

*Feature Story*



# FRANK LITTERST, JR. '43

## *An Old Ag Personified*

by Dennis Davenport '01

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*Editor's Note: This the first in a two-part series as we follow the story of Frank Litterst '43 as he recounts his life and how he, and most of his classmates, left Texas A&M and went to WWII.*

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Frank Litterst '43 perfectly fits the descriptions of an Old Ag and an Aggie's Aggie. Frank has been a Fightin' Texas Aggie for his entire 94 years of life. During his incredible lifetime, Frank has served his country in World War II, successfully operated a number of beef cattle operations, served the State of Texas, and Texas A&M University. He has become an icon in the beef cattle industry as well as in the Department of Animal Science at Texas A&M. It is also a safe bet that in addition to accomplishing whatever the mission is at hand, Frank and everybody involved had a good time during the process.

For starters, Frank has the Aggie birthright and bloodline. His dad, Frank Litterst, Sr. '19 was a lifetime diehard Aggie. The elder Litterst played quarterback on the Aggie football team but left the A&M College of Texas during World War I to join the Army. To his lifetime regret, the war ended before he could get across the pond. Frank, Sr. spent his life in the lumber business in Houston and had many Aggie friends who also impacted young Frank's love for A&M. Significantly, Frank became the beneficiary of several professional opportunities provided by his dad's underclassmen. This indeed says a lot for Frank's dad.

A lifelong Aggie football fan, Frank has

both suffered through and enjoyed 17 Aggie head coaches and two interims. Coaches Dana X. Bible and Jackie Sherrill rank as favorites. Frank attended his first Aggie football game at the age of 5 on November 11, 1927, at Rice Field in Houston, TX. The Aggies defeated the Rootatoot Instatoot (as Rice was lovingly referred to by Old Army) by a score of 14-0. During his fish year, Frank also attended the 1940 Sugar Bowl where the Aggies defeated Tulane and were crowned the 1939 National Champions. Fish Litterst made the trip to New Orleans on the train along with many fellow Cadets. Frank's grandparents had given him \$15 for the trip. Not afraid of taking a little risk, and expecting to increase his booty, Frank took on the dealer of a "Three Card Monty" game on the train. It took three hands, and fish Litterst was broke before the train got out of Brazos County.

At Texas A&M Frank became a member of A Battery Coast Artillery, serving as First Sergeant as a junior and Captain (now referred to as Commanding Officer) during his senior year. Frank recalls getting good ROTC training at A&M. They trained on campus and performed big gun live fire training over the Gulf near Galveston. Frank fired and learned how to maintain the 155mm Long Tom, the 40mm and 90mm anti-aircraft guns, the .50 and .30

caliber machine guns as well as rifles and side arms. Frank was also a member of the Ross Volunteer Company and the boxing club.

Having gone through rites of passage with the Ross Volunteers, the Saddle and Sirloin Club, and as a first sergeant designee, Frank recounts that Texas A&M was a tough place in Old Army. Frank even took his paddle to war. Serving with four classmates overseas, they relived Old Army days when they got homesick for Aggieland. Still in immaculate condition, Frank's paddle is prominently displayed on his gun rack. Ensign George Gay '40, lone survivor of Torpedo Squadron 8 from the Battle of Midway and one of the first American heroes of World War II, is the most prominent Aggie to have held the paddle. Gay, a former member of Frank's outfit and Major John A. "Jack" Hilger '32, second in command in the Doolittle Raid, visited A&M and spoke at Kyle Field. Frank and a couple of classmates were Gay's hosts. Gay was enacting a little Old Army on the group on Military Walk. As Aggie timing would have it, unannounced, the Commandant walked by. To the Aggies' delight, amusement, and relief, the Commandant disgustedly turned his

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Photo by Jennifer Hickle Carpenter.

Aggie photos and mementos displayed in Frank's den.

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head and proceeded along, ensuring not to interfere with Ensign George Gay. After a fun time at Franklin's Night Club, Ensign Gay was helped aboard a bus bound for his home in Houston.

On December 7, 1941, Frank, then a junior, was horseback riding with a classmate in Huntsville. They heard the news about Pearl Harbor and rushed back to campus to find all the Aggies fired up and ready to go to war. Fall semester 1941 ended soon thereafter. The first A&M student response was realized as a number of Aggies, including some of Frank's classmates, did not return for spring semester 1942. Wanting to get in the fight immediately, they did not wait for the draft, graduation, or induction. Instead, they joined the military as advisors or mercenaries under other Allied flags already at war, many in the English and Canadian Air Forces.

Colonel George F. Moore '08 was Commandant during Frank's first two years at A&M. Frank remembers him vividly and recalls that his transfer from A&M to his next command in the Philippines was not a big event as staff and students were leaving almost daily for the war. However, the fall of Corregidor and General Moore being taken prisoner,

as well as the fate of other Aggies, was devastating news in Aggieland.

Frank and the remainder of the Class of '43 completed the spring semester of 1942 and became Corps seniors in the traditional manner. However, Texas A&M converted to an academic trimester system in order to expedite graduation and provide candidates for the Officer Corps more quickly. Instead of going to branch training camp during the summer of 1942, '43 remained on campus for the summer trimester. Frank recalls how miserably hot it was. The subsequent fall 1942 trimester ended in January 1943.

Upon returning to campus after the 1942 Christmas break, the initial mission for '43 was to complete the trimester. At that point, having been expedited, '43 was academically complete and ready to enter into service. Also included in this group were a few individuals of other class years who were considered academic seniors.

