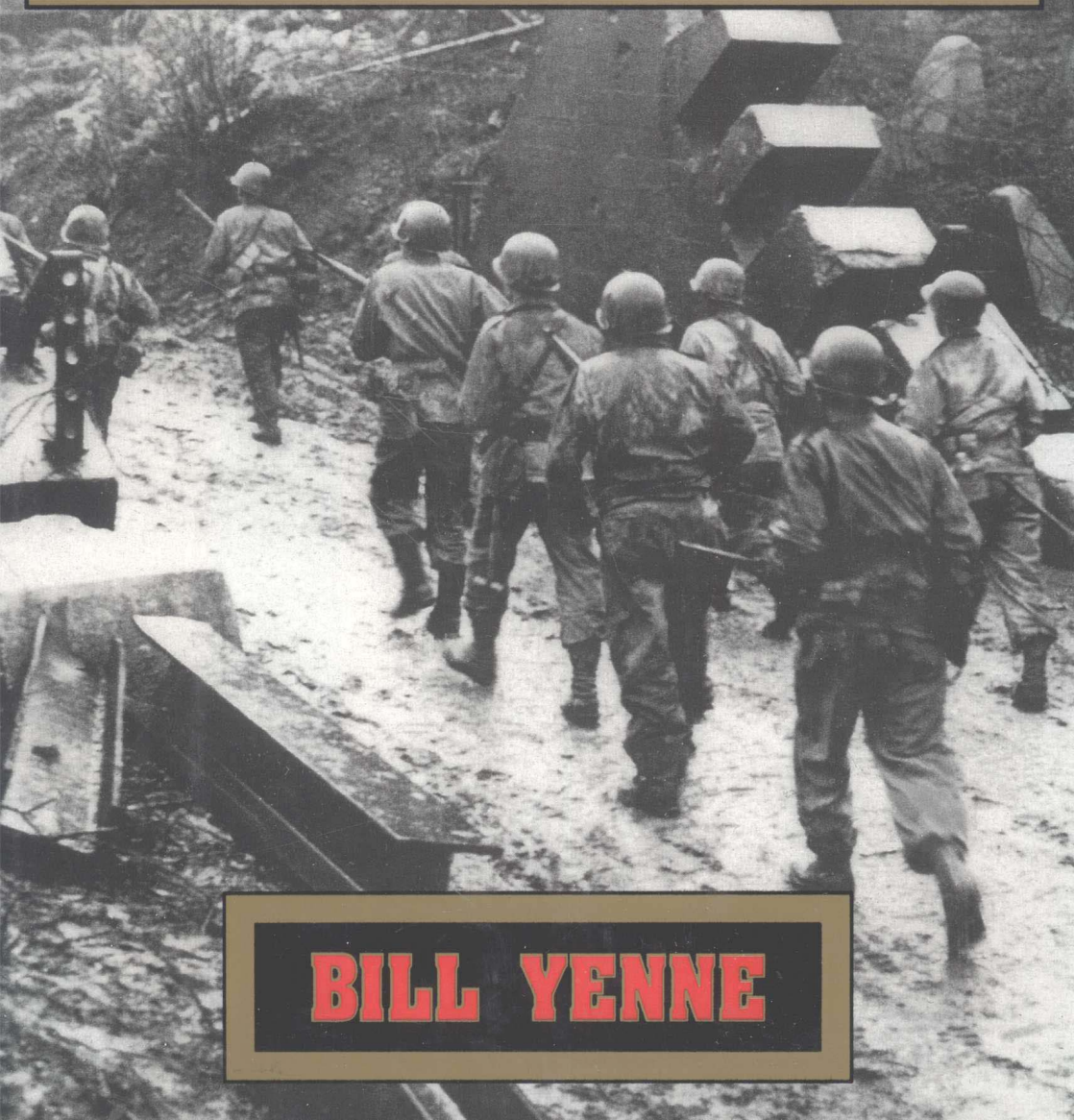
"BLACK '41"

THE WEST POINT CLASS OF 1941 AND THE AMERICAN TRIUMPH IN WWII



BILL YENNE

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The West Point Class of 1941
and the American Triumph in World War II

Bill Yenne

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Foreword

In late May 1991, the members of the United States Military Academy Class of 1941 gathered at West Point to celebrate the 50th anniversary of their graduation. Class members, wives, widows, other family members, and friends joined together for another occasion to reflect on our ties to one another and our experiences together stretching back more than 50 years. On May 28 we assembled at the Kelleher-Jobes Memorial Arch (built by the class in memory of two classmates who died as cadets) to honor the memories of all of those classmates who have died since our June 11, 1941, graduation. And, in other less solemn ways, we retold old stories, relived our times together, and renewed our dedication to one another as classmates and to the institution, the Academy, that brought us together and molded our lives.

