

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, February 19, 2007

Wilmington to Providence, \$8.25 Round-Trip: At 11:00 P.M. on March 15, 1943, a phone call from the Western Union office in Wilmington informed me that I was to report to active duty at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, immediately. The next morning, I took the 11:44 A.M. train from Wilmington, arriving in Providence just after dark. I was apprehensive; I had no idea what lay ahead. I found a T/4 named Prime somewhere on the Brown campus who told me where to bed down and where I could go for meals. No one else seemed to be around. A day or so later, another 19-year-old named Dick Ramsey from Lexington, Kentucky, arrived who was as bewildered as I was. We were occupying two beds on the third floor of an old dormitory that had about 20 more beds, uppers and lowers, in three or four rooms. There was but one bath on the floor. About the third night after we had retired, a commotion announced the arrival of our "unit," fresh from basic training at Clearwater, Florida. The rest of the beds were filled, and we were up to 22 men strong, which was called Unit 6 (they soon changed this to "Flight 6"; after all, we were in the Army Air Force).

Great activity in the next day or two brought our pre-meteorology course at Brown up to seven flights or about 150 students. Having had R.O.T.C. at M.I.T. the previous fall, I knew how to march, but I was the only one of the 150 who didn't have a uniform. Somehow the authorities forgot to send me to basic training. Within a week, however, I had a uniform and all my inoculations, and it was on with army life. It would be 3½ years before I was a civilian again. After a month or so, we were entitled to our first weekend pass, which lasted from 1 P.M. Saturday until late Sunday night. Four or five fellows from the Philadelphia area, including FAHP member Bill Schwoebel's uncle, made it to the New Haven Railroad's passenger station in Providence to take the "Yankee Clipper" for Grand Central Station in New York and on toward Philadelphia and Wilmington. It was a thrilling sight as the big streamlined Hudson-type locomotive with about 15 cars eased into the station on time from its one-hour run from Boston. As we sped down the busy main line toward New London and New Haven, we always hoped we would not be held on a siding for a high-priority freight, as we wanted to be in New York at 5:35 so we could race across town to Penn Station and take one of the Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR) "clockers" to Philadelphia. One time we jumped on the train after it started pulling away. At 30th Street Station, I would change to a fast train for Wilmington; once there were only four or five cars behind a GG-1 electric, and we made it in 20 minutes!

No matter how we did it, or how many trains were required, the \$8.25 round-trip ticket for servicemen was always honored. During the spring and summer of 1943, I took advantage of my monthly weekend pass and came home four or five times. My time at home was short, but it was cherished. My parents would take me to the PRR station in Wilmington on Sunday to catch the 4:42 P.M. train (about 5:10 from 30th Street for my Philadelphia-area friends), one of four daily trains that ran from Washington via the Hell Gate Bridge to Boston without change of trains. On Sunday evenings, there were always two sections of this train on the PRR, and three or four more sections on the same schedule running out of Grand Central Station on the New Haven. This meant there could be six sections on the same schedule north of New York. The first section would not stop at Wilmington, so I always got on the second, which became the last once we were on the New Haven Railroad and joined the Grand Central line. Electrification ended at New Haven, and I always looked forward to being pulled by a steam locomotive from there to Providence, 114 miles.

One summer night when we stopped on the horseshoe curve with the New London station in the middle of it, we tarried for an extra long time. This was a wonderful place with the locomotive heading in one direction and the rear of the train in the other because of the long, sharp curve. It turned out we had to wait for the 5 sections ahead to get out of the way. One of the older New Haven Pacifics was on the head end, but the engineer lost no time when he received the high ball, and we made the 61 miles to Providence in 55 minutes, arriving just 25 minutes late. This was World War II railroading at its best.