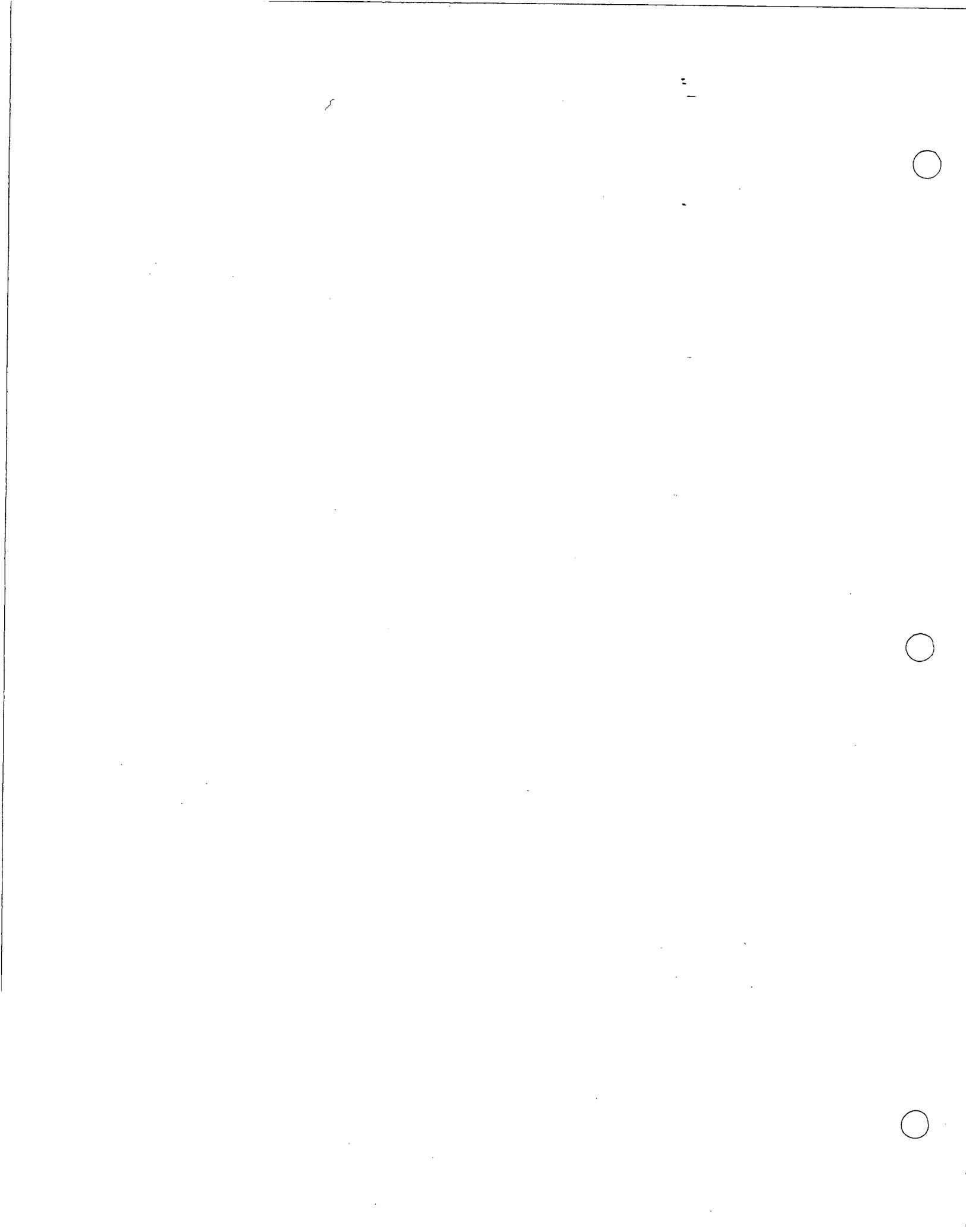


LEADERSHIP OR MANAGEMENT: THE CADET CHAIN OF COMMAND AND
THE WEST POINT CLASS OF 1915

by
CPT. D. L. Gabel

HI 600
4 December 1989



LEADERSHIP OR MANAGEMENT: THE CADET CHAIN OF COMMAND AND
THE WEST POINT CLASS OF 1915.

Eisenhower, Bradley, Van Fleet. These are names that today are synonymous with leadership and military excellence. Each, at the peak of his military career, commanded hundreds of thousands of soldiers on the field of battle and brought victory to the United States Army. Although from different backgrounds and parts of the country these three great men had one thing in common: they were all members of the United States Military Academy graduating Class of 1915. They, along with 161 of their classmates, left West Point in the summer of 1915 to serve in the armed forces of the United States. During their careers fifty-nine of the graduates of this class went on to attain the rank of brigadier general or higher. Of these fifty-nine, twenty-three reached major general, seven made lieutenant general, two earned four stars, and two held the highest rank in the Army, that of five-star General of the Army.¹ The Class of 1915 came to be known as "The Class the Stars Fell On."

