

Too young to enlist in the military, 20,000 of America's World War II-era youth welcomed the establishment of Civil Air Patrol's cadet program in 1942 as an outlet for their patriotic fervor. Here, at least, was a way those as young as their early teens could support the war effort. By the next year, their numbers had swollen to 75,000 in 1,000 communities scattered across the nation.

Initially emphasizing recruitment for the U.S. Army Air Forces, CAP's cadet program began in Minnesota with rather stringent rules to keep down participation while it was still being established. Cadet candidates were required to be physically fit, to have completed the first two years of high school with satisfactory grades and to be native-born Americans with parents who had been U.S. citizens at least 10 years.

Though wartime cadets regularly drilled for emergencies, studying — including learning about flying — was a major part of the cadet program. After President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered CAP to become an Army Air Forces auxiliary with the cadet program as one of its primary missions in the spring of 1943, the Army loaned CAP almost 300 Piper Cubs for use in aviation cadet recruiting. By the end of 1944 CAP had helped create an oversupply of Army aviation candidates. CAP had not only helped sell the government on the importance of air superiority but had also delivered trained young people to carry that vision forward.

Fourth installment in a four-part series

The Way We Were

CAP's cadet program harnesses the energy, patriotism of America's youth during World War II

By Kristi Carr

Thomas J. O'Connor

Growing up in Minnesota, Thomas O'Connor got in on the ground floor of CAP's cadet program; he was CAP's 38th cadet, a fact he said he has cherished over the years. He was part of the Minnesota Wing's Robbinsdale Squadron 711-4, which was actually formed a few months in advance of CAP National Headquarters' approval of the cadet units.

After training in leadership and military protocol, O'Connor said the cadets were allowed to buy uniforms, which consisted of a khaki shirt and pants, black tie, khaki belt and red strips denoting rank — similar to what was worn by the Civil Defense, which initially oversaw the CAP program. After CAP became the official U.S. Army Air Forces auxiliary, the red strips were replaced with various colored ones and the ties changed to khaki.

"Senior members trained us to navigate by land with a compass and maps, followed by training in radio communications and Morse code," O'Connor recalled. "We also had courses in basic first aid and survival, plus classes that covered administration, flight line operations and refueling services, always with an emphasis on safety."

O'Connor served as assistant cadet commander of the very first cadet encampment held at Truax Field in Madison, Wis., which attracted 150 cadets. He continued up the chain of command as he moved from cadet to officer. After serving with the military on the East Coast, he returned to Minnesota in 1947 where he maintained his involvement with the CAP cadet program as a senior member adviser.



One of CAP's first handful of cadets, Thomas O'Connor, sports the black tie that was part of the first CAP cadet uniform.

Still active in CAP, he has commanded three different squadrons, been a Minnesota Wing group commander and served in various wing-level positions and on the staff of CAP's North Central Region. Instrumental in establishing CAP's Cadet Advisory Council, O'Connor said he "hopes in the years to come to continue improving the capabilities of the organization."

Robert Haver

Robert Haver lost no time in joining CAP as soon as he turned 13 in 1943. Undaunted by logistics that put him 15 miles away from the nearest CAP squadron in Rochester, N.Y., he remembered carrying a kerosene lantern as he walked about a quarter-mile to the highway, where he hitched a ride to Rochester and then caught a bus to Benjamin Franklin High School on the north side of town. And then, of course, there was the return trip.



This 1943 photo shows Robert Haver, right, outfitted as a CAP cadet, with his cousin Paul Kirsch, dressed in the uniform of the U.S. Navy, on the back porch of Haver's Scottsville, N.Y., home.

"We learned how to take apart radial engines and learned flash cards depicting German and Japanese planes," he recalled.

"We had an observation booth equipped with a phone on top of the high school," Haver said, adding that Civil Defense manned the booth and allowed CAP cadets to scan the skies with them. "Can you imagine seeing an enemy plane over central New York?" he mused. "I probably prayed I would see one."

Once Civil Defense personnel realized CAP cadets really knew their planes, they allowed the cadets to man the booth alone at times. "I was so proud of that," he said.

