Cornell's Military History

Cornell has a long tradition of support for our Armed Forces that dates back to its founding as a land grant university. Under the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, universities were required to provide instruction in Military Science but Cornell’s first president, Andrew Dickson White, felt that Cornell could produce a larger quantity of well-rounded officers than the traditional military academies so he made this training mandatory for all male students, a requirement until 1960.

White turned out to be prophetic, as Cornell commissioned almost 5,000 officers during WWI, more than any other institution in the United States, including the military academies. An additional 4,000 Cornellians, including faculty, alumni, students, and staff, also served. During World War II, Cornellians again responded to the national call to arms with more than 20,000 serving in the armed forces and in every theater of war. The two most decorated Cornellians during those wars were Alan Louis Eggers ’19 and Matt Urban ’41, both of whom won Congressional Medals of Honor. In 1989, the Guinness Book of World Records considered Urban to be the Army’s most combat decorated soldier of WWII, with 29 medals for valor.

While Cornell has unofficially produced outstanding officers since its inception in 1862, the National Defense Act of 1916 officially established the Reserve Officer Training Corps. With WWI imminent, an Army School of Military Aeronautics as well as Army and Navy training schools were established at Cornell rather than the envisioned ROTC units. These units developed in the period leading up to WWII and transitioned into the Army, Naval, and Air Force ROTC units that exist today. As the only Ivy League University to host Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine ROTC programs, Cornell is one of three that offered continuous ROTC studies throughout the Vietnam era to today and the current Detachment also hosts students from a number of neighboring universities and colleges.

Whether you enter Cornell University as a student, staff or faculty member, the VCNG urges you to become an integral part of the Cornell community. Cornell recognizes that your military service is a step along your career path; the supportive and caring environment at Cornell offers the perfect place to build on the skills and experiences of your military service. Cornell is dedicated to helping you achieve your professional goals in both furthering your education and finding a permanent
position. This institution is proud to participate in the Post 9/11 GI Bill and the Yellow Ribbon program, to offer support through our Office of Diversity and Inclusion, and to provide access to resources for our veteran community through the Cornell Veteran's Colleague Network Group. Cornell's ongoing mission is to provide you with the resources you need to be successful. On behalf of the Cornell University faculty, staff, students, retirees, and alumni, welcome to Cornell!