street, men walking around in broad brimmed cowboy hats, and the smell of rich leather in shops that sold cowboy boots, defined it as a western town. After years of drought and the Great Depression, cattle raising had returned to the area with Hereford and other breeds grazing immediately east, north, and west of town. Spearfish Creek provided water via irrigation ditches to help grow an unusual variety of crops for a semi-arid region. The creek also fueled a hydroelectric plant on the south side of town that in turn supplied power for the Homestake Gold Mine in Lead, the nation's largest of its kind. During the war, the mine's foundry and shops were converted to produce war supplies, including marine landing crafts and grenade casings.¹⁴ With timber, sawmills, and a federal trout hatchery in the region, Spearfish's population grew during the Great Depression, contributing to its culture in 1943.

Though it relied financially on tourism, Spearfish was one of the largest towns in the nation without rail service. A 1933 flood washed away the Northern Burlington Railroad line that connected Spearfish to Deadwood, which was never rebuilt. Leaders in Spearfish may have anticipated the growth of automobiles as the primary means of transportation in the United States. Clyde Ice also advanced the thinking that airplane traffic would only grow in importance. As for the old rails, local rancher and author Frank Thomson wrote that they were sold as scrap metal to Japan, though he feared they were returned as bullets. "Ironical?" he commented caustically, "Sure . . . but we made money on the deal."¹⁵

Many Spearfish residents considered Black Hills Teachers College the community's biggest asset. The school took root in 1885 under Michigan-born educator Fayette Cook, an early advocate for requiring that

14. Mildred Fielder, *The Treasure of Homestake Gold* (Aberdeen, S.Dak.: North Plains Press, 1970), p. 332.

15. Frank Thomson, *Ninety-Six Years in the Black Hills* (Detroit: Harlo Press, 1974), pp. 117, 162; "Interstate Commerce Commission Report, Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad Abandonment," 28 May 1934, File 106, Drawer 13, Father Eugene W. Szalay Collection, Leland D. Case Library for Western Historical Studies, Black Hills State University, Spearfish.

public school teachers hold college degrees—sometimes a hard sell on the western frontier. He persevered, however, and in 1895 established a model elementary school that the Ninety-Third's cadets would come to know well. This center allowed teachers-in-training, under the direct guidance of supervising teachers, to work with children without setting foot off campus. Also called the lab school, this learning center was free to local families who preferred it to the Spearfish public schools due to an issue of location or because a parent worked at the college. The model school survived until 1963, so the cadets sitting in class could hear laughter and shrieks coming from the playground outside and often had hundreds of young eyes watching their drills.¹⁶

Russell Jonas arrived just eight months before the Ninety-Third was established, taking over as the college's third president after Ethelburt C. Woodburn retired. Many cadets still came to know Woodburn, who continued as a mathematics professor at BHTC. Although new to the community and college, Jonas fully supported the detachment. He knew that residents of Spearfish worried about the negative financial effects of a dip in BHTC's enrollment during the war, including the possibility that the state would permanently close the college. Jonas grew impatient with constant questions about whether the Ninety-Third could potentially save the small town and its school. "It isn't a question of saving either," he told the *Queen City Mail*. Instead, he argued that letting the government employ the facilities at BHTC and the Black Hills Airport was "a case of winning the war to save ourselves."¹⁷

Jonas, known as "Dr. Jonas" among students, community members, and incoming officers and cadets, consistently took a long view on matters related to the training detachment. He believed that saving democracy worldwide in 1943 trumped local economics and that education for all ranked among the most noble of American ideals. More than anyone, Jonas modeled how South Dakotans should support the detachment, from inviting cadets to dinner to cheering on their intramural sports teams during the absence of varsity athletics. Jonas grew up on a prairie homestead 125 miles east of Spearfish and earned his doctorate in education at Iowa State University. He seemed almost omnipresent

16. LeRoy Carlson, "A History of the Founding and Operation of the Black Hills Teachers College Laboratory School" (master's thesis, Black Hills State College, 1966).

17. *Spearfish Queen City Mail*, 11 Feb. 1943.

in Spearfish, a man in his forties walking around town while wearing a western-style hat. When the school's enrollment numbers tumbled into the hundreds, he prided himself on knowing every student by name.¹⁸ While that was not possible with the 1,100 cadets who came through the campus in 1943 and 1944, he made personal connections with many of them.

According to the detachment's official history, the unit's three "pioneer officers," First Lieutenant Homer Lewis and Lieutenants Neil L. King and Robert E. Lee, arrived on 18 February 1943. Supposedly, the trio, being unfamiliar with Spearfish, left Randolph Field near San Antonio, Texas, aiming for South Dakota, confident that someone would know the town's location after they crossed the state's border. As the

18. Interview with Cecil Haight, 2 Nov. 1997.



First Lieutenant Homer Lewis served as the commanding officer for the college training detachment.

unit's commanding officer, Homer Lewis worked closely with Jonas. Lewis, of course, wore his army uniform on campus, but he was just as much a part of the rural West, having made his living as a cattle rancher in Victoria, Texas. Prior to becoming an officer, Lewis attended the Culver Military Academy in Indiana, Valley Forge Military Academy in Wayne, Pennsylvania, and the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. Early in the war, Lewis helped activate an Army Air Forces glider training detachment. With a strong interest in the work of the infantry, he also took part in daily military training at Spearfish, including keeping a "constant watch" on the cadets' progress and passing along "his technical information to Air crew trainees."¹⁹

