SARA HOLSTON: Hi, and welcome back to *Hindsight is 20/19*, the podcast where we look at 250 years of Dartmouth’s history through 25 objects from the archives held by the Library, one per decade. I’m Sara Holston, Class of 2017, and I’ll be your host for this episode.

The story I want to tell today is one of the most beloved in the archives. It’s the tale of Charles Pearson, nicknamed “Stubbie,” a member of Dartmouth’s Class of 1942. Our artifact is a photograph of Stubbie. It’s a very nice photograph. His hair is combed and gelled to perfection, he’s wearing a crisp white collared shirt under his knit sweater with the big Dartmouth “D.” His eyes are staring deep into the camera as he gives a sort of awkward but somehow endearing almost-smile. Scribbled across part of the photo – not obscuring Stubbie himself, of course – is the message: “Sincerest wishes to Mr. & Mrs. Bray – true friends – “Stubbie” Pearson.”

To start, I want to take a closer look at this photo by comparing it to another image we have of Stubbie. This new image is actually my favorite. It shows Stubbie leaning against a thin table at the front of the bleachers in the basketball stadium. He’s talking to Coach Cowles, who has what look to be some newspapers and a clipboard in front of him. Stubbie looks far more casual in this picture – he’s wearing a t-shirt and gym shorts. He has a knee brace on his left leg. He has some acne on his chin, which suggests to us that the portrait photographs of Stubbie were probably cleaned up to make him look perfect. And while he’s not quite as flawlessly assembled in this image – the acne and the knee brace are sort of a testament to his humanity – he looks just as comfortable here, giving his full attention to his coach, as he does in the portrait.

Ok, you’re thinking, but who *is* Stubbie Pearson? Well, brace yourselves, my friends. I am about to walk you through a story that had me totally in love with Dartmouth’s dorky Golden Boy, and I predict that by the end, you’ll be pretty in love with him, too.

Stubbie came to Dartmouth from Minnesota, wanting to go east for college in spite of opposition from his parents and scandalized reactions from his hometown. He quickly found himself a stud for both the football *and* the basketball teams. The nickname “Stubbie” seems to have been intended ironically, since, by the time he graduated Stubbie was 6’4, and over 200 pounds. An incredibly talented athlete with strength honed on the farm, Stubbie was something of a jack-of-all-positions, and played numerous roles on the field over the course of his Dartmouth career. He was a leader, and his teammates, coaches, and the student newspaper all raved about him – by his sophomore year the paper was writing things like “if Dartmouth must place a big load on a sophomore, Pearson is certainly the type to entrust with real responsibilities.” And entrust him they did. Senior year Stubbie was chosen captain of the basketball team – and this was a Big Deal since he was *already* captain of the football team. At that time, only one other Dartmouth student had ever held both simultaneously. Stubbie lived up to the task, leading the basketball team to the final four in the 1942 NCAA tournament, which I’m sure didn’t hurt his popularity.

He was also the valedictorian - and won several academic awards over his four years. He was known to wake up at 6am to review his notes before classes, and to read them again at night. Amongst his teammates he could be counted on to be the first to crack a book when traveling for games – usually on the bus ride out of Hanover. During his senior year, Stubbie participated in the prestigious Senior Fellowship – a yearlong opportunity in which students abandoned tradition classes in favor of a self-directed approach to the learning and improvement that student felt he needed. Stubbie, a history major, conducted research in contemporary international governments and political affairs.

Given all these talents and accomplishments, it probably won’t surprise you to learn that Stubbie was highly regarded. But it may surprise you that Stubbie was admired from almost the moment he stepped foot on campus. He bookended his time at Dartmouth with two significant awards- in his freshman year, the William Churchill Award, for an outstanding man in the class who “possesses to the greatest degree the qualifications of manliness, uprightness, fairness, and respect for duty.” His senior year it was the Barret Award, given to “that member of the senior class whom the three upper classes choose as giving the greatest promise of becoming a factor in the outside world through his strength of character and qualities of leadership, record of scholarship and broad achievement, and his influence upon his fellows.” In between, he led the Undergrad Fire Squad and was a member of both Casque and Gauntlet and Palaeopitus senior societies. He was the President of the Class of 1942 *three* times. When he was declared valedictorian, the ‘42s had to elect a new Class Day speaker since, of course, they’d first chosen Stubbie, and I guess they thought they really should share the love.

