

HAWARDEN...HOW IT ALL BEGAN

EYES ON THE SKIES HAWARDEN'S GROUND OBSERVER CORPS

Chapter 29:

By: Mary Truesdell Johnson

In the early 1950's headlines in the national papers were filled with worries about strained relations with the Soviet Union and their threat of using an atomic bomb.

Before electronic sensors guarded the approaches to North America and satellite warning systems peered down from space the United States depended entirely on civilian volunteers to be the first line of defense against an attack on our country.

Due to budget constraints and shortage of manpower, the Military was not able to fund the necessary men and equipment to carry out the early detection and warning system. The solution was to go to the American citizens and obtain volunteers to handle the program.

The original goal, established in the 1950's was set at 500,000 volunteers to man 19,500 Observer Posts who reported to 49 Filter Centers. The Observer's worked from any site that offered a clear and unobstructed view of the skies.

The front page of the Hawarden Independent on April 9, 1953 announced a Ground Observer Corps meeting at the American Legion Hall. All interested citizens were urged to attend. The American Legion had agreed to sponsor the Ground Observer Corps in Hawarden and Don Dowdey agreed to be the supervisor. Air Force Officers would be present to explain the program and to show a moving picture on the subject. Mr. Dowdey reported that the bell tower at the Central school would be the site for the observers and a telephone with a direct line to the Offutt Air Force Base in Omaha, Neb. was being installed.

Across the United States, men, women and teenagers volunteered to watch the skies on a 24/7 basis to protect their beloved country. As of 1954 13,000 Iowans gave their time and effort so that trained eyes and ears might detect enemy planes in the event of an attack on the US.

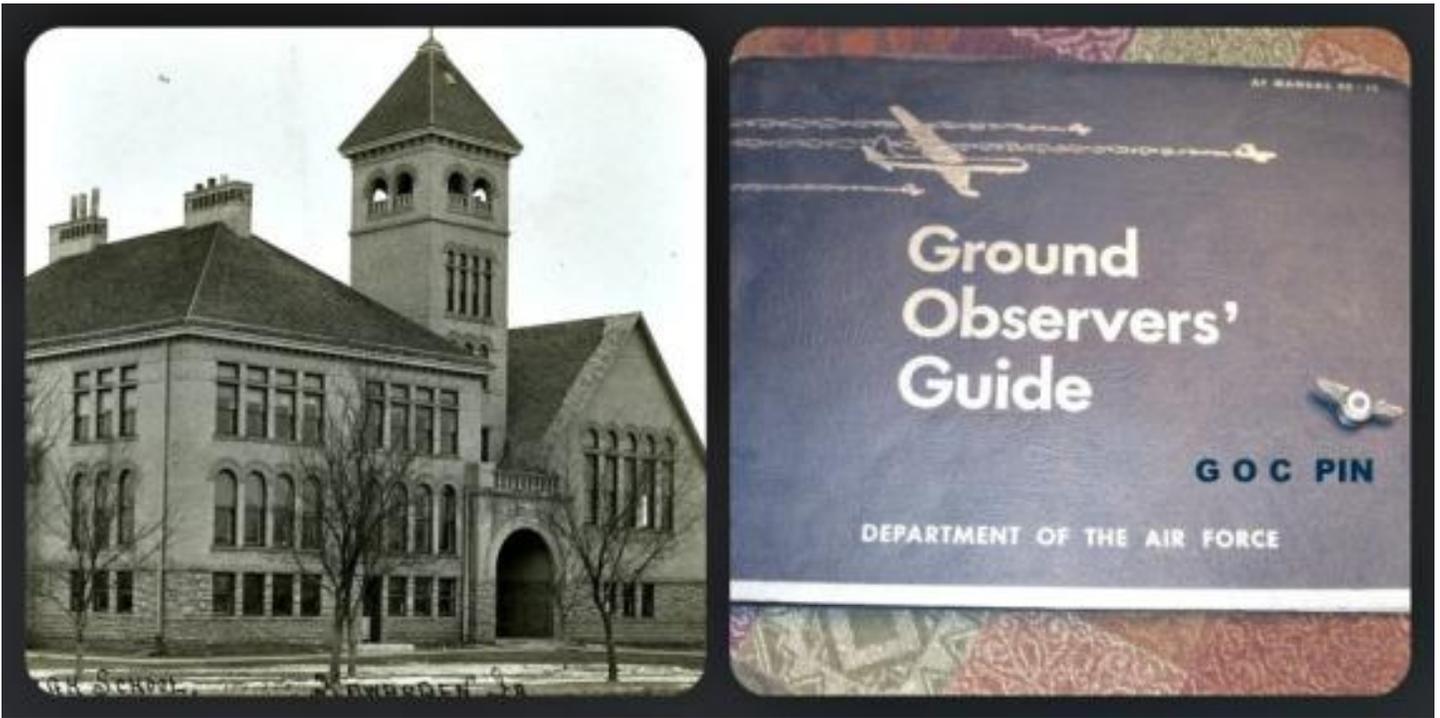
I have not been able to find a list of the volunteers from the Hawarden area, but I do know that several of them were teenagers and to this day talk of the experience with pride and emotion.