Neil King, the detachment's adjutant and Lewis's second-in-command, had been a Denver banker until beginning his army service as an enlisted man at Lowry Field, Colorado, in February 1942. He was selected for Officer Candidate School in Miami Beach that August and graduated in October. King's banking background proved key to his administrative success within the army. In addition to his primary duties, he handled public relations, postal services, the detachment history, and, in the Ninety-Third's final weeks, stepped up as commanding officer.²⁰

Robert Lee served as the unit's tactical officer, responsible for military training. A former newspaper reporter, he had written for the *Washington Post* before enlisting.²¹ He should not be confused for Minnesota native Robert Lee, another World War II army journalist who became a longtime Black Hills newspaper editor and historian after the war. Initially, Lieutenant Charles L. Gerlach, a Texan who raised cattle, grew cotton, and produced livestock feed before becoming an officer, assisted Lee with training as the commandant of students before being transferred to Santa Ana, California. In late 1943, Lieutenant John Neustadter, an Oregon man previously assigned to the 312th College Training Detachment unit at Montana State College in Bozeman, replaced Gerlach.²²

Additionally, a dozen enlisted men were assigned to the Ninety-Third as the detachment's "permanent cadre." These soldiers managed day-

19. *History of 93rd Army Air Forces College Training Detachment*, pp. 69–70.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 71; *Prop Wash*, 25 Oct. 1943.

21. *Prop Wash*, 24 Mar. 1944.

22. *Ibid.*, 4 Mar. 1944.



Lieutenant Neil King, the detachment's adjutant, acted as Lewis's second-in-command and ably handled a wide variety of administrative tasks.

to-day campus affairs, provided off-campus transportation, occasionally assisted classroom instructors, and acted as military police. A recent BHTC graduate originally from Plankinton, South Dakota, Beryl Sherin, worked as the unit's civilian "clerk stenographer." She scored highly in performance evaluations and Lewis later awarded her with the War Department's emblem for Civilian Service.²³

Although not the most dominant aspect of the detachment's daily schedule, flight training was vital to the cadets' preparation. Spearfish residents likely noticed increased air traffic over the area and local press made regular references to "future wingmen." Cadets rode buses to the airport for daily flight school, which started at 7 a.m. until limited daylight pushed the start time up to 8 a.m. in November. An article in the detachment's newspaper, *Prop Wash*, told the cadets what to expect at the airport. "On your first day," it informed them, "you will meet your instructor and familiarize yourself with your plane . . . your second day at the airport will be spent flying." It also notified the trainees that the

23. *Ibid.*, 20 Dec. 1943.

“instructor will do most of the flying” during their first flight, but they would have the chance to “get the feel of the ship and do a few 90 degree turns.” Despite the excitement of getting into the air, the newspaper stressed that ground school was where the future pilots would learn vital principles about turning, stalling, going into and coming out of spins, and, more specifically, making S turns and rectangular courses.²⁴ In December 1943, a national directive revised the flight curriculum and the cadets would spend 50 percent of their course time learning about takeoffs and landings.²⁵

Over three weeks during their five months with the unit, each cadet spent ten hours in the air with a civilian instructor in a small single-engine aircraft that resembled an Aeronca and Piper model crop duster. Clyde Ice contributed to this instruction, teaching the Controlled Indoctrination Flight Course.²⁶ Ice was well-respected among

24. Ibid., 24 Jan. 1943.

25. *History of 93rd Army Air Forces College Training Detachment*, p. 62.

26. Ibid., pp. 59–64.



Flight training on airplanes, like the small, single-engine aircraft pictured here at Black Hills Airport, was an important part of the cadets’ program.

civilian and military aviators nationally. He rubbed shoulders with Army Air Forces general James (“Jimmy”) Doolittle and Henry Ford, who was pioneering mechanical innovations and commercial applications for aircraft. The cadets had probably come across press accounts of Ice flying into stormy conditions across South Dakota and Wyoming ranch country, rescuing ill or injured people when roads were impassible.²⁷ The army considered flight instruction with Ice a remarkable success. Ice and his crew maintained the model care and upkeep of the government’s airplanes. The Ninety-Third’s final report noted that Ice presented “a vivid picture that can be added to the pages of Army Air Forces history in the training of airmen.”²⁸

Part of that success came about due to an impressive safety record. In 7,600 flight hours, the detachment recorded no fatalities or serious injuries. The most serious in-flight incident for the unit happened in May 1943 when instructor Alfred Kroger and cadet Earle Karlson crashed east of the airport near Whitewood. The two men were practicing forced landings with Kroger at the controls. At one point, Kroger brought the aircraft down too low and collided with a fence running along a highway. The airplane bounded across the road and hit another fence on the opposite side before coming to rest in a wheat field. Kroger escaped with only cuts and bruises and Karlson walked away uninjured. Damage to the airplane, however, was extensive, including a broken propeller, bent wings, and destroyed landing gear.²⁹

Ice selected nine civilian pilots from Spearfish to work with the cadets. Each pilot mentored eight cadets at a time. It seems that these flight instructors avoided a common issue at other sites. In some areas, local draft boards were confused by nonenlisted men claiming that they were already contracted with the government to provide vital military service.³⁰ Army leadership did, however, complain about how some of the free-spirited civilian instructors paid little attention to military decorum.³¹

27. *Spearfish Queen City Mail*, 9 Mar. 1944.