And, get this, he was a *poet.* Yes, that’s right, this two-sport varsity Captain brilliant mind, beloved guy also wrote, poetry. JEEZ, Stub, we get it, you’re basically Superman.

Now, this is a podcast about Dartmouth history, right? We’re talking, in this episode, about Dartmouth in the 1940’s. Stubbie’s last year at Dartmouth saw the entry of the United States into WWII. As you might expect, this radically altered Dartmouth’s campus culture for most of the decade. Stubbie’s class was the last to experience what would have been a “normal” Dartmouth for a long time.

And Stubbie was actually instrumental in this change. When America entered the war in December 1941 Stubbie felt an immediate sense of responsibility. He called for a no-cut rule, which required students to attend their classes, rather than skipping as they saw fit. He also proposed a physical fitness requirement, to help get Dartmouth men in better shape for any military training that may come after. These two changes were intended to create an emphasis in the Dartmouth education on discipline. “The Pearson Plan,” as Stubbie’s proposal was quickly dubbed, was wildly unpopular. The student newspaper printed a flurry of letters they received, objecting to the perceived attempt to turn Dartmouth into an Army camp. The primary point of concern was the no-cut rule, which was thought to compromise the values of liberal education, in which young men took responsibility for their own learning, and for the consequences – good or bad – of their decisions.

In spite of this backlash, Stubbie pushed forward – not aggressively, but with the calm determination of a young man sure of his convictions. The first meeting held on the proposed Plan ran about two hours, and opened with Stubbie’s addressing those gathered, smiling and joking and getting a hostile crowd to laugh along with him. Stubbie’s defense of the plan appealed to the independence of the student body; he insisted that something would have to be done, with the war now upon them, and that the students ought to do it for themselves. He reassured classmates that the plan was created by students and intended to be amended until students were satisfied. It didn’t quite work. The Pearson Plan still faced immense opposition, and the argument raged like wildfire on campus for weeks. But as the Plan was debated and undergrads from across the community spoke in its favor, sentiment changed. A “streamlined college war semester” was approved.

I’ll just note briefly that even after the war concluded, the campus was slow to return to “normal.” Numerous Dartmouth soldiers returned to Hanover…with their wives. It wasn’t until this generation of veterans graduated that things fully settled down. If you’re interested in some first-hand accounts of Dartmouth in WWII, check out the War Years Oral History project, linked from Rauner’s homepage.

But back to Stubbie - while WWII radically influenced Dartmouth internally, Dartmouth students and alums also played a part in the external war effort. Again, Stubbie had a role in inspiring some of this spirit of service. In his valedictory to the College, Stubbie offers a vision of Dartmouth as preparing young men to take hold of the future they will be responsible for shaping.

He writes that “…this also we know we know that the world is changing. That tomorrow is to be different from today even though our principle of democracy remains. We know that there will be almost insurmountable problems after this crushing affair is ended. We must meet these problems intelligently. We know we must do this. We do not know whether we will…If you see what we ourselves can bring, you too can fight this war with a zest you have never known before. You can fight with a will. You have a hope. You have a future and you know that the outcome – the new order – our new world is in our hands. We must not, we dare not fail.”

Whether Stubbie’s words dramatically changed the hearts of his classmates, or whether many of them already agreed I can’t say, but Stubbie was one of at least 32 members of his year to enlist following their graduation. And I say “at least” because Stubbie entered the Navy as a pilot alongside 31 of his classmates – a large enough group that people thought their entire training cohort might be made up of Dartmouth 42s – but that’s only the Navy. It doesn’t take into account the other branches of the military, and it also doesn’t account for the members of other classes who fought.

