

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Veterinary Education and Non-Combat Veterinary Service During World War II

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
June 18, 2013

World War II changed veterinary medicine. It altered the way veterinary education was delivered, and it introduced new responsibilities and expanded career options for graduates and those who already were in the work force. It disrupted the lives of veterinarians with established practices and other careers, sometimes sending them far away from home or halfway around the world for extended periods of duty. In the war's aftermath, a new wave of veterinary colleges emerged to meet the needs of returning veterans.

This story (June 18th) will focus on some of the changes in veterinary education as well as the responsibilities of veterinarians serving in non-combat roles in the Army Veterinary Corps. The companion story on June 20th will describe the roles of veterinarians who served in combat zones, especially the China-Burma-India theatre. That particular story will also provide a rare glimpse into the horrific experiences of a Japanese army veterinarian as he was fighting in the same theatre of the war and then returned home to start his life as a practicing small animal veterinarian in Japan.

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During the late 1930s, leading up to the war, Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs were common at the land grant colleges. In some colleges, male undergraduate students were required to take two years of ROTC, typically offered in the infantry, horse-drawn field artillery, and Corps of Engineers. Students were appointed into the Medical Corps Reserves as second lieutenants.

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, many of the colleges became quasi-military bases and male veterinary students were enrolled in some form of military training. Their appointments under the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) meant that the federal government had control over them, as they were put on active duty. They received meals, a stipend for books and supplies, and attended class in uniform.¹ As one octogenarian who had graduated in 1944 reminisced, "For the kids who were poor, that was the biggest lift that we ever had because they picked up the cost of all the books and they fed us."²



3206th SCSU Cornell University June to October 1943³
(©Cornell University)

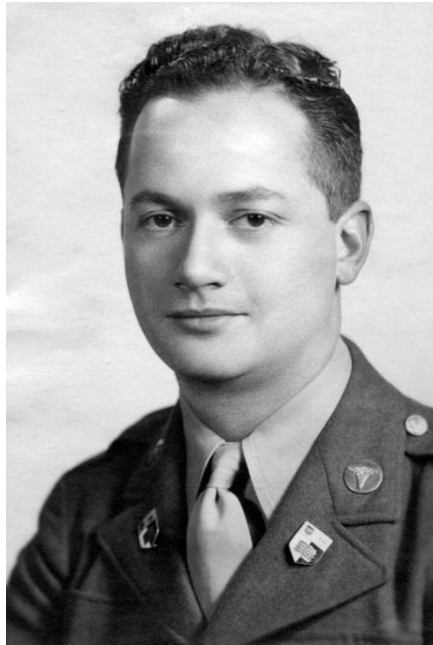
Summer breaks were cancelled at several veterinary colleges and the curriculum was compressed to a continuous year-round schedule. Colleges insisted that, “No sacrifice of standards of instruction or course material [was] entailed, however.”⁴ To this day, reunion class members from the war years often start with a question: “Good to see you again, were you in the spring class or the fall class [of 1943 or 1945]?”

Dr. Morris Povar entered Cornell’s veterinary college in 1941 and proceeded from semester to semester without a break. He referred to attending classes during the summer heat without air conditioning as “hideous,”⁵ though some of his classmates welcomed the opportunity to take an accelerated program and complete their four-year equivalent degree in fewer than three years.

When their DVM requirements were completed, most male students were commissioned as First Lieutenants. Povar described what happened as soon as the Cornell Class of 1944 graduated.

“The [male] students were taken right from graduation and we were put in a blacked-out train and sent from Cornell overnight. We didn’t know where we were going, but we ended up at Fort Dix [New Jersey]. We went to the barracks and they immediately started inoculating us with everything under the sun. Some of the kids were sick as hell and most of us didn’t feel well.”

*"We were supposed to be in Fort Dix for a couple of weeks after the initial shots were done, and then shipped out. But one morning after we'd been there about a week, they called my name and said to report to headquarters. I ran there as fast as I could and the sergeant handed me a slip of paper and said, 'You've got to go to Rutgers tomorrow morning; here's your bus ticket.'"*⁶



Morris L. Povar, DVM (Cornell 1944)
(©Cornell University)

Povar's started at Rutgers University and then he moved to a poultry facility in nearby Vineland where he learned how to run a virology laboratory. He completed his East Coast assignment within a month and was shipped to Kimber Farms on the West Coast to participate in vaccine development. "There was the absolute perception that there would be a biological attack on the United States and we were making vaccines against everything that we could conceive of."⁷

Povar didn't go by himself, however. While at Rutgers, he had met a female student. "When I was told of my West Coast assignment, I called her: 'Lotte, they're sending me to California. Wanna go?' She said, 'Sure!' And that was my wedding proposal."⁸

Morris Povar and most of the other veterinary students who had been part of the ASTP were commissioned as first lieutenants in the Veterinary Corps following graduation. Many veterinarians who had graduated during the mid- or late 1930s were also deployed. Some were dispatched to work for inspection of meat and other foods at plants that served the military or at bases in the United States or overseas. Their professional expertise was considered critical to ensuring a safe food supply for the troops and civilians.