28. *History of 93rd Army Air Forces College Training Detachment*, p. 64.

29. *Rapid City Daily Journal*, 20 May 1943

30. *Spearfish Queen City Mail*, 4 Nov. 1943.

31. *Bimonthly History (1 Mar. to 30 Apr. 1944) of 93rd Army Air Forces College Training Detachment*, p. 62.



Crashes like this one from May 1943 were extremely rare for the cadet training program, as head instructor Clyde Ice achieved a nearly flawless safety record.

Despite being called “future airmen” in the Spearfish newspapers, the cadets knew that this status was not guaranteed. Numerous factors resulted in trainees “washing out,” including when any potential pilot experienced air sickness while flying. Cadets who failed the college training program could still serve in air combat by enlisting as gunners, a position that rarely included officers.

The campus culture, meanwhile, felt completely different for the college’s several dozen traditional students, despite assurances that their education would not be interrupted. One report in the student newspaper light-heartedly commented on the noticeable Chicago accents of

many of the first two hundred cadets that arrived in 1943. “Say! Common, ordinary B.H.T.C. in plain clothes isn’t that anymore,” the writer commented. Joking that the school “should change the name or leastwise, add another name or two,” the author suggested, “Couldn’t we christen it ‘Little Chicago?’”³² This image of young men coming from Chicago for training with the detachment persisted, even though cadets in succeeding classes called many other places in the United States home. Additionally, not all were so young. Some, in fact, had seen combat already, but requested a transfer to air training after their first tour of duty.

Although civilian and army students rarely attended the same classes, they interacted with the same faculty members. The army’s academic expectations for the college training detachments reflected a belief that traditional liberal arts coursework would yield both technical

32. *Black Hills Teachers College Anemone*, 19 Mar. 1943.



The cadets attended classes taught by BHTC instructors, as this photograph shows. The curriculum, which aimed to produce well-rounded officers, included courses in a variety of subjects.

knowledge and mindful leadership. An army directive also suggested the best way to educate their trainees. “The lecture notebook method of classroom procedure is recommended,” it read, further supporting the use of “any reputable text being used for reference.” It also required the classroom instructors to submit their lessons to the detachment commanders “not for approval but to facilitate supervision.” At BHTC, professors held degrees from universities in South Dakota, Nebraska, and Colorado, as well as Columbia University, the University of Chicago, and the University of Michigan.³³

The professors recognized that, no matter the subject, their courses should prepare the cadets for combat beyond their leadership roles. Indeed, the chair of the history department, Fred Guenther, observed, “For many of the boys the program has served as a shock absorber between civilian and army life. This psychological phase of army life is frequently overlooked.” Guenther worked to ease that transition. Although he assigned two general texts for the classes, *Survey of European Civilization, Vol. II* and *World Since 1914*, he also employed current issues of *Time* magazine so the students could relate current events to historical antecedents. Later in the program, Guenther increased the emphasis on American history and introduced a new text titled *School of the Citizen Soldier*.³⁴

Likely no other faculty member better understood the psychological effects of warfare better than English instructor Grace Balloch. A Pennsylvania native, Balloch started her teaching career in Washington, D.C., before moving west to Chicago. Astonishingly, at the age of forty, she shipped out to France during World War I to run an American YMCA canteen near the front lines. She counseled the U.S. soldiers, fed them, discussed religion with them when trauma shook their faith, and, above all, made certain they wrote home regularly.³⁵ After the armistice on 11 November 1918, Balloch supported her husband as he struggled with the aftereffects of gas poisoning from the conflict, which eventually killed him. Balloch herself died in 1944, having never recorded her thoughts about instruction for the Ninety-Third. Yet she

33. *History of 93rd Army Air Forces College Training Detachment*, p. 31.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 41.

35. Grace Balloch's personal papers recounting her World War I service are housed at Spearfish's public library, known as the Grace Balloch Memorial Library.

presumably contributed to the three goals that the department's chair, T. E. Terrill, listed. The courses should teach the cadets "effective reading, good straight-forward writing, and capable (not necessarily eloquent) public speaking."³⁶ Balloch had also been a driving force behind an effort to build a new library in Spearfish. As a result, the town would name the Grace Balloch Memorial Library in her honor.