Prior to all of their successes in the military each of these men, as cadets at West Point, had his first opportunity to practice leadership in a military environment. The most logical system by which a cadet

should have been able to gain leadership experience was by serving in the chain of command within the Corps of Cadets. The purpose of this paper is to explore the cadet chain of command structure that was in place during the four years that the Class of 1915 was attending West Point. What was its purpose? And how did it prepare the future officers of our military to embark on careers of leadership?

In 1911, when the Class of 1915 entered West Point, the Corps was 521 cadets strong. Throughout their four years it continued to grow at a steady, but slow, pace. Upon graduation in 1915 the Corps numbered 631. Throughout this period of gradual growth the organization of the Corps of Cadets remained the same.

The structure of the Corps was much like a Regular Army unit. There were two battalions of three companies each. The first battalion consisted of companies A through C and the second battalion companies D through F. The hierarchical structure further organized each company into platoons, squads, and teams. Ostensibly in charge of each of these levels of command was a cadet, usually a first or second classman. But this is where the similarity to a real military unit ends, because the actual reins of control were in the hands of a group of Regular Army commissioned officers outside of this chain of command.

The Commandant of Cadets was, as he is today, the commander of the Corps of Cadets. His duties were to ensure the good order and discipline of the Corps and to be the

primary instructor in drill regulations and in the rules of military police, discipline, and administration.² To assist him in running the Corps the Commandant had two battalion commanders and six company commanders, each of whom was a commissioned officer in the Army. These officers held the titles of commanders first and tactical instructors second. As with the Commandant the primary duties of these tactical officers revolved around the order and discipline of the Corps of Cadets. They were to ensure all regulations were abided by and that the barracks were in good order each day. To accomplish this they were to inspect the barracks both day and night, and report any infractions to the commandant on a daily basis.⁴

The cadet chain of command had its own officers, sergeants, and corporals. The chance to demonstrate leadership ability or potential should have been greatest when a cadet was actually in charge of other cadets. Unfortunately, this philosophy did not hold true for the Class of 1915 during most of their time at the Academy. The cadet chain of command, while of a standard military structure, was invested with few real powers through which the cadets could exercise their leadership skills. The Corps and its chain of command were organized for the administration and accountability of the cadets, not for developing leadership. Their primary mission in the system was also the order and discipline of the Corps.

The Superintendent selected Cadet officers and noncommissioned officers from those cadets who were most studious, soldier-like in the performance of their duties, and most exemplary in their general deportment.⁵ This was the official criteria. When one examines the records of some of the cadets that were chosen for positions in the Class of 1915, it is apparent that the actual selection process varied quite often from this standard.

In 1911, when the Class of 1915 entered West Point, cadet officers came from the first class, cadet noncommissioned officers (NCOs) from the second class, and cadet corporals from the third class. In 1914 the Commandant of Cadets, Lieutenant Colonel Morton F. Smith changed this procedure. Starting in June 1914 all of the cadet officers and NCOs came from the first class, and the corporals from the second class. The third class cadets remained privates.⁶

Lieutenant Colonel Smith changed the class rank structure to provide the maximum opportunity for the first classmen to exercise authority and to gain experience as instructors in the various drills the cadets practiced. The outcome of this additional experience was to prepare the first class for duties that they could expect to encounter as new commissioned officers. The members of the first class were to feel that they were young officers gaining experience rather than cadets who needed to be watched and disciplined.⁷ With the institution of this change being in

June 1914, the Class of 1915 would reap the most out of whatever benefits would come of it. What this meant to them was that they were able to hold all of the cadet NCO positions under the old system, and when they became first classmen all of the positions above corporal were reserved for their class. Therefore, they had more opportunities to fill more leadership positions than either the class ahead of or behind them. The Commandant recognized the utility of using the cadet chain of command system to train and prepare the cadets for their future, as well as to manage the Corps.

While the cadet chain of command design was much as one would see in an Army unit, there was one clear exception. In 1915 the senior cadet in the Corps was the adjutant. He was the principal link between the Commandant and the Corps of Cadets. So at this time the senior cadet was not a cadet commander, but a senior cadet staff officer for the Commandant. The primary duties of the adjutant were administrative. Each day the adjutant held formation, took the reports of the companies, and passed them along to the Commandant. In the evenings he would again receive the reports from the companies, and report any absentees to the officer of the day. At this time he would also present to the officer of the day the list of cadets who were to serve punishment on that day.⁸ In addition to these standard duties the adjutant supervised a staff of three fellow cadets, consisting of the cadet sergeant major, the cadet quartermaster, and the cadet quartermaster sergeant. His

staffs primary duties were to coordinate the administrative and logistical requirements of the companies.

