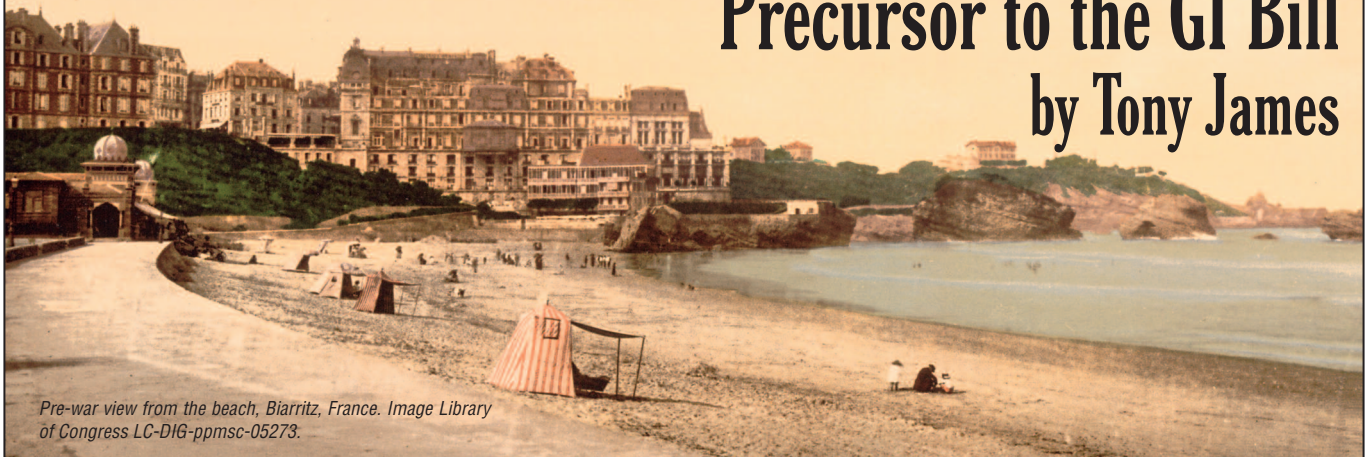


# The Army University Center No 2 Biarritz, France Precursor to the GI Bill by Tony James



Pre-war view from the beach, Biarritz, France. Image Library of Congress LC-DIG-ppmsc-05273.

THE Army University Center at Biarritz meant nothing to me when I recently obtained these two mess and billeting cards. However the maps on the back of the cards aroused my curiosity, was the American Army involved in recycling? What was this university, situated in France, that had a military connection?

It was in 1944 that the Servicemen's Readjustment Act was passed in the United States. This is more commonly known as the G I Bill. The law gave important benefits to US soldiers coming home from World War II. Education and training opportunities, loan guarantees for home, farm, or business, job-finding assistance, unemployment pay of \$20 per week for up to 52



French 100 Francs signed 6 June 1944 D Day

weeks if the veteran could not find a job, and priority for building materials for Veterans Administration Hospitals.

In late 1943 the army's Information and Education Division advised President Roosevelt that a post-war education program would maintain and increase morale of the troops fighting in Europe. In September 1944 the War Department issued Readjustment Regulation 1-4, a move designed to provide academic, vocational, and orientation courses for every US soldier serving in Europe when the war ended. General Dwight Eisenhower, commander of the European Theatre of Operations (ETO), was responsible for its implementation.

Within four months of VE Day May 8 1945, three entirely new 'universities' were created in Europe. Campuses in Florence, Shrivenham and Biarritz offered a genuine college education to officers and enlisted men who had fought the Axis powers, and were now awaiting demobilisation. Most importantly, students gained credit points for future college courses back home. Some 25,000 soldier-students passed through these institutions, but by the spring of 1946, all three had closed their doors for good.

Florence American University was the first American university for service personnel, established in June 1945 at the School of Aeronautics in Florence, Italy. Between six and seven thousand soldier-students were to pass through the university during its four one-month sessions from July to November 1945.