The school's department of speech, while seemingly unrelated to the cadets' military future, helped them develop useful skills. The department's director, Lavina Humbert, was known on campus and in the community chiefly for her theatrical productions and pointed to how theater arts could contribute to army training. "The attainment of military bearing," she asserted, "has been accompanied by marked evidence of physical and mental poise," two skills the cadets could gain through performance.³⁷

Mathematics and science courses had more direct applications for the detachment cadets. Longtime BHTC professor Evelyn Hesseltine directed six faculty members, including the college's recently retired president, E. C. Woodburn, in the school's mathematics department. Hesseltine possessed a strong background in mathematics related to aviation. She previously taught ground school courses for the college's civilian pilot training program. For the detachment, she selected texts ranging from W. W. Hart's *Basic Mathematics* to A. H. Sprague's *Essentials of Plane and Spherical Trigonometry* and told her staff to prepare drill sheets. Hesseltine praised the work of the detachment program in two ways. She appreciated that the program helped older soldiers who had been out of school for years get reaccustomed "to schoolroom procedures" and allowed recently graduated young men to become accustomed with "military procedures."³⁸

M. G. Richmond, a professor of physics, led classes that emphasized concepts behind mechanics, heat, sound, light, magnetism, and electricity. This area of study proved difficult for many cadets. Most of the trainees, according to the detachment's official history, lacked "previous preparation . . . for the work of collegiate level in the field of Physics." Richmond and his four other instructors hoped their cours-

36. *History of the 93rd Army Air Forces College Training Detachment*, p. 35.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32, 40.

es would “enable the more capable student to secure a more thorough mastery of the details than is possible for all members of the class.”³⁹

The school focused on providing trainees as many practical skills as possible that they could carry into the field. From the start, the geography department worked to lay the foundations for aerial navigation, meteorology, and understanding the “economic, cultural, and geographical relationships” between nations and people, especially the belligerent nations in World War II. Its chair, M. Haslem, however, struggled to obtain relevant maps and charts for instruction. He initially duplicated materials from War Department manuals using a mimeograph machine, a precursor to modern copy machines. A year into the program, the army shipped a new collection of maps and charts to the detachment that helped immensely.⁴⁰ Additionally, American Red Cross certified instructors Doris Gooder, F. L. Bennett, and Guy Jacobs led medical aid classes. They taught the cadets proper techniques for bandaging, applying tourniquet pressure to reduce bleeding, and treating fractures. They also emphasized techniques to improvise these treatments, such as employing shirts for bandages and guns or tree limbs for splints, under combat conditions.⁴¹

Several of these professors found their classroom interactions with the cadets stimulating. The men came with worldviews and life experiences seldom heard in classrooms around rural South Dakota. “I, personally, would not have missed participation,” wrote T. E. Terrill, a World War I veteran. While teaching the trainees, Terrill felt he had “the same exhilarating contacts” with men of “all races and from every section of the country,” as when he was a soldier.⁴²

Physical conditioning and military training remained central to the detachment’s program. Though the army considered physical fitness separate from academics, a BHTC faculty member led the training regimen. Ted Birkeland, an economics instructor and the director of the school’s physical education department, was the school’s football, basketball, and track coach. As Birkeland was the sole staff member for physical education, Lewis assigned two soldiers from the perma-

39. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 36–37.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

nent cadre to assist him. Physical conditioning aimed to harden the cadets' muscles, improve their motor skills, and sharpen their mental alertness. Six days a week for twenty weeks, the trainees ran and performed calisthenics for an hour. The program also required the cadets, both those who could and could not swim, to take swimming lessons at an indoor pool in the college's Cook Gymnasium.⁴³ This physical fitness program naturally led to athletic competitions among the entire detachment, including officers and members of the permanent cadre, which also became a popular replacement for BHTC varsity sports. Intramural basketball teams took to the Cook floor on Saturdays. One of the Ninety-Third's intramural softball teams, with Lieutenant King acting as its player-manager, even won the 1943 state championship.⁴⁴

The military training program had multiple goals in mind for the cadets. According to the detachment's official report, the training intended "to produce individuals, teams, crews or armies for combat—men who can meet and beat the enemy, wherever he may be met in battle."⁴⁵ Although entirely the army's domain, the college and its faculty supported the military training routine. Indeed, Fred Guenther articulated the need for this indoctrination. Of army life, Guenther wrote, "In Europe the child is born into it. In the United States the youth have been born away from Army life and this is a fact that we must recognize."⁴⁶ With Lieutenants Gerlach and Lee at the helm, the unit's military training emphasized skills related to precision and drilling. Even though this program employed drills associated with infantry units rather than potential airmen, army leadership believed the snap and precision that infantry drills instilled in the cadets would translate to their experiences in the sky.⁴⁷ Gerlach and Lee made do with the limited space the campus had to offer—its football field and a nearby open lot of about the same size. Cold weather in March 1943 made drills next to impossible, posing an even greater challenge. On wet or extremely cold days, cadets retreated indoors for lectures and film strips, which