In this book, *Black '41*, Bill Yenne tells the story of America's coming-of-age as a world power through the eyes and experiences of our class that graduated on the eve of America's entry into World War II. He takes many of the stories we have told one another, our families, and friends over the years and weaves them together into a uniquely vivid tapestry of an American experience.

We came together in that faraway summer of 1937 from all over these United States. From the first day, through the ensuing four years of West Point's demanding academic and military routine, we were bound together as we were prepared for the service to come. At our graduation, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson told us that we were ". . . going into the new army of the United States—a great army which is now in process of enlistment and formation and training." We rushed into the army and the Army Air Corps as brand new lieutenants, and within weeks were caught up in the exhilaration of the task. Within six months some were in combat, and within seven months we had suffered the first "killed in action"—Sandy Nininger, who subse-

quently was awarded the first Medal of Honor of World War II. By the end of the war we were majors, lieutenant colonels, and a few colonels, and 40 of the class had been killed in action, with 11 more killed in Air Corps training accidents. In the 1950s, as we went into the Korean action, another four were killed. In a sense it seemed that the Class of 1941 was indeed "the class upon which the world fell." We did not give it much thought then because we were too caught up in the demands of the times and our assignments to devote attention to speculation on history.

The story of the USMA Class of 1941 comes alive here for the first time in the public realm. We have told it for years to whomever would listen. Bill Yenne now brings it to all—from the first day to the present. We are proud to be '41ers and proud of the story. We hope this comes through in Bill Yenne's telling, and, in the words of our alma mater, "When our work is done, our course on earth is run, it may be said, 'Well done' . . ."

Michael J. L. Greene
Brigadier General, US Army, Retired
President, USMA Class of 1941

Preface

They graduated into the eerie twilight of a nation at peace in the midst of a world at war. They graduated from the school that had trained America's military leaders since 1802, and they began their service careers in a US Army that had yet to prepare itself for what they all knew was coming.

It has been said that the Class of 1915, which included men such as Dwight Eisenhower, Omar Bradley, George Stratemeyer, and James Van Fleet, was the "class upon which the stars fell." If that is so, then the Class of 1941 is the class upon which the entire world fell.

They were known at the time as the "Black Class," or simply "Black '41." Nobody knew why. One theory now holds that they were a class that had an excessive number of black marks against it for unusual enthusiasm in playing the usual undergraduate pranks. This was not necessarily true. The Class of 1941 was probably no more mischievous than its predecessors. But somewhere in the course of their Plebe Year, former classmates believe, a now-anonymous upperclassman tarred the men of this class with the epithet that made them forever West Point's *classe noire*. It was but one of a number of distinctions that separated Black '41 from other classes.

In his commencement address to the graduates on a sunny June day in 1941, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson remarked, "Usually commencement is a time of rejoicing and congratulations as we elders give good wishes to the young men who are beginning life's journey. But that is hardly the atmosphere which surrounds our country today. And I have the feeling that I should be false to the responsibility which is laid upon me by the invitation to meet here if I did not try to help you to understand the nature of the crisis which confronts us all today, and to give you encouragement in meeting it. The work of meeting it may fall, in large measure, upon your shoulders."

Indeed it was time. It was *their* time.

Black '41 is the story of the experiences of this remarkable class at West Point and in the four long years of war that followed. It is adapted from what *Black '41's* classmates wrote about themselves in 1941 and in all the years leading to the present, when I was privileged to correspond with, and speak at length with, the surviving members of the class. It is an unusual story, the story of how some of our best and brightest went off to war to lead our troops in battle against the German armies in Europe and the Japanese troops in the Pacific. Some of these men died, and many, serving valiantly, learned from their experiences and became, in a way they might never have otherwise, men.