"At my age then, this was all I could do for my country," noted Haver, who still belongs to CAP as a lieutenant colonel in the Georgia Wing.

John G. "Jack" Atherton

John Atherton, who literally grew up in service to CAP, was the rare cadet who saw some real action during World War II.

Joining the CAP squadron in Emporia, Kan., at age 16, Atherton participated in a mock attack that pitted his squadron against the local National Guard unit. The Guardsmen were so quick, CAP members didn't even have time to drop flour bombs on the pretend intruders.

Less than six months later, Atherton was off to a real assignment, refueling planes, driving a fire truck and later serving as an observer at Coastal Patrol Base 10 in Beaumont-Port Arthur, Texas. He and three senior squadron members drove there in a 1941 five-passenger Chevy coupe, seated amid their luggage and three shotguns. The pay — $5 per day — looked good to a teenager. He and his fellow Kansans rented a barn hayloft for lodging and bought meals for about 32 cents each at the airport.

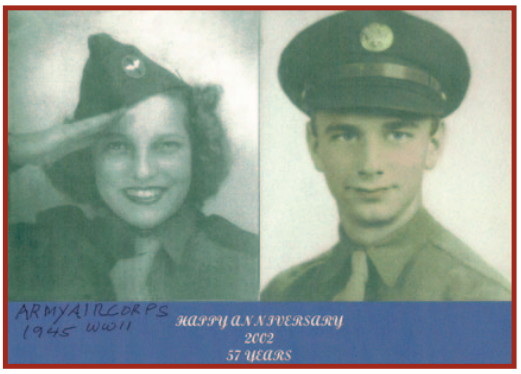
Atherton, who had earlier completed both radio-telegraphy and aircraft spotting exams, eventually got to fly on missions, going aloft in a plane fitted with a 50-pound bomb. He also saw some action on the ground when the coastal patrol base was hit by a hurricane. "We were in water up to our knees on the airstrip trying to hold down the planes which had been tied down," he recalled. "We had little luck, and a number of planes were damaged or destroyed."

After serving CAP for a little over a year, Atherton returned to Emporia to complete his high school education and then enlisted in the U.S. Army.

Thomas and Dorothea Tiemann

For Thomas Tiemann and Dorothea Whitmore, CAP provided the common thread for their romance. Both joined CAP as cadets during the war; he left his senior year of high school in Michigan to join and learn how to fly, while she was prompted to join in Wisconsin because she'd always been drawn to the activity at an airport near her home.

The two didn't cross paths until sometime later. Tom, who had enlisted in the Army Air Forces, was sent for radio training to Madison, Wis., and took a part-time job at a war plant there to help make batteries for backpack radios. Dorothea was his assembly line supervisor. When five of Tom's batteries failed their tests,



Tom and Dorothea Tiemann had their days as CAP cadets in common, though in separate wings, when they met during World War II. His U.S. Air Force photo and her CAP membership photo were reproduced as a memento of their 57th wedding anniversary in 2002.

Dorothea sat him in a chair near her and put him to work cutting silver wire.

They're now living in Kentucky and have been married for 67 years. "We're still trying to figure out who's the boss," he joked.

Russell F. Vizzi

Russell Vizzi was so anxious to be a part of CAP he fudged his age to be able to join Bendix Squadron in Rutherford, N.J., as a cadet in 1942. Decades later, he still remembered his CAP serial number: 221-D-34C.

Vizzi wanted to be a pilot, and CAP provided him with classroom instruction over the next 2½ years. During the summers, he said, the Army picked up the tab for rotating weeks at airfields across New York State. "We felt like we were really in the Army, and it was exhilarating!"

He soloed in 1945 and advanced to be cadet commander of the combined Rutherford and Passaic squadrons. Upon graduating high school at age 17, he presented himself before an Army Air Forces recruiter, who quickly quelled his prospects of becoming a military pilot. Instead he joined the regular Army, where his $75 monthly pay check allowed him to continue his flight instruction. He was discharged before he qualified for the formal check ride and remembers Oct. 24, 1947, as the date of his last flight as a private first class.