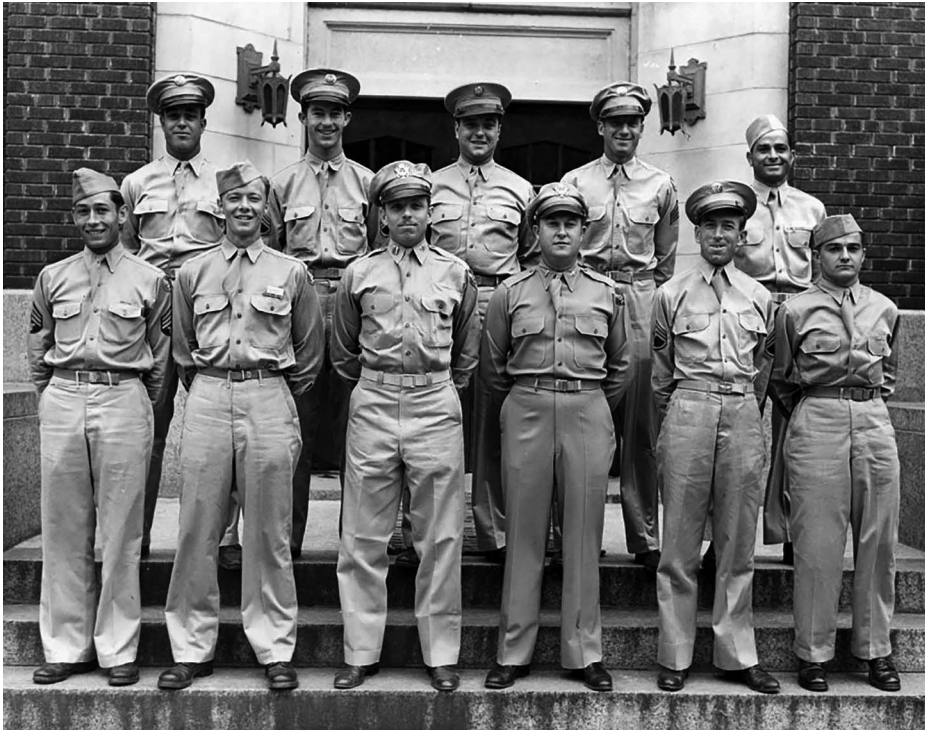
43. Ibid, pp. 53–58.

44. *Spearfish Queen City Mail*, 2 Sept. 1943.

45. *History of the 93rd Army Air Forces College Training Detachment*, p. 45.

46. Ibid., p. 41.

47. Bruce Ashcroft, *We Wanted Wings: A History of the Aviation Cadet Program* (Randolph Air Force Base, Tex.: AETC, Office of History and Research, 2005), p. 27.



Cadets engaged in sports and athletic competitions in their free time. The Ninety-Third's intramural softball team, pictured here, won the 1943 state championship.

covered topics including courtesies and customs of the army, conduct in public, discipline, leadership, Articles of War, and general hygiene and sanitation, among others.⁴⁸

Eventually, army leaders hoped the training would “diminish individual differences,” while giving them the chance to identify potential leaders and allowing the trainees to develop characteristics appropriate for commissioned officers. The Ninety-Third's commanders organized the cadets into squadrons of one hundred men each. The units included drum and bugle corps that greatly enhanced drill precision and later obtained guidons that featured both national and detachment colors, adding to the appearance of squadrons, which “facilitated military training.” Around the same time, the commander implemented

48. *History of the 93rd Army Air Forces College Training Detachment*, pp. 48–49.

an interview process to select student officers and noncommissioned officers to lead the squadrons, permanent positions for those chosen unless they proved unfit. Aware that this permanency deprived other cadets of responsibility, the leaders created a system of rotating commanders for drills and retreat parades, giving each cadet an opportunity to lead others. To help maintain discipline, they also constructed a demerit system that punished the cadets for any rule infractions, with tardiness the most common offense. For those cadets who received an excessive number of demerits over the course of a week, they lost the opportunity to take part in Open Post, a free pass to go off campus and explore the area.⁴⁹

49. Ibid., pp. 46–52.



This aerial view showcases Spearfish's Main Street, which was a popular gathering spot for locals and cadets alike.

Determined to support their martial visitors, the residents of Spearfish tried to provide comforts for the young trainees, who became quite familiar with the proprietors along Main Street. The people of Spearfish secured room in the town's spacious Matthews building on Main Street to create a weekend recreation center. The cadets who spent time there regularly visited photographer Josef Fassbender, who owned the nearby Black Hills Studio. Fassbender had emigrated to the United States from Germany shortly before World War I. After moving to South Dakota, he took photographs of reservation life, local rodeos, towns, landscapes, and even Mount Rushmore's construction. President Franklin D. Roosevelt so admired one of Fassbender's pictures of the George Washington bust in its early form that he had it framed for the White House. With the detachment's arrival in 1943, Fassbender became the unit's unofficial photographer, documenting everything from routine marching drills to the aftermath of the airplane crash involving Kroger and Karlson. At times, Fassbender joined an instructor and cadet for their training flights and captured many aerial views of the airport runways, Spearfish streets, and BHTC campus. When an officer or cadet appeared in a Fassbender photo, he would often offer them a print for free. Cadets developed great affection for the photographer, feeling free to call him Joe and even teasing him at times.⁵⁰ In one issue of *Prop Wash*, for instance, the cadets published one of his pictures of the trainees doing calisthenics in unison with a caption reading, "We can vouch right now, fellows, that picture was posed—just show us a squadron that can look that beautifully coordinated in an exercise when their [sic] grunting, groaning and grumbling. It just isn't done that's all."⁵¹

For some of the cadets, working on projects like *Prop Wash* reminded them of their collegiate experience before entering the service. For others, everything on campus felt new, part of a college adventure they never expected to have due to their family background or limited finances. With the federal government funding their tuition, many cadets jumped into extracurricular activities, including theater and music performances, intramural athletics, and community service opportunities. On 18 June 1943, cadets Lewis Harrison, George Kaub, and Harry

50. *Prop Wash*, 4 Mar. 1944; interview with Betty Fassbender Johnson, 8 Jan. 2013.