Through this process, I have come to know this class better and more intimately than I know my own college classmates; I am proud and humbled to have talked with the men upon whose shoulders Henry Stimson laid the burden of a nation at war.

Bill Yenne
San Francisco
August 1991

Acknowledgments

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Prologue: Rites of Passage

June 11, 1941, was a very pleasant spring day. June is still springtime in the Hudson River Valley, but just barely. The trees had leafed out and the hillsides were green, but the nights were still cool, the days still just warm rather than sticky hot.

June 1941 was still the springtime of our century, but just barely. The springtime of our century had ended for Europe in 1940, and it would end for the United States inside of six months.

It had been a year since France had fallen, and the war was no longer in every headline. Russia would remain at peace for another 11 days, but even when Hitler's panzers invaded on June 22, little concern was aroused in the United States.

Within the gray walls of the United States Military Academy at West Point, where another corps of First Class cadets was about to become second lieutenants in the United States Army, there was a certain ambivalence about the world situation. The war seemed so far away. It was, after all, still spring at West Point—as it had been for every graduating class for two decades.

There wasn't much folderol this graduation day. Everything about it was simple and direct—much more so than a West Point graduation today. All of the cadets had been sworn in as second lieutenants early that morning, just after their final breakfast in Washington Hall. Technically, even though they still wore the gray uniforms of West Point cadets, these 424 young men were already second lieutenants when they filed into the Field House to receive their diplomas.

That would be their last act in West Point careers that dated back to a

humid July first in 1937. When they received their diplomas they would be *gone*, and they were itching to get going. "Our primary interest was to get the hell out of there because they had told us we had to be gone before dark," recalled George Pickett of Cadet Company H. "Although we were the graduating class—and second lieutenants—we had to have our tails off the post before dark!"

For the cadets there was a sense of this day being the culmination of a great many things, but as a practical matter, June 11, 1941, began more like a typical duty day than like the dawn of a brave new world. It was an exceedingly hectic day; there wasn't time to stand around or become nostalgic. The men had crates and boxes to move and administrative activities to complete. There would be no prolonged farewells, except between roommates who would see one another once more when they returned to their barracks to gather their belongings. There was no more time.

The graduation exercise would be the last time that these men, who had bonded like brothers, would ever assemble as a unit in one place. Within a few hours they would all be gone. There would be reunions 10, 20, and 50 years down the road, but the coming war would claim 53 lives, and the class could never again be complete. Indeed, even among the living members of the class, no such gathering as today's breakfast in Washington Hall, once commonplace, would ever be repeated.

At 9:30 A.M., the cadets filed into the cavernous Field House. Of the graduates on that day, there were 62 men whose fathers or grandfathers had graduated from West Point. Many of the graduates would one day send their sons into the valley of the Hudson.

They came from every one of the 48 states in the Union, as well as from the Territories of Hawaii and Puerto Rico. The largest number, 43, were from New York. There were 14 from New York City alone. There were 33 men from California, 8 of those from San Francisco. Among the other states, 28 cadets had been appointed from Pennsylvania, 23 from Georgia, and 21 from Texas. Ten of the men had been appointed from the District of Columbia. There was one cadet, Atanacio Torres "Tony" Chavez, who came from the Philippines, the Pacific commonwealth of the United States, a land that was to see the first blood of this class spilled in wartime within seven months.

Nearly every year since before World War I, it had been customary for the secretary of war—the army's man in the presidential cabinet—to give the commencement address. Indeed, it seemed as though Newton Baker was *always* there when he was secretary of war, and even after he retired. There were exceptions, of course. General John J. "Blackjack" Pershing (Class of 1886), the army's greatest hero since George Washington and the man who had led it to victory in World War I, had done the honors in 1920, 1923, 1924, and 1936. Another exception was Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had come

in 1935 and 1939, and whose presence was especially unusual because he was a navy man.

On June 11, 1941, Henry L. Stimson came north to deliver the graduation address. Secretary of war in the Roosevelt cabinet, the 74-year-old Stimson was a gentleman's gentleman of the patrician Ivy League aristocracy that Franklin D. Roosevelt had gathered about him. A former cabinet officer under two presidents—secretary of war under Taft and secretary of state under Hoover—he was one of Roosevelt's closest advisors, preparing for a conflagration that would make the nation all but forget Blackjack Pershing's war.