We actually have a pretty good picture of what this experience was like, since Stubbie wrote regularly to several of his old Dartmouth friends, including President Hopkins and Dean Neidlinger. He wrote to Hopkins especially about how important it was that young men stay in school, abut Dartmouth’s future, and about the racism he saw in some of his Dartmouth classmates who flew with him in the Navy.

He also wrote letters to his hometown, published in the local paper, that described life in the Navy. He shared some funny anecdotes, often at his own expense. In one, he confessed to struggling with the Navy’s swimming requirements because, as he said, until high school his only contact with water had been in the bath. And the Navy was…a bit more intense than that. They had this one contraption that was built like a pilot’s cockpit, and they would strap young men into it and submerge them six feet under water. According to Stubbie, “This supposed to simulate a water crash landing. The crux of the game is to see if you can escape alive. I have never given myself a chance to find out. When the time came for checking boys out in said deathtrap I have always made tracks for some far off corner of the base. I might add that I have never lacked company in my dash for safety. We all like to live. Why take unnecessary chances?” But though he struggled with swimming, Stubbie was otherwise unexpectedly comfortable with Navy life. He had a childlike delight in his own ability to avoid the seasickness that plagued the others. To his hometown, he joked: “Maybe I am a natural sailor. I certainly hope so for if I ever get as sick as my roommate I’ll dive overboard.”

Mostly though, Stubbie was surprised by how…ordinary it all was. He described it to his readers as just like any other job: “It is like the small grocer who opens his store each morning, works in it, closes it and goes to live or exist with his family. The men who fight and plan are storekeepers doing their jobs the best way they know how. They spend their free hours with friends and forget, if possible, their daily duties. It is all such a remarkably simple, struggling honest, ordinary procedure that I find myself bewildered with the realization of it.”

But while Stubbie was keeping the folks at home posted on his life, perhaps his most important correspondent was a girl named Sally Neidlinger. Sally was the twelve year old daughter of Dean Neidlinger, and she had developed a huge schoolgirl crush on Stubbie. Yeah, me too, Sally. They’d exchanged some letters back when he was at Dartmouth – mostly Sally dropping him notes after games, offering congratulations and encouragements like “You played a swell game. I got so nervous I pulled out a tooth.” But the letters continued after Stubbie enlisted. And even though he was an all-star, and now he was immersed in the war effort, Stubbie had clearly taken the time to get to know this twelve year old girl, and his letters to Sally were as honest and personal as any of his other exchanges.

Many were lighthearted as he teased her, scrawling along the side of one letter – “two timing me by going to dances but don’t worry – I’ll be faithful.” He also lamented repeatedly that he she couldn’t come and visit, saying things like “Wish you could spend a couple of days with me. I wonder if you’d be afraid in the middle of a steep dive – more likely you’d be screaming for more speed – I know you and you frighten me.” He promised her he would return, with the words: “Someday I’m coming back and will fill the Inn table with good things to eat and you’ll put on your party dress and I, my blues, and we’ll celebrate until the world screams for mercy. Are you with me? Yes and say hello to President Hopkins and tell him we’ll all be back some day.”

After almost two years of service and numerous successful raids, Stubbie was nearing the end of his tour of duty. On a cool April morning in 1944, he went up on what was probably the last action of his tenure, joining his squadron in engaging a fleet of Japanese ships and planes causing trouble near Palau. He never came home.

President Hopkins received this letter from 1st Lieut. Ernest H. Giusti:

“By this time you will have heard or shall shortly hear that Stubbie Pearson was killed in the Palau raid where the Navy sank close to 38 ships and destroyed approximately 300 planes. I was here at this island base when Stub’s carrier left, and I had an appointment to meet him when he returned from this action, so that when his ship returned I, too soon, heard of the tragedy. Stubbie Pearson, being the figure that he was, I thought that the College might like to know the actual details, so I went aboard his ship and made inquiries amongst his squadron mates. First, however, I must assume you know little about the technical aspects of dive-bombing and explain in brief the fundamentals, for Stub was a dive-bomber. A dive-bomber pilot is comparatively safe if he pulls out of his dive at 2500 ft. or above, for then the range of the anti-aircraft guns is so great that his chances of being hit are small. If, however, he dives below this altitude, his risk increases greatly with each hundred feet, but his chances of hitting the target increase correspondingly. The Navy and Marine Corps suggest a safe release and pullout altitude, but leave the decision to the discretion of the pilot. Stubbie was seen to dive on a Japanese destroyer and at 1500 ft. was still going straight own, for one pilot reported that as he pulled out at 1500ft. Stub went by him still going down. He must have been struck at this point or shortly thereafter, for the nose of his plane started to come up but at about 900 ft. he must have lost consciousness for the plane nosed over sharply and went straight in at terrific speed. There is no possibility of his having survived. In the shower of bombs no one knows which bomb was Stubbie’s, but the destroyer was hit and sunk. You may be interested to know that Stubbie’s shipmates aboard the carrier held him in even greater esteem than we all did at the College, if that is possible.”

The crash that killed Stubbie also resulted in the death of T.W. “Tommy” Waterson, aviation radioman, third class and Stubbie’s rear-seatman. As partners, they had flown together since the beginning.

In his last letter, written to Bill Cunningham – a sports writer for the Boston Herald and a frequent correspondent of Stubbie’s during the war – Stubbie reflected on his motivations, his dreams, and his fears. He wrote: “Death? There’s no ignoring the fact that he rides with us out here. As I’ve written you before, I fear battle as much as the next man, maybe more. But there are things worth dying for, if that is the price. That’s the theme of every engine-song that screams through the sky. Death, I don’t want, but if death, it’s to be, perhaps I’ll find my own soul…”

So, if I was right, I’ve made you fall in love with Stubbie Pearson, just to shatter your heart with his sacrifice. Let’s return to Dartmouth in the 1940s. Hopefully by now you’ve got a sense of why Stubby’s story is important. He embodies the 1940s ideal of the Dartmouth man, and I think in many ways that vision resonates into the present decade. It can be easy to be cynical about that stereotype - “the Dartmouth man,” - but when we look at Stubbie, that cynicism suddenly becomes much harder to maintain. We’re going to spend a lot of time in this podcast taking as objective a look as possible at Dartmouth over its 250 year history. At many points, that’s going to mean examining the times we’ve fallen short of our vision or ideals. It seems only right to look at the moments that really shine, too.

It’s important to note that Stubbie was involved with the Vigilance Committee, a group of upperclass students who took the lead in hazing incoming freshmen (the only blemish we couldn’t airbrush away). But even as he shaped up as the Golden Boy in a culture that can be very elitist, Stubbie demonstrated a deep-rooted humility. Remember the photograph we looked at in the beginning of this episode? My favorite one, where he’s spending some time with his coach. He’s fixed his attention on Cowles with such earnestness it’s impossible not to feel that Stubbie is just incredibly genuine.

In fact, in one of Cunningham’s articles on Stubbie, even before they began writing each other, Cunningham reflected that “The boy considers college an opportunity, not a privilege. He wants to make the most of it, and he has.” Before the war, he’d hoped to go to law school, maybe teach for a while before moving into policy, since he had so many ideas about the education system and what could make it better. In his own words, Stubbie said: “I am interested in people. I want to spend my life helping those who are at the bottom of the pile. I want to work for people because they are human beings, and because many of them will need help more than ever after the war. That is still my dream out here when I’m not in the sky – to make a better America by making life a lot more bearable for the mess of our fellow men who live under foot.”