51. *Prop Wash*, 4 Mar. 1944.



Cadets worked together on the detachment's newspaper, *Prop Wash*. Participating in extracurricular activities helped give the cadets a full college experience.

Fey staged what the *Queen City Mail* called, “two old time melodramas guaranteed to evoke hisses for the villain and cheers for the hero.” The performance was open to the public in Spearfish as well as “anyone else in South Dakota or Wyoming who wants to be entertained.”⁵² The trainees offered barbershop quartet vocals between the one-act plays. To do so, they requested the public’s help in securing a barber’s chair and two hard-to-find costume pieces, “a red calico Mother Hubbard dress of generous proportions and a pair of ordinary garden variety civilian pants.” Fey, in authoring this request, noted, “Trousers of that type are scarcer than hen’s teeth at the BHTC barracks.”⁵³ That winter, Lavina Humbert invited the trainees to audition for a popular Christmas play, *Eager Heart*, which had been performed on campus in the previous years. She ended up casting twelve servicemen.⁵⁴

52. *Spearfish Queen City Mail*, 20 May 1943.

53. *Ibid.*, 10 June 1943.

54. *Prop Wash*, 20 Dec. 1943.

The detachment had its own dance orchestra as well. Known as the Jive Bombers, the group won wide attention in Spearfish and the surrounding area. The jazzy outfit formed in early fall 1943, performed at a few detachment dances and assemblies, and then had its public debut at the BHTC homecoming, known as “Swarm Day,” that October. Most of the musicians had previously performed in either college orchestras or professional combos. The *Queen City Mail* reported that the orchestra’s leader, vocalist Charles Kaufman, had “done a great deal of broadcasting over New York stations.” More notably, John Bufano, the group’s pianist, had “played with Tommy Dorsey and . . . accompanied Frank Sinatra.” The outlet reported, “Bufano has made an outstanding musical reputation for himself during the few weeks he has been in Spearfish.”⁵⁵ Trumpeter Bill Dawkins, who was known “of Reveille ill-fame” according to one *Prop Wash* writer, had played professionally for eight years, most significantly with a group in Kansas City. In complimenting the group, the *Prop Wash* reporter argued that “the boys have done more to show a display of mass good morale than anything I have seen since coming to this organization,” something that would lead to “the success of any program.”⁵⁶

The entrance of the United States into World War II halted all varsity sports at BHTC, including Birkeland’s Yellow Jacket football squad. The detachment’s intramural sports filled this void. According to Jonas, these tournaments “were free to the public and were well patronized. There were many athletic stars among the cadets.”⁵⁷ Basketball, volleyball, bowling, softball, and tennis were quite popular and the team

55. *Spearfish Queen City Mail*, 10 Oct. 1943.

56. *Prop Wash*, 25 Oct. 1943. Strangely, of all the army musicians stationed in the Black Hills during World War II, Private Dale Maple of Fort Meade’s 620th Engineers rose to national fame—or more accurately, infamy. Maple, a former child piano prodigy from California, sometimes rented a Spearfish Canyon cabin for parties and entertained in Deadwood’s bars. The army and his comrades in the 620th, however, considered him a likely enemy sympathizer. That suspicion proved true after the unit was transferred to Colorado. In Feb. 1944, Maple drove two German POWs from a camp there to Mexico. The trio was captured and Maple initially received a death sentence, which was later commuted. Interview with Dale Maple, 28 Aug. 2000; E.J. Kahn, “Annals of Crime, The Philologist,” *New Yorker*, 18 Mar. 1950, pp. 4, 11.

57. Black Hills Teachers College, *Spearfish, South Dakota: The Year 1943–1944 in Pictures* (Spearfish, 1944).

names, such as the Tracers, Gunners, B-17s, Roscoe's Rockets, Superchargers, and Magnetos, reflected the wartime spirit of the moment. In the absence of Yellow Jacket football in 1943, the army organized a homecoming parade through town in conjunction with a Spearfish High School football game against Custer High School.⁵⁸

Locals praised the festivities that the detachment put together. "The Swarm day [homecoming] parade," reported the *Queen City Mail*, "noted for years as the most beautiful parade of South Dakota events, will be minus the gayety and color of floats and the Swarm day queen coronation ceremony this year." Instead, the outlet noted, attendees would see "an inspiring military parade . . . presented by the aviation students featuring music by the CTD and Spearfish High School musical organizations."⁵⁹ The larger *Rapid City Journal* gave its approval to the detachment's efforts. "'Joe College' gave way to 'Private Jones,'" one reporter recorded. They believed that the celebration "showed that the military can create as good a program and manifest as much enthusiasm as his peace-time brother," noting that "the day's activities attracted an average large crowd." To top off the celebration, Spearfish defeated Custer on the football field as well.⁶⁰