Written by Ron Thompson - 1957 graduate of Hawarden High School:

I was fourteen years of age and proud to be a member of the Hawarden Ground Observer Corps when it was formed in 1953. Like all the volunteers I took the responsibility that the Corps shouldered very seriously. We were part of our Country's early warning system against an enemy warplanes invasion. The USSR had "The Bomb" and we were doing our part to fight "the Cold War."

After induction into the Corps, I was given a "rigorous" (about 1 or 2 hours) training on how to identify airplanes, both friendly and foe. Then I pledged allegiance to the flag, made a solemn promise to be vigilant and keep my eyes peeled for enemy aircraft when on duty, and pinned on my silver GOC Wings. I was ready for duty and proud to serve my country.

The observation post was high up in the Central School bell tower. When my team of observers was scheduled for duty, I made sure that I was on time to relieve the previous observers. No one in the Corps wanted to be responsible for breaking the continuity of our air watch patrol and allow an enemy plane to slip by without being reported to GOC central at Offutt Air Force Base.



To reach the Bell Tower, we used the east ground floor entrance of the school. Once inside I climbed the two flights of stairs to the third floor and then climbed a narrow ladder leading up to the open air belfry; a little square room with a small table in the center. On the table sat our observation gear; a pair of binoculars, a duty roster, and a black telephone. Next to the phone was a GOC AIRCRAFT RECOGNITION book containing silhouettes of planes we needed to identify. It was a very complete manual. It contained profiles of every plane ever built. Nothing was left to chance. We were prepared!

The following comes from the recollections of **Stuart Flynn: 1956 graduate of Hawarden High School:** I remember being on duty in the school tower and at various times reported one of our B 36 bombers flying high overhead. When we picked up the phone to give a report, we first said something like, "Aircraft Flash" then we repeated our post identification, which was : **Juliet, Nectar Three Five Black.** We then proceeded with repeating the things we had written down on the official form such as how many aircraft, approximate altitude, direction, etc.

Another vivid memory I have was on "Armed Forces Day". Jules Johnson and I were on duty and all of a sudden the grade school tower was being "buzzed" by two thundering P-51 Mustang Fighters. The roar of those two fighters was deafening as they came close to the tower. They were probably less than 500 feet off the ground and made at least a couple of passes at us. For a brief moment I thought we were under attack by the Russians!! Jules stayed pretty calm and we were eventually able to determine that they were friendly aircraft. As I remember, Jules called the report in to Offutt. Later it was decided that they were Air National Guard Planes from the Sioux City base.

I also remember how windy and cold it often was while on duty in the tower. There were no windows or walls to protect us from the weather.

Stuart's other story about the GOC was a story he heard about Ken Bode being injured with a gash on his head caused by an overhanging wood beam. On researching this story, Ken reported to me that his injury came from a 2x4 that came flying through the hole where the ladder to reach the tower was located. His head was indeed gashed and he later received a 'GOC lavender heart' to recognize his war injury.

I know many others from the Hawarden area were volunteers to this prestigious group. I have made attempts to locate more stories about this period of Hawarden's history, and would still love to hear them. They should be recorded for posterity.

Fifty years later, the wings and badges of the GOC are collector's items enshrined in museums or sold on e bay. The teenagers who helped man the ramshackle observation posts are now drawing social security. Only a few of the towers from which they phoned their reports have survived the ravages of time. What a wonderful legacy for America....1,000's of volunteers reported to be of service to their country without any thought of recognition or compensation.

There is no way to tell if an imminent air attack on the US was deterred by this band of patriotic volunteers, just as it is impossible to tell how different things could have been without them. Their dedication and commitment to their country deserves a word of thanks....even at this late date.

“KEEP YOUR EYES TO THE SKIES! YOUR COUNTRY IS COUNTING ON YOU!”