

Raymond Gerald Thorpe

January 20, 1921 — September 6, 2005

Professor Thorpe was known simply as “Ray” by his colleagues and friends, and as “Uncle Ray” by the more than 50 classes of Cornell students for which he was a teacher, mentor, advisor, coach, confidant, counselor, and good friend.

His early years in the Navy, during World War II, did much to shape his outlook and to make him the man he was. He was born in Utica, New York, but grew up in Herkimer, New York. Upon graduation from high school in 1938, he enrolled in the chemical engineering program at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. In 1941, at the end of his junior year, he joined the Navy, and was commissioned as an Ensign, but after brief training, he was released from active duty to complete his studies at RPI. In December of that year, Pearl Harbor was attacked, plunging the U.S. into World War II, and in May 1942, immediately after receiving his BChE degree, he returned to active duty at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, where he quickly advanced to the post of Ordnance Ships Superintendent.

Unwilling to be confined to a stateside appointment, Ray requested combat duty. After a brief stint on a destroyer escort in the Atlantic, he was assigned as Assistant Gunnery Officer on the USS Bennington, a newly commissioned Essex Class Carrier bound for the Pacific. By May of 1943, he had been promoted to the rank of Lieutenant JG. While on leave in the spring of 1944, he married Eleanor Livingston Crofts in Cortland, New York, and days later was promoted to the rank of Lt (equivalent to Captain in the Army). He held that rank until his discharge nearly two years later.

Over the first six months of 1945, the Bennington saw heavy action in the campaigns at Iwo Jima and Okinawa, two of the most intense battles in the Pacific. Eleven U.S. aircraft carriers were sunk in the Pacific War, and although The Bennington was repeatedly attacked, it never suffered serious damage. Ray and his gun crews were proud of that record. Ray was formally discharged from active service in February 1946, at the age of 25. He served in the Naval Reserve until 1955.

Ray Thorpe was a true American Hero. His military experience strengthened his commitments to integrity, to honor, and to caring for his fellow man. To this he added his own deep sense of compassion, his common sense approach to everything in life, and his ability to inspire and motivate others. It was these characteristics that made him so successful and so well loved for the next 59 years of his life, most of which were devoted to Cornell. Had he remained in the Navy, he would surely have risen to the highest ranks.

But he chose another path. In March 1946, a month after his release from active duty, he enrolled in Chemical Engineering at Cornell, and was awarded the degree of Master of Chemical Engineering in September 1947.

After a brief period as a process engineer at Monsanto, he returned to Cornell in 1949 as a research investigator, and in 1951 was appointed Assistant Professor of Chemical Engineering. Three years later, he was appointed to the rank of Associate Professor with tenure.

From time to time over the years, he taught or assisted in the teaching of almost all the undergraduate courses in Chemical Engineering. His specialty, though, was the sophomore introductory course required for entry into the program. Here the students learned how to think, not just to regurgitate facts; how to marshal information already gained from chemistry and physics to solve practical problems; and how to quantify the performance of flow processes for solids, liquids and gases as these undergo chemical and physical changes. In all of his teaching, Ray demanded rigor, but he also stood eager to help those who struggled. His success as a teacher for 39 years, his remarkable rapport with students, and his ability to motivate and inspire them is the stuff of legend. Students who were overwhelmed by academic pressures and personal problems, were often invited to spend a few days at Ray's home, where he helped them through a difficult period. When they had serious financial difficulties, he would sometimes write a check to bail them out.

The teaching awards he won illustrate the extent of Ray's influence on his students. He twice won the Tau Beta Pi Award for excellence in teaching—in 1974 and in 1983. The student honor society selects the winner of that award. At that time, it was one of a small number of teaching awards, and was the most prestigious in the Engineering College. At the time of his retirement in 1988, he was one of only two faculty members who had won that award twice. In 1982, the School of Chemical Engineering awarded him the title of "Master Teacher." In 1984, the University inaugurated the Merrill Scholars Program, a program under which the top students from the graduating class are screened and 35 are chosen as Merrill Scholars. Typically about six of these are from Engineering. Merrill Scholars are asked to identify the high school teacher and the Cornell Professor who contributed most to their success. In the first four years of that program, there were four Merrill Scholars from Chemical Engineering, and they all identified Ray as the Cornell faculty member who had contributed the most to their success. No other faculty member in the University came close to that accomplishment during that time. The Chemical Engineering Alumni have further honored Ray by endowing the Thorpe Lectureship, which annually brings to campus outstanding leaders from industry, many of whom are his former students.

A few other brief notes about Ray's career: he was on the staff of the University Division of Unclassified Students from 1973-79, and he was its Director from 1979 until his retirement in 1988. DUS was a kind of "purgatory" where students seeking to transfer to another college were assigned until they met the requirements for transfer. There is a letter in Ray's Cornell files from the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, pointing out that before he took over, many of the Deans wanted DUS shut down because it was ineffective, but with Ray's leadership it became highly successful. It gave him the opportunity to help students all across the university.

In 1984, he was appointed to the rank of full Professor, after 30 years as an Associate Professor—a promotion that many recognized as 25 years overdue!

Ray retired at the end of 1988 to care for his wife, Eleanor, who was seriously ill. She died in 1990.

The final chapter in Ray's Cornell career began in 1991 when the Dean of Engineering asked him to return to Cornell to work in the Engineering College Advising Office. He readily agreed, and he worked there continuously until a few weeks before he died. He also taught part time in Chemical Engineering. With his guidance and leadership, he and his colleagues made the Advising Office more effective and successful than it had ever been. He was back in his element, and he loved it.

Outside Cornell, one of Ray's major interests was the civic affairs of Cortlandville, New York, the community where he lived most of his life. He served for many years on the Town Board and as Town Supervisor. A colleague there captured one of his outstanding qualities with the observation, "Ray had a ton of common sense."

Ray is fondly remembered by his colleagues, particularly the eclectic group of professors with whom he lunched regularly at the Statler over the years. That motley gathering at times represented economics, physics, education, and mathematics, in addition to various branches of engineering. Ray's contributions to the discussions were frequent and forceful. He is sorely missed.

His daughter, Kimberly T. Knight; his son, Mark L. Thorpe; and two grandsons, Garrett and Wyatt Thorpe, survive Ray.

Robert K. Finn, Ferdinand Rodriguez, William B. Streett