The homecoming parade was just the first instance of the detachment contributing to public events in Spearfish. Nineteen days later, on 11 November, in a more somber spirit, the Ninety-Third led the town's Armistice Day (now known as Veterans Day) observances. The program began in the College Hall auditorium late that morning. It started with the BHTC choir performing "Hymn to Night" and "Oh, Prayer of Peace" and then Jonas provided short remarks. At eleven o'clock in the morning, those in attendance observed a moment of silence, followed by the playing of "Taps," and then the dedication of a BHTC service flag. The flag bore 251 blue stars, one for each BHTC graduate and former student serving in the military. Four gold stars represented the men killed in the current war: Allen Beardshear, Phillip Cottrell, Jess Hendrickson, and Ralph Lothrop. After a trainee read these names, two Ninety-Third cadets standing at either side of the auditorium said, "They died in the

58. *Spearfish Queen City Mail*, 14 Oct. 1943.

59. *Ibid.*, 21 Oct. 1943.

60. *Rapid City Daily Journal*, 25 Oct. 1943.



The Ninety-Third led a Memorial Day parade through town in May 1943. The cadets played a significant role in many local events and celebrations during their time in Spearfish.

service of their country, Sir.” The assembly then moved outside where the service flag was hoisted up a flagpole in front of the hall.⁶¹

The people of Spearfish not only adapted to having the cadets in their community, but, in many ways, adopted them as well. While speaking on behalf of “the aviation students who are now stationed at BHTC,” Cadet J. J. Neukomm wrote, “We are away from home but we have found here people whom we could call Mom and Pop.”⁶² Not surprisingly, romances blossomed between some of the trainees and young Spearfish women. These relationships led to a handful of marriages, including Neil King’s.

61. *Ibid.*, 11 Nov. 1943.

62. *Spearfish Queen City Mail*, 15 July 1943.

As the cadets became more comfortable, many Spearfish residents heard stories from those who had already served in the war before entering airmen training. Texan William Hillman, for example, described living through an eight-day battle in New Guinea in late 1942, claiming it as the moment when his hair started prematurely turning gray at the age of twenty-four. While fighting in mud and constant rain, he recalled the feeling of lying in a “trench or fox hole” while watching Japanese forces “drop bombs on you and there isn’t a thing you can do but take it.”⁶³

The college helped strengthen the relationship between the cadets and the community as well. In December 1943, BHTC formed a committee to ensure that all of the trainees would be invited to share Christmas dinner with a local family. “Many of the men stationed here will be spending their first Christmas away from home,” Jonas told the *Queen City Mail*, “and others have not been home for Christmas for several years.”⁶⁴ Spearfish and Lead responded with such enthusiasm that, come Christmas Day, there were not enough cadets to accept all the invitations.⁶⁵

By early 1944, army leaders, cadets, and Spearfish residents could start thinking about what would happen when the detachment closed. Allied military success in both Europe and the Pacific made it possible for Americans to consider what Jonas termed, “a future currently known as the post-war period.” Though certainly months or even years away, Jonas was thinking of that period when addressing a class of graduating cadets in February. “I have been disturbed about one phase of this academic program,” he explained. “It has been our instructions to teach you certain facts—many of them. We have not been told to make you think. We have not had time to encourage democratic debate.” Jonas’s statement made clear that he feared the program did not prepare the trainees for being civilians, an experience, he claimed, that “the majority of you will live . . . much longer than you will as G.I. Joes.”⁶⁶

Although the cadets and civilian instructors could begin looking to a time after the war, army leadership focused on ensuring the quality

63. *Ibid.*, 19 Aug. 1943.

64. *Ibid.*, 2 Dec. 1943.

65. *Ibid.*, 23 Dec. 1943.

66. Black Hills Teachers College, *Eociha* (Spearfish, 1967), pp. 39–40.

of training at the detachment. Their evaluations pointed to a possible ongoing problem with civilians influencing the trainees. On 29 February and 1 March 1944, four Army Air Forces officers conducted an annual general inspection of the detachment. They reviewed the unit's administration and its instruction in academics, flying, military, and physical training. The officers did not find any discrepancies in the detachment's administration and academic instruction. Despite rating the military and flying training as excellent, they recommended placing "greater emphasis . . . on military indoctrination, particularly that dealing with the honor code." They praised "the cooperation between civilian and military personnel at this station," but believed that civilian flight instructors should take part in "an indoctrination course in the military customs and courtesies of the service."⁶⁷

With the war going well for the United States, the Army Air Forces began winding down the college training detachment programs. From Washington, D.C., Army Air Forces general Henry H. ("Hap") Arnold sent a communique to the Ninety-Third informing the commanders that the unit would disband after the current class of 240 students graduated that month. Any potential airmen deemed qualified for pre-flight school but who had not yet enrolled would return to the ground and service units from which they came. That move, Arnold wrote, was "necessary as the result of a critical need for young vigorous and well-trained men with leadership qualifications to meet the urgent need of the Ground and Service Forces." He expressed regret for having to "drop from the AAF team these spirited young men who have aspired to join the combat crews which are gaining our superiority in the air in every theater of warfare." Yet, he concluded, it was the Army Air Force's success that made this "shift of fighting power wise and proper."