Shrivenham American University (SAU) under General C. M. Thiele, was situated at a British army camp near Swindon, northwest of London. The Americans took over the camp in 1942 and after VE day, Shrivenham was converted into a university campus and opened its doors on August 1 1945. After two successful terms, the GI University closed in December 1945, having had approximately 8,000 students attend its educational facilities.

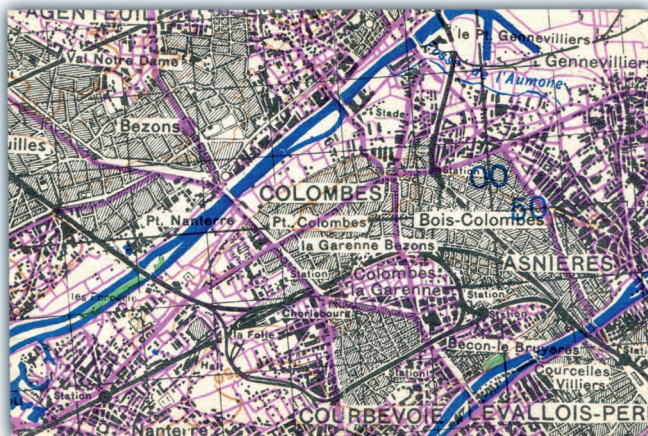
*W. Williams Capt. Inf.*  
**Army University Center No. 2**  
**Biarritz, France** **2**

**MESS and BILLETING CARD No. 1220**

*Harold S. Rush Sgt. 39417881*  
 (Name) (Rank) (ASN)

is billeted at \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Room \_\_\_\_\_

Mess located at *Miramar*



Mess and Billeting Card Army University Center No 2. Coupon 2, front indicates Mess at The Miramar Hotel (Now the Sofitel Miramar Hotel) Back - Army map of Levallois Perret near Paris

## Biarritz

The Biarritz American University No.2 (BAU), under General Samuel L. McCroskey, was located on the Atlantic coast in south western France not far from the Spanish border. It opened 10 August 1945 and received its first students on August 20. Approximately 10,000 students attended at least one 8 week term, and after three successful terms the GI University closed in March 1946. While the universities at Florence and Shrivenham were housed in functional buildings intended for college use, Biarritz was very different.

Biarritz American University had no campus as such. Much of the resort town had been mothballed since the fall of France, when its rich and aristocratic clientele stopped taking vacations there. The Americans simply took it over, billeting instructors and students in hotels and villas. The ordinary G I, used to sleeping in draughty barrack rooms, had soft beds with linen sheets, private bathrooms, hot water and maid service. General McCroskey found that the local people, many of them made idle by the wartime lack of tourism, were willing to pitch in and help prepare and operate approximately 240 hotels and villas. Some 1,500 to 2,000 French civilian employees and 750 German prisoners of war were engaged in providing services to the students.

The *Hotel du Palais*, built by Napoleon III for Empress Eugenie, became a regular college hostel; fine-art students at Villa Rochefoucauld were surprised to find one of Queen Victoria's inventories in a wardrobe. Journalism was taught in the Villa les Courlis, while the Education Department was in the Villa la Titania. Ten biology professors ended up being billeted in what had been the German officers' brothel. The casino became a library, with bookcases replacing the roulette wheel.

The only piece of military discipline that was retained at BAU was the wearing of uniform; gone were most of the army's usual rules and regulations, including saluting, dress codes, and close-order drills, even reveille and enforced calisthenics went by the board. All ranks mingled on equal terms in the classrooms. In particular the walls of racial discrimination were lowered, black and white soldiers sat together in classrooms, ate together in mess halls and played ball on the same teams. While for the majority of the time, discipline was not a problem, there were occasions when students overstepped the mark and cutting lectures could result in loss of privileges and a fine.

A sense of esprit-de-corps was noticed among the staff, and many comments were passed regarding the academic freedom that had seriously not been expected by civilian staff when being recruited. This was not just a US campus transplanted on to French soil. The universities were made coeducational by a few students from the Women's Army Corps and the Army Nurse Corps as well as by a contingent of fledgling actresses to fill out the casts of the plays.