As he looked out at the Class of 1941, Stimson knew that these men were the ones who would fight and die in the coming war. More than that, he knew that they would also be the ones who would *lead* the countless thousands who would fight and die in the coming war.

Stimson must have felt a sense of sadness when he looked out at that sea of faces over which he presided, but it must have been a sense of sadness tempered by a commitment to purpose. Stimson was a crusader, or, more properly, the leader of a crusade. As Hoover's secretary of state when the Japanese went into Manchuria in 1931, he had authored the Stimson Doctrine under which the United States would not recognize land taken by military conquest. So much more territory had come under fascist boots since 1931. It was Stimson's job—his mission in life—to take back every square inch of land that the fascists had seized.

Stimson came to address the West Point graduates as more than just a figurehead in a ritual. He was one of the key architects of the policy that would shape the destinies of those who were gathered before him. Indeed, Stimson recognized that in this season—this final spring—the *entire* nation was about to undergo a rite of passage.

Stimson stood ramrod straight before the audience as he began his speech. His dark blue suit was in stark contrast to the shock of white hair that framed his stern and determined face.

He began by commenting that his words that morning would be of an "unusual and perhaps unconventional character. Usually commencement is a time of rejoicing and congratulations as we elders give good wishes to the young men who are beginning life's journey. But that is hardly the atmosphere which surrounds our country today."

Stimson went on to frame the events of that day against the backdrop of a world in torment, noting that beyond the borders of a geographically sheltered nation, there was a world "where justice and law have been overthrown, where mutual tolerance has been replaced by cultivated hatred, and where the doctrines of humanity and religion have been trampled under by ruthless barbarity and by the organized slavery of fellow men. In all that world today, only the British Commonwealth of Nations is still fighting for

the old standards of freedom. All other nations are either cowed or conquered."

Stimson was obsessed with the righteousness of his crusade, *the* crusade. It was an effort that went straight to the heart of the doctrine of *Pax Americana*, of America's future role as superpower.

At the grassroots level, however, most Americans, while not "capital-letter Isolationists," were instinctively "small-letter isolationists." There were probably very few parents or other guests at West Point on June 11, 1941, who had any desire to take part in the conflict.

"If Japan had not attacked Pearl Harbor," Merritt Hewitt of Cadet Company M would later observe, "I doubt that Congress would have ever declared war. In those days, Europe was still very far away. I believe that without the United States in the war, the British and the Germans would have negotiated a peace. Neither was willing to go through 1914–1918 again."

The secretary of war saw it differently. He went on to emphasize that anyone who believed that the United States could come to terms with the Nazi system and peacefully live in the same world with theirs "simply has not thought this matter through. The world today is divided between two camps," Stimson went on tersely, "and the issue between those camps is irreconcilable. It cannot be appeased. It cannot be placated. Humanity cannot permanently make terms with injustice, with wrong, and with cruelty."

It was an era of upheaval and a time when old traditions and ideologies were moved by the winds of change. This change was also washing over the US Army as it awoke to the challenge before it. The graduates, like those before them, were the American military elite, but the army's manpower needs were suddenly so great that in the restructuring that was taking place, the elite of West Point would be the exception rather than the rule in the ranks of officers. The Class of 1941 would not be going into the old "regular army," but into the new army of the United States—a great army that was then in the process of enlistment, formation, and training.

But among the 424 graduates in the audience, sitting with their parents, fiancées, and girlfriends, thoughts were turned not so much to the battlefields of Europe as to the extended leave that was about to begin.

George Pickett's thoughts were on Montgomery, Alabama. "I don't think any of us paid any attention to the graduation address—really remembered it," he said later. "It was just something that sounded good. None of us, throughout our military careers, was ever inspired by a *speech*. . . . he might as well have stood up and said, 'Fellas, you did good. We need you. Your country needs you. Get out there and fight!' "

For Jesse Thompson, remembered by his classmates as a "master of the art of indifference," Stimson's speech was something to be endured before the men could conclude graduation ceremonies. Thompson was impatiently waiting to collect his diploma so he could run back to the barracks to get his

bags, get into his car, and head south to Haileyville, Oklahoma, for a few weeks of celebration.

While many of the men believed in the inevitability of the war, few were truly inspired by Stimson's call to the crusade. It would take an attack on a Hawaiian naval base, already in preparation half a world away, to rouse the class to Stimson's call.