Dr. Morris and Mrs. Lotte Povar, 2010
Picture by the author

Dr. Joe Merenda had graduated in 1934 and was working for the famous C.P. Zepp in one of the country's most progressive small animal clinics located on West 53rd Street in Manhattan (New York City).

"Colonel Seeley called me and said they're going to put me on active duty and assign me to Fort Slocum, an old army post in New Rochelle. We had had no training in food inspection or anything like that, but all of a sudden, I'm in the Army assigned to be a food inspector. I didn't know the ropes, and it seemed like everybody was out to get me. For example, the Army had a contract for a certain grade of meat at a certain price. But if the supplier could give you a lower grade of meat at a higher price, they'd try to slip it past you. I would have all these specifications, like the air space in an egg, how much a crate of eggs weighed, and so forth. I learned how to candle eggs in the Army!

"I was at Fort Slocum for about three months, learning the hard way before the Army sent me to school to learn something about food inspection."⁹

Most non-combat assignments overseas also involved food inspection for the troops and support personal. Dr. Clarence Bent graduated in 1939 and was working at the Springfield branch of the Angell Memorial Hospital when he was called up for a four-year tour of duty, half of which was in New Guinea and in the Philippines.¹⁰ Some Army Veterinary Corps officers were

also assigned clinical work looking after the health needs of the companion animals on military bases.

Many veterinarians who remained in the U.S. were assigned regulatory duties, such as testing cattle for TB and Brucellosis. The rationale was that their professional expertise was critical in assuring a safe food supply for the troops and civilians. One of these was a large animal veterinarian, Dr. Andrew Draper, who was assigned regulatory work in the Bureau of Animal Industry (BAI) near his home in Fairfield, Connecticut. "Because the BAI was only giving me \$37.50 a week, I had to give up the building that had served as my practice. We moved all my equipment into a friend's barn and my wife ran a boarding kennel from this facility for the duration of the war."¹¹

As I interviewed veterinarians who served in World War II, I was struck by the variety and scope of their assignments. Some work was mind-numbing, repetitive and dirty. For others, their forced relocation from practices they had built, often from scratch, meant a total life change. They sometimes literally had to start all over again when they returned to their home communities after a three- or four-year hiatus.

For many, the work opened up whole new areas of interest, showing the versatility and value of the comparative medical education that a DVM provides. Would Morris Povar, for example, ever have become a faculty member managing the laboratory animal facility at Brown University in the 1960s if he hadn't learned how to run a virology laboratory that developed vaccines during the war?¹² Would Dr. James McCarthy, a one-time large animal veterinarian in the Northeast, ever have comfortably settled into a small animal practice in southern Florida if he had not been assigned there to inspect food for the army? "The 2nd World War was responsible for our being sent to Florida", he wrote to his classmates from West Palm Beach some 20 years after graduating, "We 'got sand in our shoes' here and couldn't get back up north".¹³

Whatever their role, the large number of veterinarians who were engaged in non-combat services during World War II had a profound impact on veterinary activities during the first half of the 1940s.

For some insights into veterinarians who served in combat zones during World War II, please see the second story in this sequence, coming June 20, 2013.

¹ Smith Donald F. 150th Anniversary of Veterinary Education and the Veterinary Profession in North America: Part 2, 1940-1970. *J Vet Med Educ* 2011 38(1) p 84-99.

² Povar, Morris L. DVM (retired veterinarian in Boca Raton, FL, now deceased). Interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) 2010 Apr 28. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/15200>

³ This photo also appears in *J Vet Med Educ* (citation 1, above); reprinted with permission.

⁴ Day, Edmund E. Report of the New York State Veterinary College at Cornell University for the Year 1941-1942. Geneva, NY, Humphrey Press, Inc., Printers, 1943. P5.

⁵ Povar, Morris L, DVM (see ref 2, above).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Merenda, Joseph J. DVM (retired veterinarian in New York, NY, now deceased). Interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) 2007, Aug 2. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/12877>

¹⁰ Bent Clarence F. DVM (retired veterinarian in Nashua, NH). Interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) 2008 July 1. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/14195>

¹¹ Draper, Andrew M. DVM (retired veterinarian in Ocala, FL, now deceased). Interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) 2009, Mar 9. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/12658>

¹² Dr. Povar helped design and deploy Brown University's first major laboratory animal facility. In 1970, he accepted a tenured position as professor of psychology and medical science at Brown. See ref 2, above.

¹³ McCarthy, James L. DVM (deceased small animal practitioner). Alumni form completed in advance of his 20th class reunion at Cornell, 1958, Apr 18.

KEYWORDS:

History of Veterinary Medicine
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Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.