For those affected, Arnold ordered commanding officers to hand them "a copy of this message explaining the reasons." He believed that, after reading his explanation, "these fine American soldiers who want to do the greatest possible damage to the enemy will prefer the opportunity for an earlier engagement to the alternative of waiting for training with the AAF at some later date." In their records, these cadets were

67. *Bi-Monthly History* (1 Mar. 1944 to 30 Apr. 1944) of 93rd Army Air Forces Training Detachment, pp. 8–10.

listed as “accepted for Aircrew Tng, [but] relieved without prejudice for the convenience of the Government.”⁶⁸

Due to this development, the detachment saw quick leadership change. Participation in the general inspection was among Lewis’s last activities in Spearfish. Only days after the inspection, he received a transfer to a station in Douglas, Arizona. King assumed command but knew his tenure would be brief.⁶⁹

Initially, the detachment’s remaining officers and the college’s administrators believed that all of the men would transfer out on 1 April. In fact, they left gradually, and some continued their academic studies until mid-May, but the situation created noticeable changes. “A sharp deterioration in the quality of the academic work followed the announcement of men to other branches of the service,” King reported. He observed “a lack of enthusiasm that had marked the earlier part of the program.” Still, he mentioned that the professors attempted to maintain a “high standard of achievement” and that a number of the remaining trainees “recognized the value of the academic training,” despite losing out on the flight training.⁷⁰ During those final weeks, the army renamed the unit, calling it the 3054th Army Air Forces Base Unit.⁷¹ By June, all the soldiers were gone.

The next fall, BHTC welcomed seventy-five civilian students back to campus. Before Christmas in 1944, Jonas offered a positive assessment of the school and Spearfish. He wrote, “The war, we must confess, has not hit us too hard.” Even with rationing during the conflict, he commented, “I haven’t seen a hungry face, nor a shabby coat for some time.” Some residents, however, had felt the full effect of the war. “We do see tired faces and worried eyes and know that our neighbors and friends are carrying burdens heavier than many physical discomforts,” Jonas noted.⁷² No evidence suggests that the president tried to build enrollment back up in the war’s final year. Rather, it seems he employed a frugal approach while awaiting better days.⁷³

68. *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

69. *Ibid.*, pp. 1–3.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

72. Black Hills Teachers College, *Eochia* (Spearfish, 1967), p. 41.

73. *Spearfish Queen City Mail*, 6 Jan. 1972.

After the war's end in 1945, the officers and enlisted men from the Ninety-Third began building their postwar lives. Homer Lewis remained in the newly formed U.S. Air Force until retiring in 1975 as a major general. He eventually returned to work on his Texas ranch thirty years after the war. Neil King would remain connected to Spearfish for the rest of his life. Before heading overseas to serve in New Guinea and the Philippines, he married Joan Sunderland, the daughter of meat market proprietor John Sunderland, whose shop was a Main Street staple. After the war, Neil and Joan lived in Denver, where he resumed his banking career.⁷⁴

To rebound from the drop in students after the detachment's departure, Jonas moved aggressively to grow BHTC through new curricula, stronger teacher preparation, and campus expansion. Jonas's decision to have faculty travel to teach "extension classes" in outlying communities, including at Ellsworth Air Force Base, also aided in the college's growth. Jonas, who served as president until 1967, died in 1971.⁷⁵ BHTC continued to grow, eventually being renamed Black Hills State University in 1989 to reflect its broader approach to education. Today, the school has an enrollment of approximately 3,600 students.

While the people connected to the Ninety-Third moved on, the time between February 1943 and June 1944 reflected the transformation of local communities in South Dakota. During the conflict, Americans everywhere played a role in supporting the war effort. Spearfish, however, saw an even more direct connection. While BHTC hosted the detachment, the community embraced the young servicemen and attempted to make their time comfortable. In the other direction, the potential airmen filled the void that nonmilitary students left behind. This mutual relationship influenced the World War II experiences of both the cadets of the Ninety-Third and the residents of Spearfish.

74. Information on the postwar lives of Lewis and King comes from Terry King's personal contacts. He spoke to Homer Lewis, his father's former commander.

75. *Spearfish Queen City Mail*, 6 Jan. 1972.

Picture credits: All illustrations in this issue are property of the South Dakota State Historical Society except for those on the following pages: pp. 202, 203, 205, 207, 210, 212, 213, 214, 216, 219, 221, University of Sioux Falls Archives; pp. 230, 232, 237, 239, 240, 242, 243, 248, 249, 251, 254, Neil Lyon King & Joan Sunderland King Collection, Leland D. Case Library for Western Historical Studies, Black Hills State University; pp. 271, 274, 276, 277, 279, 281, 284, 294, 299, 302, Library of Congress; pp. 290, 291, 293, Rose Lane Wilder Collection, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library; p. 305, *San Francisco Bulletin*; p. 319, Robert L. Slagle Collections, University Libraries, Archives and Special Collections, University of South Dakota.

On the cover: Based out of Black Hills Teachers College (now Black Hills State University) in Spearfish, the cadets of the Ninety-Third U.S. Army Air Forces College Training Detachment learned to fly using the single-engine aircrafts seen in this photograph taken at Black Hills Airport during the 1943–1944 school year.

Copyright of South Dakota History is the property of South Dakota State Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.