"I had concluded a one-hour drill and was 'cooling off' when someone snapped this picture of me as a cadet first sergeant in the New Jersey Wing," wrote Russell Vizzi. More recently, Vizzi pulled duty as an aerial photographer documenting the Gulf oil spill.

After that, both CAP and the military faded into his past as he got a college education, had a family and embarked on a career, which culminated in his serving as director of North Alabama Operations at NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Ala. As a retiree, in 1991 he resumed flight training where he'd left off in 1947 and rejoined CAP as a member of the Florida Wing. He cited as his most notable CAP deployments two stints as a photographer and scanner during CAP's response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010.

Vizzi died last year and was buried in his CAP dress uniform.

Otha H. "Skeet" Vaughan Jr.

Then 15, Skeet Vaughan joined the South Carolina Wing in the summer of 1944. He said his mother drove him to the meetings at an armory in Anderson, where he and the other eight to 10 cadets learned close order military drill and studied aeronautics, including staging a model airplane building contest. Before he graduated from high school, he had soloed in a Piper J-3 Cub at the airport in Seneca.

Vaughan left the Anderson squadron with the rank of cadet master sergeant to participate in the Army ROTC program at Clemson A&M College (now Clemson University), later joining Air Force ROTC once the U.S. Air Force was established in 1947.

"My CAP training proved very helpful," Vaughan said. "By the time I graduated from Clemson, I was an Air Force ROTC Distinguished Military Student and received my second lieutenant's commission." He served as an aircraft maintenance officer and as a member of a jet engine research team at Tinker Field in Oklahoma. After 21 months of active duty, Vaughan entered the Air Force Reserve; he retired from commissioned service

27 years later as a lieutenant colonel.

CAP is still a big part of his life. Since joining the Alabama Wing's Huntsville Senior Squadron in 2005, Vaughn has performed various CAP aerospace duties and served as an aerospace education officer, as a flight crew member and as squadron historian.



A proud cadet, Otha Vaughan Jr. commemorated his first solo flight on April 26, 1946, with this photo of his instructor, Leonard H. Meldeau, and his parents, Ethel and Otha Sr., at a grass strip airfield in Seneca, S.C.

Paul Gilmore

When World War II began, Paul Gilmore was living with his mother in Long Beach, Calif., and had volunteered as a bicycle messenger for the Civil Defense. He then returned to Denver, his birthplace, where he attended West High School and worked in his spare time at the old Higley Field.

At that time, CAP planes were the only ones flying out of that airfield, and Gilmore took an interest in the organization. As a CAP cadet, he soon had his student pilot's license.

Though he remembered that his CAP membership card showed him as a member of the Army, he officially joined the military in June 1945 and was in training when the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan that August, bringing the war to a close.

Gilmore served out his Army commitment and then embarked on a 30-year career with the Denver Fire Department, along with two-year stretches of service with the U.S. Navy Reserve and the Colorado National Guard.

Though his CAP membership lapsed after his days as a cadet, he rejoined CAP as an officer in the 76th Squadron, which later disbanded, in Aurora, Colo., in the early 1990s. He initially served as an observer and scanner.

His CAP cadet days came full circle recently when he helped the Valkyrie Cadet Squadron find a meeting place at Denver's Wings Over the Rockies Air & Space Museum, where he was volunteering. A mentor to these modern-day cadets, he meets with them every Tuesday night.

Then and now

The modern CAP cadet program welcomes members as young as 12 and extends cadet membership to age 21, when cadets can become officers. Cadet membership now exceeds 26,000 in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and the District of Columbia.

Though still adhering to a military structure, the CAP cadet program no longer recruits for the military. Its programs, however, continue to teach life skills, offer numerous avenues for aeronautics education and produce America's leaders for tomorrow. ▲



Now a CAP major, Paul Gilmore was a fresh-faced cadet, far left in back row, when this photo was taken during a cadet encampment in 1944 at Lowry Field, later Lowry Air Force Base, Colo., until closing in 1994.