Unlike SAU, Biarritz did not bother with college songs, colours or a coat of arms; although there was a daily newspaper called the *Bau Banner*, several orchestras and a radio station which seemed natural given that many students were aiming to commence or get back into media occupations. Teaching methods were extremely informal and experimental, and became the subject of much interest by educationalists during the post war period.

Academically, BAU differed from its sister colleges in that it was not directly sponsored by a major university nearby (as the universities of Florence and Oxford aided the other two). The acquisition of learning materials was, as expected, very difficult and the non-arrival of some items led to last-minute course cancellations. A reporter from *Time* magazine records a flabbergasted US supply officer in Paris who received an order for 25,000 copy books, 2,500 erasers, one dozen fresh frogs, 25 two-and-a-half-ton trucks and two salamanders "sexually highly developed." However the resourcefulness of the staff was apparent when laboratory equipment was "liberated" in Germany and 20 out of 25 requisitioned pianos arrived for the music department.

Army University Center No. 2  
Biarritz, France

MESS and BILLETING CARD No. \_\_\_\_\_

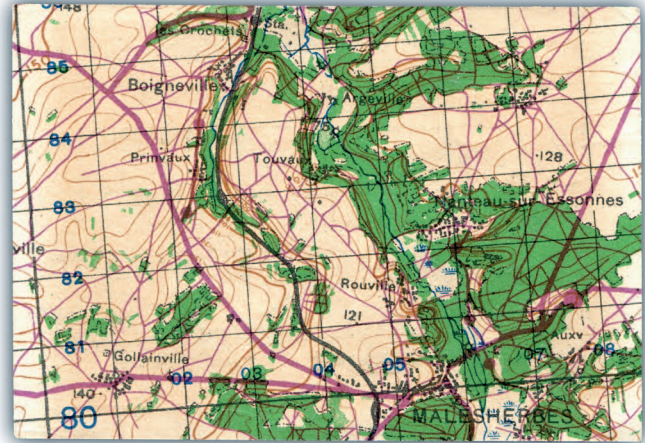
*Rush, Ward G.* *Sgt.* *29417811*

(Name) (Rank) (ASN)

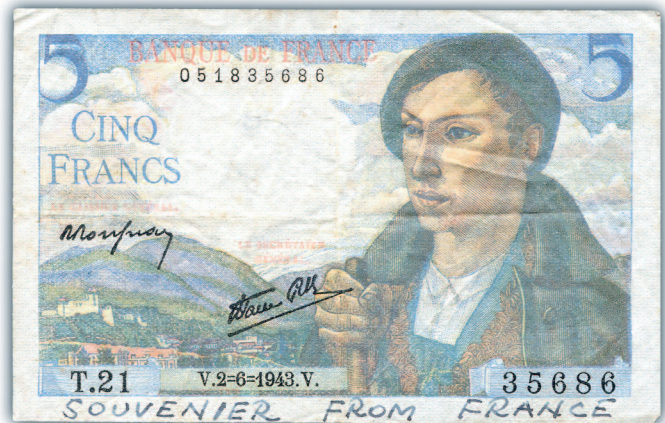
is billeted at *Edward VII*

Room *9*

Mess located at *Grand Hotel*



Mess and Billeting Card Army University Center No 2. Coupon no. 5  
Billeting at the Edward VII Hotel room 9 and mess at Grand Hotel  
Biarritz Back: Army map of Malesherbes / Boigneville 80 km south east of Paris



French 5 Francs dated 2 June 1943 inscribed Souvenir from France



*Allied Military Currency 5 & 10 Francs used by Military personnel post-invasion helped support the local economy as students purchased souvenirs*

### Books and a Library

Donald Engley, drafted in 1941, had graduated from Amherst, received a Masters in library science from Columbia University, and worked as an intern at the New York Public Library. By VE Day he was a captain on duty in prisoner-of-war camps and with displaced persons in Czechoslovakia. On July 8, 1945, Engley received orders to report immediately to the Information and Education Division in Paris, where he was informed that he was the librarian. At Biarritz, Engley had to find a place for a library. He settled on the Casino Municipale. "With a huge chandeliered gaming room that could become the reading room, with good space in adjoining rooms for books and staff, and with windows that looked out over the beach," he recalled, "it was very convertible to a library."