It was that very sentiment that inspired Stubbie’s determination to fight. Again, in his own words: “This is the ideal to which my life is consecrated in war or peace, but at the moment it’s war. But this is worth fighting for. Man is Man wherever he is on the planet and whatever his creed, color, or condition. In him inherently is goodness, dignity, and service. He must be freed from bondage wherever he is, bondage of body, bondage of soul, bondage of ignorance. He must be helped, protected, fed, and permitted to grow…” “I want a nation where all men have the right of freedom and the privilege of being secure. I want to see a state which insures to all of us political freedom, freedom to elect and appoint our leaders – leaders with a desire to serve – freedom to speak and to weep and to sing…I want happiness to reign as the Black Plague over the Dark Ages…I want a populace so proud of their community and their state that their buttons pop.”

I think we’ve seen how much Stubbie really did pay attention to and care about people. Even in the midst of training and then fighting, Stubbie took the time to maintain all those correspondences with friends and family back home – everyone from his hometown, to the President of Dartmouth, from a well-known sports writer, to a little girl who thought he was her hero long before he enlisted.

And though Stubbie was beloved, he did not, apparently, consider his public image to be of primary value – when Stubbie is listed on the honor roll at the end of his senior year at Dartmouth, the short entry reads: “Charles Milton Pearson, for devising a plan which he thought would fulfill an urgent need, and for fighting for that plan in which he believed, even in the face of general student opposition and even though it could have meant the loss of a hard earned campus popularity.”

What’s encouraging to me about Stubbie’s story, and what I think is especially important to note, is that the College *did* embrace this vision. As we’ve seen throughout this story, Stubbie was adored by almost everyone who met him – at Dartmouth and beyond. In an article from November 1941, during Stubbie’s senior year, Cunningham wrote “if you can find any more Stubby Pearsons on the loose in your district, in the name of a Character prominently mentioned in the New Testament, sell him Dartmouth – for his sake, and ours, and the worlds.” Even years after his death, people were still looking at Stubbie as an ideal. In 1966 Stubbie was named to the Sports Illustrated Silver Anniversary All-America Award, honoring those athletes who accomplish great things in the 25 years after their senior season. Other winners include people like Bill Osmanski, who was later inducted into the Football Hall of Fame, Congressman Richard Walker Bolling, and Scott McLeod, ambassador to Ireland. Stubbie was the first to be awarded this honor on the basis of great promise of achievement, cut off by his early death.

So in the 1940’s Dartmouth’s ideal – the kind of spirit the school hoped to foster in all of its students – was a young man I think many of us today would recognize as a positive role model. He was sincere, respectful, humble, and dedicated to using every opportunity he was given to leave the people he met better than he found them. But he was also fun, playful and enthusiastic – fully engaged in his interactions with the people around him.

And though his death was premature, Stubbie continues to live on in Rauner’s classroom, where we use the narrative to help undergraduates become comfortable with, and excited about, primary source research. In a way, I guess Stubbie’s dream of becoming an educator kind of came true. And as to the rest of his hopes for the future, well, both in the classroom and as part of our 250th celebration, Stubbie’s story has a lot to offer our contemplation of the ups and downs of Dartmouth’s history to date, and what we’d like our next 250 years to look like. As much as we’d like him to be, Stubbie wasn’t perfect. But he challenges us to consider how we go out from Dartmouth and apply what we gain there in the wider world. What kind of influence do we want to have on the people whose lives we touch?

As we’ve seen, Stubbie inspired everyone he met. I’d like to close with a poem written by a classmate of his – James Idema – another young man from the class of ’42 who joined the Navy. This piece was published in 1947 in *POETRY: A Magazine of Verse* – one of the leading poetry magazines in the country. It’s called “To Pearson.”

You’d never in a million years have guessed

Hero Pearson wrote fatuous verses to the stars,

And – tall, generous, brooding, loving, clumsy –

Laughed, and made them paper balls to pitch.

Once, on a tender spring-night campus walk,

He archly tried to mortify me, saying:

Come the Revolution, and the first

They ought to kill off are the poets!

Yet Pearson wrote them, and some, I know, he saved,

(Though none very good)

And the day from 20,000 feet he dove

A flak-shocked SBD ablaze against

The turquoise shoals some yards of Peleliu [Pel-a-liu]

They opened up a cardboard box and found

“To Mother,” “To Ann,” “To Death.”

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