A cadet captain was at the head of each company. He was not the cadet company commander, as they are titled today, but was the senior cadet responsible for the maintenance of administration and discipline. To assist him in his duties the captain also had a company quartermaster sergeant and first sergeant. The regulations make it quite clear that he was not the commander, but was to provide general supervision over the administration of his company. In addition to these administrative duties the cadet captain, with the assistance of his lieutenants and NCOs, was to maintain discipline within his company area and assist in instruction when required. The areas of instruction that the first classmen were to assist in were not specified but were most probably in the areas covered by the Tactical Department, such as drill or marksmanship training.

While perhaps not so clear as to what the instructional duty requirements were, the regulations were explicit that the responsibility for maintaining order and discipline in the barracks was the duty of the cadet captains and their company chain of command. Within each company area the billets were sub-divided, and under the overall supervision of the company tactical officer a cadet officer or NCO was responsible for each section. In the case of any disorderly conduct or disruption within the barracks the cadet officer

or NCO was to reinstate order, report the cadets involved, and if the incident warranted it, contact the officer in charge immediately.⁹ Additionally, the section leader was to inspect the barracks each day and submit a report of any deficiencies to the tactical officer. In general then, the cadets were responsible for policing themselves and reporting any departures from regulations to the authorities (the tactical officers). In every case the real authority lay in the hands of a commissioned officer; the cadets were only to report infractions. There is no indication that cadets made any decisions, or that the authorities would have welcomed any such initiative.

The duties of the cadet company first sergeant were also fairly well delineated. As in a regular unit the duties of the cadet first sergeant included most of the daily operations and administration. He was responsible for maintaining the company records, which included the morning report book, the sick-call book, the delinquency book, and the company roster.¹⁰ He had to ensure that cadets annotated each of these books properly and, when required, were ready for inspection by the tactical officer. Each evening the first sergeant would also detail cadets from his company, by roster, for guard duty the next day. He would then post it on the company board and provide a copy to the cadet sergeant major.¹¹

As with the other cadet chain of command positions, the primary duties of the cadet sergeants and corporals centered

around the accountability and orderliness of their squads or teams, respectively. This of course meant knowing each person in the squad or team and being able to report accurately on his status during each formation. Within these ranks there were special positions known as color sergeant and color corporal. The people holding these color ranks did not have a squad or team but were responsible solely for carrying the unit or national colors during formation or parade.

The long standing purposes of the cadet chain of command were to assist in the administrative management of the Corps of Cadets and to help the Commandant in maintaining discipline. The organization of the Corps into military-like units, the roles and responsibilities of the cadets in the positions, and the constraints of the regulations all reinforced these purposes. The regulations did not cover the new outlook on the purpose of the cadet chain of command, to provide training for the first class in instruction and leadership. The sentiments expressed by the Superintendent in 1875 that the "offices to which cadets are appointed have more reference to the discipline and administration of the Corps of Cadets than to instruction of cadets in the duties of officers in the Army at large" were still operating in 1915.¹² Only through such programs as those instituted by the Commandant, beginning in 1914, was the potential for the cadet chain of command to be another tool for developing better officers slowly being realized.

A second area in the cadet leadership system that did not address development as a purpose was the process for selecting those cadets who would hold the positions. The regulation stipulated that those cadets most exemplary in deportment, studiousness, and soldier-like performance would be chosen to be cadet officers and NCOs. This procedure no doubt resulted in the cadets needing the least training being selected as cadet leaders. As far back as 1875, cadets and cadre alike saw selection for cadet leadership positions as a reward for good conduct. In a letter to the Secretary of War the Superintendent, Colonel Thomas Ruger, wrote that "the appointment was prized as reward of merit and good conduct."¹³ Using chain of command positions as a reward for good conduct was still in practice. The cadet selected as the adjutant for the class of 1914, while being 55th in his class overall, was first in conduct.

Although not based solely on their class standing in conduct or any other subject, this procedure for rewarding cadets for merit and good conduct did not change for the class of 1915. A number of cadets of the class of 1915 held positions at some level in the chain of command for their last three years, while some were never selected at all. Even under the Commandant's new program that reserved all of the cadet officer and NCO positions for the first class, a number of the cadets of the class of 1915 never had the opportunity to lead their fellows and to gain from that experience.