Books for the library were sourced from London and Oxford institutions as well as the remains of a local library that had served an English community in the town. This discovery netted four to five thousand books.

### Students and Staff

Although many of the soldier-students had fought in the European Theatre's bloodiest actions just months before, there was little evidence that the horrors of war affected their adjustment to peacetime study. If anything, the opposite seemed true. The fear that the GIs would fritter their time away on the beach proved similarly unfounded. The Dean of Education at Chicago University, seconded as academic head of BAU, noted that "GIs applied themselves to their academic work with an enthusiasm that faculty members had seldom observed in civilian institutions." Few failed and while graduation totals were below enrolments (at BAU, 9,465 graduates out of 10,295 attending), this resulted more from redeployments than poor performance.

The calibre of guest instructors and visiting lecturers was among BAU's most extraordinary attributes. Most famously, Marlene Dietrich came to lecture on movie acting techniques, and perform for the students. The story goes that the hapless (or lucky!) GI charged with looking after her found himself given the job of sucking her toes to help her sleep!

Actor-director Richard Whorf was among the visitors from Hollywood and Broadway to help shape the drama course. The *Comédie Française* made frequent trips to Biarritz, and French surrealist Paul Éluard – very much at the zenith of his fame – was appointed poet in residence.

The university was considered a showcase by the US command, and 12 friendly nations were invited to send guest students to sample a college education, American style. Only Britain,

France and the Netherlands took up the offer; but the "Foreign Legion", as they became known, were seen as a vital part of BAU's image as a beacon for international cooperation.

The university enrolled at least 4,000 students for two-month terms and offered a choice of eight major fields of study: agriculture, commerce, education, engineering, fine arts, journalism, liberal arts, and science.

### Who could attend?

US troops stationed throughout Europe were invited to apply for detached service at either SAU or BAU. Each of the major command units in the European theatre was assigned a quota proportionate to the unit's strength, no more than 10 percent of students could be commissioned officers. The only requirement for attending the schools was that applicants must have a high school diploma or its equivalent. Soldiers would be relieved of military duties while attending the universities. The enlisted men anticipated that "we would get pushed around just as much at a GI university as any other place in the army." As a result both schools opened short of the 4,000-student capacity, BAU enrolled 3,850 students, SAU had 3,641.

It seemed too bad that the universities couldn't live on and on for fresh legions of GIs. But after V-J Day (August 15, 1945) the troopships were no longer heading for the Pacific Theatre; as they were ferrying troops home across the Atlantic and the supply of students dwindled rapidly. SAU closed its doors after two terms, BAU after three. In all, a total of about 18,000 American soldiers attended the three universities.

### What remains?

The British were so impressed by what took place at Shrivenham that they decided to use SAU as the prototype for redoing their own military training facilities. The commandant of British Army Schools, Colonel G.S. Fillingham, remarked, "It is amazing that the British must come to the Americans in England to learn how to set up a school." The British relocated the Military College of Science at Shrivenham to SAU and converted it into a technical staff college. Since 1984 a civilian school, Cranfield University, has supplemented the range of courses available. Shrivenham, at least, has survived as a learning centre for the young. In Biarritz, however, the grand hotels in Biarritz quickly scrubbed away the marks made by GI boots and prepared once again to welcome pleasure-seeking European swells. The only reminder of the US student occupation is a street sign that reads, *Rue de l' Université Americaine, 1945-1946*.

The Army University Center No 2 in Biarritz, France, gained fame as the "GI Paradise", the US forces' cushiest billet: a college carved out of an opulent resort town. Writing in *Time* magazine, the novelist John Dos Passos dubbed its students "the most contented GIs in Europe".

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