It was still springtime in the Hudson River Valley when Henry L. Stimson folded his notes and returned to Washington and the gathering storm. It was a day that saw 424 brand-new second lieutenants climb into roadsters and railroad cars, racing off to six weeks of leave and the world beyond.

It was still springtime in America, but the winds of war were already blowing.

1

You're in the Army Now

It was a wonder that the Greene boys found each other in the surging crowds in the cavernous terminal. In 1937, everybody traveled by train, and New York's Grand Central Station, in its sprawling, ostentatious splendor, was America's crossroads.

They came together at dawn on the first day of July with that assured, backslapping familiarity that is part of the special bond between brothers.

Michael Joseph Lenihan Greene and Lawrence Vivans Greene did not *look* like brothers. Much to the contrary. To identify them as such would be to invite incredulity. Larry was 6'2" and weighed 200 pounds, while Mike was 5'7" and weighed just 110. Larry was an imposing figure with a strong jaw, sharply chiseled features, and a high forehead. Mike's round face, centered beneath a shock of sandy hair, was the face of a kid on his first big adventure in life. Mike looked a lot younger than Larry, and few would have guessed how close they were in age. Many people who knew both of them didn't realize they were related. If you didn't *know* it was true, you'd think they were pulling your leg. It was one of their favorite inside jokes.

The two brothers were on their way to West Point to enter the United States Army Military Academy. For Larry, it had been a long haul. At the age of 19, two years of out high school, he had been doing everything possible—including joining the National Guard and calling on members of Congress—to snare an appointment to West Point. He had known he had wanted to go to West Point since he was a child. Mike, two years younger, was much less certain about the Academy. He had finished high school in 1936, when he was only 16, and had joined his brother at the Millard Prep School in Washington, D.C., arguably the foremost military prep school in the country. Indeed, at Millard the Greenes would meet no fewer than three dozen men who would later become their classmates at West Point. After six weeks,

however, Mike withdrew to attend the Drexel Institute of Technology in Philadelphia, where his father, Colonel Douglass Greene, was a professor of Military Science.

Colonel Greene, himself a graduate of the Military Academy, had always hoped that Larry and Mike would join the corps of cadets. But Mike didn't necessarily agree with his father's plans for him.

It was during the summer of 1936, while Mike was attending the Millard Prep School, that an Illinois senator offered Mr. Millard a second alternate appointment to the Military Academy. "Beanie" Millard asked Mike's father if he wanted to put Larry's name in for the appointment. Colonel Greene replied, "Thanks, but that's not necessary. Larry is already competing for a Pennsylvania congressional appointment, a Pennsylvania National Guard appointment, and a presidential appointment." But he quickly caught himself. "Oh, what the hell. If it's only second alternate, you might as well put Mike's name in."

On May 30 of the following year, Mike received a telegram at his home near Philadelphia, informing him that the principal as well as the first alternate had failed, and therefore, if Mike passed the physical exam and the validating exams, he could have the West Point appointment from Illinois.

Mike told his family he didn't think he wanted to go to West Point. "The next thing I knew," Mike related facetiously, "I was on the living room floor and my dad was kicking me, my grandfather was kicking me, my grandmother was kicking me, and my mother was kicking me. So I said, 'Okay, I give up. I'll go to West Point!' "

Mike went to Walter Reed Army Hospital for the physical exam, which he passed without difficulty. When he was finished he went on to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to visit his girlfriend, Ruth Ann Greenlee, whose father was a navy captain stationed there. On June 21, Mike arrived at West Point to take the validating exams. After his year at Drexel, he was already validated in most subjects, so he took only the history and English exams.

Nine days later, he got a telephone call from his father. "You've been appointed to West Point," his father told him, "and you have to report tomorrow."

"I really didn't know what the hell I was getting into," Mike said later. "I was just seventeen years old, and this would be the first time I had ever lived away from home."

Mike told his father, "I *still* don't really think I want to go to West Point."

Colonel Greene, who had six children and little money to educate them, said, "What do you really want to do?"

Mike said, "I think I want to go into the foreign service, and I want to go to Georgetown University."

His father said, "You know as well as I do, Mike, that we can't afford that. I don't have that kind of money."