



Raymond G. Thorpe

U.S. Navy World War II Veteran and superb life influence on 9,300 Cornell Chemical Engineers

A true American hero and legendary Cornell University professor, Ray Thorpe was born in Utica N.Y. in 1921, grew up in Herkimer N.Y., and graduated from Herkimer High School in 1938. In the fall of that year, he entered RPI as a student in chemical engineering, and in May 1941 at the end of his junior year, he joined the Navy, and because of his engineering background was commissioned as an ensign. After a brief training period in New York City, he returned to complete his studies. Three months later in December 1941, Pearl Harbor was attacked, plunging the United States of America into World War II.

In May 1942, immediately after receiving his bachelor of chemical engineering from RPI, Ray was assigned to the Brooklyn Navy Yard and trained as an ordnance inspector and fire control specialist. He soon realized that because of his engineering expertise he was destined for stateside assignments for the duration of the war, but repeatedly requested a combat assignment. He first had temporary assignments on destroyer escorts in the Atlantic, then in early 1944 was assigned as assistant gunnery officer on the USS Bennington, a new Essex-class carrier that was being fitted out in Brooklyn. In June of that year he took a short leave and was married to Eleanor Livingston Cross, in Cortland NY on June 29, and immediately thereafter was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant. The USS Bennington embarked for the Pacific late that year.

As assistant gunnery officer Ray was assigned the duty of defensive fire control, and his job was to train and supervise the gunners and the technicians in the fire control center, who used information on the altitude, speed, and direction of approaching aircraft to direct the defensive fire from the carrier. He soon realized that his superior gunnery officer had little understanding of how to train people, and that his life and the life of his shipmates could depend on how well he could teach young anti-aircraft gunners to shoot. The USS Bennington saw its first action in the Pacific on February 16, 1945, and over the next 6 months it took part in the campaigns for Iwo Jima and Okinawa, two of the most intense campaigns of the war, and in many air raids on enemy installations. Despite the sinking of eleven Pacific carriers in that stretch of the war, the USS Bennington was attacked many times by kamikaze fighters, but never suffered significant damage. Ray had trained his crews well.



Planes from the Bennington took part in the flyover that was part of the formal surrender ceremony on the battleship Missouri in Tokyo bay September 2, 1945, VJ Day. Because of his long and distinguished service, he was one of the first to be discharged from active duty on Feb. 11, 1946 at the age of 25, serving in the Naval Reserve until 1955.

From Dean William Streett's eulogy: Ray was a true American hero. His military service strengthened his commitments to integrity, 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 which made him successful and so well loved for the next 59 years of his life, most of which he donated to Cornell. Had he remained in the active Navy, Ray would surely have risen to the highest ranks, but he chose

another path, enrolling in chemical engineering at Cornell a month after his discharge, and ultimately earning his masters degree. After a brief period as a process engineer at Monsanto, and based on his successful teaching experience as a gunnery officer in the Pacific, he decided to return to the University in 1949 as an instructor in what was then known as "metallurgical and chemical engineering." He became a member of the faculty shortly thereafter, embarking on an incredible career impacting the lives of thousands upon thousands of students. He taught for four decades in Chemical Engineering, where he was known for the quality of his teaching, stories, and high standards.



When his beloved wife died, he returned to Cornell's College of Engineering Student Advising office where he guided the careers of undergraduates for over a decade, giving them the benefit of a lifetime of knowledge of engineering and life skills until his death on September 6, 2005. By this time Ray had given over 50 years of service to the College of Engineering as a teacher and student advisor. Ray wanted to bring the 'real world' to campus. The Ray Thorpe Lecture series was started in 1989 by Joseph Degenfelder Chem E 1960 with Herbert (Ted) Doan, former CEO of Dow Chemical, who attended the first lecture in 1991 by Samuel W. Bodman, Cornell Chem E 1960. Eric J. Degenfelder, Cornell Chem E 1986, gave the 25th anniversary lecture in November 2015.

Audio of Ray's eulogy by Dean William Streett, Ray's family, and Joseph Degenfelder is at: www.cheme.cornell.edu/cbe/news/lectures/upload/