

Gene Patterson, NG '42

Lecture – Part II

Following are excerpts from his comments that day:

At North Georgia

Thank you all for inviting me back to this campus, a place that I love. Oddly enough, this building that I'm speaking in today stands on the very site where the old Band House stood. That's where I lived for two years. We were a two-year college then at North Georgia College. The Band House was an old plank barracks. We had one shower in the basement for every man living there, and we had to line up about 20 deep at night to get a bath.

In my second year, we became Honor Company of the battalion. We beat out A, B, C, and D companies in athletics and scholarship and military drill. So we proudly wore the golden fourragere (braided shoulder cord) for a year. I was the second lieutenant in that band, my late brother Bill having beaten me out for captain. [William C. Patterson went on from North Georgia to earn his medical degree from Emory University and specialize as a noted surgeon.] In that second year I also saw my life predestined by North Georgia College, because not only did it prepare me for war (I was shortly to land in Normandy in World War II), but it also prepared me for the journalism career I pursued for 41 years by making me the editor of the school newspaper here, which was then known as The Cadet Bugler.

The president of this university at that time was Jonathan C. Rogers. He was a formidable figure. I was afraid of him and never wanted to go near his office.

But Georgia's governor then was Gene Talmadge, father of Herman, both of whom maintained a hold on power in the state for many lamentable years by their central championing of white racial supremacy. Ole Gene was such a powerful segregationist demagogue that he forced his handpicked Board of Regents to fire the head of the University of Georgia education school, Dean Walter Cocking, because the governor decided he was soft on racial segregation.

And right here at North Georgia College Talmadge's purge ruined one of my social science professors, Professor Powel Bush, who was fired by the Board of Regents to further slake the governor's anger.

Because of this political interference in higher education's pursuit of truth, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools immediately discredited the entire University System of Georgia.

I wrote a loud, hot editorial in the Cadet Bugler, page-long and double columned, denouncing Gov. Talmadge and all he stood for, and saying that he had placed our diplomas in jeopardy. Upon our graduation they might be worthless pieces of paper, I wrote angrily.

The day after the Bugler was distributed, I got a call to report to the president's office. He wanted to talk to me. So I thought, well, I'm gonna get a ticket on a Greyhound bus back to Adel, Ga. And, with fear and trembling, I marched into the president's office. Sure enough, he had the Cadet Bugler opened to the editorial page on his desk. He punched a finger down on it and said, "Cadet Patterson, did you write this?"

"Yes sir, I did," I confessed.

"Hmmm," he frowned.

Then he punched his finger down on a word in the lead editorial and demanded, "How do you spell jeopardy?"

I said, "J-E-A-P-O-R-D-Y."

"No," he said. "That's how you spelled it here, and that's wrong. It's J-E-O-P-A-R-D-Y."

Then he smiled a great sunny smile, rose and shook my hand and said, "That's all Cadet."

That clear approval of my editorial, qualified only by disapproval of my misspelling, was the greatest relief of my life. That man, that wonderful man, who might have been fired himself for condoning denunciation of the governor by one of his students, went on to become the president of the University of Georgia before his retirement. And Talmadge was voted out of office in 1942 on this issue and replaced by Gov. Ellis Arnall, who gave the University System Board of Regents the independence to operate out from under the political thumb of future governors.

As I indicated, I was prepared for my military career and my journalism career by what I got here at this wonderful place. It put me in mind, then and now, of the old axiom of Thucydides, the Greek historian, who felt a society that permits too great a gap to develop between its scholars and its soldiers risks having its thinking done by cowards, and its fighting done by fools.

That won't happen here because I know this school, and I love it, and I got so much from it, including a balance between Thucydides' two fields, which prepared me uniquely to cope with the century in which I lived.

I even got the beginning of some business knowledge here – got it from my English professor, Dr. Bert Flanders. He went on to become the chairman of the English Department at Georgia State University in Atlanta. When I was at the Atlanta Constitution I ran into him one night at a literary party. I took him aside and said, "Dr. Flanders, I have a confession to make to you."

I said, "Do you recall that you made all your English 101 classes write a weekly theme? We had to think up something and write longhand, two or three pages, and I usually got an A?" He said, "Yes, I recall. You wrote very well, Mr. Patterson."

I said, "My confession is this. Dr. Flanders. When the guys in the Band House discovered I was making A's on those themes, they started coming by my room asking what it would take for me to write their themes for them because they weren't making very good grades. And I said 10 cents. Deal. After that, I wrote half a dozen themes a week for my friends and collected their dimes, and that did my laundry."

Dr. Flanders smiled and asked, "What did you say they paid you?"

"A dime a theme," I said.

"As I recall," he said drily, "that's about what they were worth."

His crusher brought me down to earth. That was my business beginning.

It was 64 years ago that I rode a bus up here as a 16-year-old, moved into this Band House and entered the magical classrooms of this institution, threadbare as it was in the Great Depression. It had been a mere 22 years since my father marched home from World War I in France before I went back into uniform and shouldered a rifle again here in Dahlongega.

It was 63 years ago, when I was a sophomore here, that the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Their sneak attack decimated our Pacific fleet. They killed 3,000 Americans one Sunday morning. We'd heard the beginnings of the story on our barracks radios. But when we marched out to our regular Sunday afternoon parade, the adjutant of the battalion strode forward, clicked his heels and announced that Pearl Harbor had been attacked, and we'd suffered heavy casualties, and that the president of the United States was going to address us the next day.

We marched into the auditorium, upstairs over the dining hall, located then in the building next to Barnes Hall. By radio the President told us of this day "that will live in infamy" and committed us all to go to war against the two greatest military machines the world had ever known. This campus swiftly filled with military recruiters seeking volunteers – Navy, Army, Army Air Corps, Marines. So many of my classmates signed up.