

Anchors aweigh at Ambrose

By John Willard / QUAD-CITY TIMES

With its Victorian and Gothic buildings sheltered by ancient oaks, St. Ambrose University hardly looks like a place of military training.

During World War II, though, the tranquil campus on Davenport's West Locust Street was an officer candidate school for hundreds of sailors. They were students in the U.S. Navy's V-12 program, which produced 60,000 Navy and Marine Corps officers at 131 American colleges and universities.

With the movie "Pearl Harbor" playing in the Quad-Cities and all the interest in World War II that the film has sparked, now is a good time to march back to the university's days as the "U.S.S. Ambrose."

They were exciting times at St. Ambrose. Davis and Ambrose Halls became barracks for boys in blue, and the quadrangle became their drill field. Under the tutelage of college faculty and Navy personnel, the cadets took courses ranging from trigonometry to naval history. In the gymnasium's pool, they practiced swimming.

They also marched at nearby Vander Veer Park and other places around the neighborhood, published their own mimeographed weekly known as the Sea Breez and jitterbugged at dances hosted by the Davenport USO.

A total of 767 sailors went through St. Ambrose's V-12 program from July 1943 until it ended in October 1945.

The V-12 program was an economic blessing at a time when St. Ambrose was facing an enrollment crisis. Despite efforts to increase course offerings and extend the academic year, the then all-male college had lost its pool of potential students to the draft.

Monsignor Thomas B. Lawler, the college's business manager, went on the attack. In 1942, he spent two weeks in Washington, D.C., urging senators, congressmen and military officials to consider St. Ambrose as site for military training. Pressed with a need for officers

to lead their burgeoning ranks, both the Army and Navy had turned to colleges and universities for help.

In late April 1942, St. Ambrose announced it would offer Navy officer training under the V-12 program. To make room for the V-12 cadets, St. Ambrose moved faculty and civilian students out of Davis and Ambrose halls. The college also had 60 trainees in the Navy's V-5 aviation cadet program when the V-12s arrived.

The Quad-Cities welcomed the officer candidates with open arms, writes James G. Schneider in his 1987 book, "The Navy V-12 Program: Leadership for a Lifetime."

Open houses, parties, and concerts were hosted by the American Legion and Masonic lodges. The cadets also got free alterations and repairs to their uniforms, thanks to the ladies of Davenport's First Presbyterian Church, he writes.

Old issues of the *Sea Breez*, on file in the special collections department at St. Ambrose's O'Keefe Library, offer colorful glimpses into cadet life.

A gossip column in the first issue, published Sept. 9, 1943, offers this gem: "And 'tis a well known fact that Robert "Oh Oh" Johns spends his best hours worrying about the girl friend being thrown in the brig. Me thinks that she's an ensign in the Navy Nurse Corps."

From the same issue: "Have you heard: that a trainee in Davis Hall kisses Betty Grable's picture goodnight just before he goes to bed, maybe he doesn't know that she's Mrs. Harry James."

Simple pleasures were important. One news item in the premier issue of the *Sea Breez* reported that three new Coke machines were installed in the recreation department by the Quad-Cities Coca-Cola Bottling Co. of Rock Island. Hours after it was installed, one machine dispensed 94 Cokes.

The future officers attended the V-12 program for a year and then went on to midshipman's school and advanced training before they shipped out overseas.