Among the fifty-nine cadets of the class of 1915 who achieved the rank of general officer, there was a great variety in the number, and type, of chain of command positions each held while at the Academy. Some, such as William Covell (Lieutenant General), John Bragdon (Major General), and Robert Strong (Brigadier General), held positions in the cadet chain of command every semester from their yearling year through graduation. They were both cadet noncommissioned officers and officers during their time at the Academy. Others, such as Joseph McNarney (General), Hubert Harmon (Lieutenant General), George Stratemeyer (Lieutenant General), and Joseph Swing (Lieutenant General), never held any position in the chain of command, and graduated cadet privates. The most famous cadets of the class, Omar Bradley (General of the Army), Dwight Eisenhower (General of the Army), and James Van Fleet (General), were somewhere in between these two extremes. Bradley reached the highest rank of the three, that of cadet lieutenant, while Eisenhower maintained the position of color sergeant for both semesters of his first class year.

None of these men could be said to have failed in his career, as becoming a general officer is success by almost any measure. What impact being a cadet leader had on their ultimate success would be difficult to determine. However, those who directly credit West Point with their development as leaders, such as Omar Bradley, refer to their experiences

on the fields of sports competition, rather than their challenges as cadet officers.¹⁴

For the cadet chosen to be the Corps adjutant, or the company captain, the benefits of being in such a position of leadership to prepare him to be a commissioned officer may not have been obvious in 1915. But then, the commissioned cadre did not view the chain of command for the Corps of Cadets as a developmental tool. The cadet chain of command was meant to assist the Commandant in maintaining the good order and discipline of the Corps. The idea of leadership development through more autonomy and active participation by the senior classes was still in its infancy at West Point in 1915.

Many of the issues faced by the cadre and the cadets of 1915 in relation to the purpose of the cadet chain of command still confront the Academy today. How much responsibility for running the Corps of Cadets should be put in the hands of the cadets? Should the selection of cadets to positions of rank and responsibility be done on a basis of reward for demonstrated leadership ability? Or should those who need the leadership training be put into the chain of command to provide them additional experience? The Superintendent, the Commandant, and every company level Tactical Officer must consider these issues, and others like them, in the light of the mission and purpose of the Academy today: to provide leaders of character to the nation.

Endnotes

¹Paul W. Child, ed., Register of Graduates and Former Graduates of the United States Military Academy 1802-1987. (West Point: Association of Graduates USMA, 1987), p. 311-314.

²Regulations for the USMA, West Point, N.Y. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1911), p. 9.

³Official Register of Officers and Cadets: USMA 1915. (USMA Press and Bindery, 1915), p. 46.

⁴Regulations for the USMA, West Point, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1911), p. 55.

⁵Ibid., p. 61.

⁶Annual Report of the Superintendent, (USMA Archives), vol. 9: 1913-1915, p. 12.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Regulations For The Interior Police And Discipline Of The United States Corps Of Cadets. (West Point: Press of U. S. Military Academy, 1906), p. 5.

⁹Regulations for the USMA, West Point, N.Y. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1911), p. 74.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 61.

¹¹Regulations For Discipline, p. 14.

¹²Superintendent's Letter Book, (USMA Archives Series 2, 1875), vol. 5: 1867-1875, p. 472.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Omar Bradley and Clay Blair. A General's Life, An Autobiography. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 34.

Selected Bibliography

- Ambrose, Stephen E. Eisenhower, 2 vols. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983. Vol. 1, 1890-1952.
- Ambrose, Stephen E. Duty, Honor, Country: A History of West Point. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966.
- Bradley, Omar and Blair, Clay. A General's Life, An Autobiography. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983.
- Child, Paul W., ed. Register of Graduates and Former Cadets of the United States Military Academy, 1802-1987. West Point: Association of Graduates, USMA, 1987.
- Engeman, Jack. West Point: The Life of a Cadet. rev. ed. New York: Lothrop, Lee, and Shepard, 1967.
- Superintendent's Letter Book. USMA Archives Series 2, Vol. 5: 1867-1875.
- Official Register of Officers and Cadets: USMA 1906-1915. USMA Press and Bindery, 1915.
- Regulations for the USMA, West Point, N.Y. Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1911.
- Regulations for the Interior Police and Discipline of the United States Corps Of Cadets. West Point: Press of U.S. Military Academy, 1906.
- United States Military Academy Annual Report of the Superintendent. USMA Archives, Vol. 9: 1913-1915.
- The Howitzer, 1913. New York: Chas L. Willard Co., 1913.
- The Howitzer, 1914. New York: Chas L. Willard Co., 1914.
- The Howitzer, 1915. New York: Chas L. Willard Co., 1915.