During this time, the mission of the college and ROTC Department was to get '43 administratively ready and logistically organized to depart A&M for active duty and their branch schools. This group included all of '43 that remained on campus except for Veterinary Science students and a few deferred from service for physical reasons. The process involved final academic recording by the college,

Commencement, Graduation, inherent social events, and Final Review. The ROTC Department would update military records and coordinate travel plans to coincide with branch school dates. The Cadets were responsible for providing status updates to their home draft boards. Great efforts were made to cut the red tape and get '43 in position to get to their branch schools.

Realizing this would be their last hurrah before going to war, many '43 Cadets, Frank included, returned to celebrate New Year's Eve in Aggieland. Navel's, located in what is now the Farmers' Co-op Building at the intersection of Highway 21 and Texas Avenue and Franklin's, located west of the Vet School on University Drive, were the prominent Old Army night clubs. Oh, how they rocked that night! Frank celebrated at Navel's and enjoyed a raucously good time, in spite of having a beer bottle broken over his head.

*The Battalion reported on how the Cadets would finish their days at A&M and subsequent shipping out dates.*

**January 14, 1943: Edition** "The Class of '43 will bow out of Aggieland's social circles with their Ring Banquet and Dance in the main dining room of Sbis Hall from 7:00 p.m. until 9:00 p.m. and from 10:00 p.m. until 2:00 a.m. Following the speech making part of the banquet program, while the music of Barney Rapp plays softly, each

senior and his escort will ascend the steps behind the huge ring and pause in its center. The young lady then removes the senior's class ring from his finger and replaces it in the opposite position, with the '43 towards the end of his finger. This act signifies that the cadet has transformed from student to graduate, and he is supposed to wear his ring as it is placed forever. The couple then kiss and descend from the ring down the front steps and return to their seats. Barney Rapp and his New Englandlanders orchestra will begin at 10 p.m. and Ring Dance will last until 2 a.m. The curtain will ring down on the Class of '43 at Texas A&M with commencement exercises on Friday and Saturday, January 22-23, and mark the first class to be graduated under the speed-up program in effect at the college since last June."

**January 19, 1943:** "The Class of '43 orders received, 571 seniors will report to their respective branch schools. One hundred sixty seniors left for Houston Induction Center, then back to A&M to get to their various branch schools. For seniors reporting to their various base training camps after their induction, the schedule is as follows:

**February 4:** 21 Coast Artillery Seniors to Camp Davis

**February 5:** 104 Field Artillery Seniors to Ft. Sill

**February 5:** 34 Cavalry Seniors to Ft. Riley

**February 6:** 89 Infantry Seniors to Ft. Benning

**February 18:** 53 Coast Artillery Seniors to Camp Davis

**February 25:** 11 Coast Artillery Seniors to Camp Davis."

**January 21, 1943:** "Seniors to review for last time Saturday; Juniors Take Over. Seniors will participate in the last activity of their college careers Saturday morning at 10:00 a.m. when the bugler sounds first call for the Final Review and the entire Corps falls out of their dorms and marches to the drill field."

After departing College Station, Frank and his group of Coast Artillery Aggies traveled by train to Camp Davis, NC, located about 30 miles west of Wilmington. Their first stop was at Camp Beauregard, near Alexandria, LA, for processing into the Army. Frank and his Aggie Buddies became corporals in the U.S. Army. They got regulation haircuts and, having left their Aggie uniforms behind, were issued wool uniforms. Frank recalls that it was a



Junior Ross Volunteers meet Frank at the 2016 RVA spring meeting.

sobering step going down from an Aggie senior to an Army corporal.

Camp Davis was the sight of a major anti-aircraft artillery school. There Frank and his group of Coast Artillery Aggies joined ROTC units from many other eastern colleges. Similar to the training near Galveston, Camp Davis featured locations in which weapons were fired over the Atlantic Ocean. In many instances the targets were towed by Women Airforce Service Pilots. Frank and those who successfully completed the course were commissioned as second lieutenants on May 5, 1943. Afterwards, Frank took advantage of leave time, flew back to Houston and married Royce Dudley two days later. Their marriage would last 58 years; Royce passed away in 2002. The newlyweds honeymooned for a couple of days in Galveston. Unfortunately the nightlife was non-existent. Due to enemy submarine threats, Galveston was under wartime blackout conditions with lights not allowed.

Along with four classmates, Frank's next assignment was for advanced training at the Anti-Aircraft Artillery Training School at Camp Stewart, GA. The three-month session ended on August 7, 1943. Knowing he was headed overseas, but not knowing where, Frank boarded a west bound troop train.

The train terminated at Camp Stoneman, CA. Located on the San Joaquin River, with deep access to San Francisco Bay, Camp

Stoneman was the main embarkation point for soldiers going to the Pacific Theater. The out processing procedure included personnel file updates, wills, allotments, medical, dental, and eye examinations and immunizations, a 10-mile hike, last weapons instructions, troopship instructions, and over-seas issue. Frank recalls there were two Aggie classmates issuing rifles. The pre-embarkation process took about a week. Among the modern conveniences and recreational opportunities that were available, Camp Stoneman featured the world's largest telephone center and USO Shows with the biggest stars of the day performing.

Saying goodbye to Camp Stoneman, Frank and the group boarded an Army ferry for the several hour trip downriver into San Francisco Bay. Reaching the embarkation terminal under the cover of darkness, they boarded the Kota Agoeng, a Dutch Ship, which means City of Riches. For security purposes, she had only one light on. In a convoy of three ships, the Kota Agoeng got under way the next morning. Under the escort of several dirigibles, the convoy passed under the Golden Gate Bridge and entered the Pacific Ocean. The water was immediately rough and almost everyone aboard, including the crew, became seasick—Frank and classmate Earl Wunsche, included. Frank vividly remembers Earl holding his belt as he threw up over the side of the ship. The troops still did not know where the ship was heading.