

Grooming the Army Leader:
The Evolution of Cadet Field Training
(Third Class Summer, 1945-Present)

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The ceremony was both short and emotional. In honor of Lieutenant General Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr., the United States Military Academy (USMA) posthumously dedicated a major cadet training area. On July 6, 1946, Major General Maxwell Taylor formally renamed the cadet training area Camp Buckner. World War II had not only taken LTG Buckner's life but also bestowed greatness on those present at his dedication. Among others, Chester W. Nimitz, Admiral of the Fleet and WW II hero, witnessed the dedication. WW II was over, but this ceremony heralded a new era of training at West Point. The seeds of modern training for a West Point cadet were present during WW II.

With the end of WW II quickly approaching, USMA determined there was a need to change the methods of cadet summer training. Technological advances in ground warfare required cadet competence in new equipment such as tanks and light machine guns. As technology continued to improve, West Point saw the need for additional land for training areas. The location of this land was about six miles southwest of West Point's boundaries. This annexed land was once a premier summer resort during the early 20th century and resided on the banks of Lake Popolopen. This would become the future site of summer training for the Third Class cadets where they would learn more about the various branches of the Army.

For the next fifty years, West Point periodically adjusted the Third Class Summer Training framework. The intent was to stay current with Army training doctrine. Over the years, USMA planners have made numerous adjustments to the Cadet Field Training (CFT) mission in order to maintain consistency with doctrine. Today, questions surface about the quality of training that CFT provides. One train of thought is that CFT does not prepare cadets for the challenges of the Army leaders in the 21st century.

Despite the changes to CFT throughout the years, the focus remained on the development of a cadet as a military leader. Throughout the years, the CFT experience prepared cadets for the duties of an Army small unit leader. The only differences in the CFT training model over the years were those that reflected changing roles of the Army. Today, these same differences generate unnecessary concern with senior Army officers for the quality of military training for the Corps of Cadets.

Before looking at the development of CFT, one should be familiar with the history of the training area. On the banks of Lake Popolopen, Camp Buckner's lineage dates back to 1755. The property was originally under the control of a local mining company. Periods of heavy rain hindered mining operations. "The mine company was having trouble keeping these high waters out of the mine shaft. In an attempt to control the high water, the mining company built a stone dam across Popolopen Creek in 1817 near the site of the present dam".¹ The company eventually sold the property to J.J. Redner, who converted the land into a resort area. Lake Popolopen remained part of the Redner Estate for the next 125 years. As the Corps of Cadets expanded, so did the need for additional land. "West Point was interested in the area around Popolopen because of the water supply. In 1931 Congress authorized the purchase of Lake Popolopen and surrounding area".² However, the actual purchase took a number of years. WW II later sparked large-scale mobilization that included West Point. "With the national emergency on, and a dire need for the Popolopen area, the government moved in and took over the lake and the Redner Estate surrounding the lake in the early spring of 1942".³

¹ Cornay, *The History of Camp Buckner, West Point*, U.S. Military Academy Library, 1952, p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³ *Ibid.*

The lessons learned from WW II created a need for change in the summer military training of cadets. Major learning points included the importance of combined arms operations. "Regardless of the terrain or enemy involved, most divisions in Europe and many in the Pacific believed that they needed tank, antiaircraft, antitank, and nondivisional engineer support in virtually all circumstances".⁴ As a result, USMA planners saw the need to develop a CFT training program that familiarized cadets with combat, combat support and combat service support operations. The benefit would be a well-rounded officer who would understand the facets of combined arms operations.

This instruction consisted of the following: rifle marksmanship, driver training and first echelon maintenance, antiaircraft instruction, use and maintenance of armored vehicles, practical military engineering, signal communication, use of light machine gun, carbine, and BAR, and tactical employment of small units.⁵

Though cadets gained an understanding of the various branches in the Army, an emphasis did remain on the infantry branch. It appears that West Point leaders continued to believe that infantry training was an excellent tool for developing cadet leadership. Regardless of the validity of this belief, the heart of tactical training remained small unit infantry training. In this environment, cadets had the opportunity to hone leadership skills learned throughout the summer. For the first time, cadets were responsible for leading other soldiers in a tactical setting. "This was especially true during the final two weeks of training when the various small unit exercises were held".⁶

It is important to note that the infantry tactics taught to the cadets mirrored the training of soldiers fighting in WW II. Good examples include the German pillbox and

⁴ House, Toward Combined Arms Warfare, Ft. Leavenworth, USCGSC, 1984, p. 107.

⁵ USMA, Annual Report of the Superintendent, West Point, USMA, 1947, p. 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Japanese cave positions encountered by American soldiers in the European and Pacific Theater, respectively.

Instruction was given in the tactical employment of small units as follows: squad in the attack, followed by the squad in the attack of a pill-box, squad in the attack with a tank, squad as the point of an advanced guard, squad as a day light patrol, squad as a night reconnaissance patrol, squad in the defense, squad in the defense of a road block, platoon in the attack, platoon in attack of a cave position, attack of a fortified village, and an attack at night.⁷

Cadets were well trained in infantry tactics. Moreover, continuous improvements in technology increased the American soldier's confidence in the fighting capabilities of the Army. However, no one could foresee the future Cold War with Communism.

During fall 1950, the newly formed United Nations (UN) fought the spread of Communism with deployed American forces. After his master strike at Inchon, General MacArthur grew confident that North Korean forces would meet imminent defeat. However, he underestimated the abilities of the Chinese Communist Forces (CCF). Consequently, the CCF attacked the American forces and achieved "strategic, operational, and tactical surprise, while attacking with such ferocity and shock that MacArthur's formations were pushed to the brink of disaster."⁸

The shockwave of the Army's failure in Korea eventually hit West Point. American soldiers encountered massive waves of relentless Chinese soldiers. In many cases, the soldiers found that they could not stop the onslaught of the CCF. However, American units that could effectively use the combat multipliers were successful. One example was the American attacks launched to destroy enemy personnel. "The U.S. used

⁷ Ibid., p. 20.

⁸ McMichael, A Historical Perspective on Light Infantry, Ft Leavenworth, USCGSC, 1987, p. 51.

its World War II doctrine for combining the different arms in such attacks, modifying that doctrine slightly to maximize the available firepower and to minimize casualties.”⁹ The Korean War initially illustrated a constant struggle between ground and air forces. Ground commanders preferred the WW II system of close air support (CAS) control. “Gradually, the air and ground leaders became more familiar with each other’s operations and capabilities”.¹⁰ From a defensive perspective, the Army saw the effectiveness of choreographed combat operations. “When such attacks occurred, a combination of artillery, heavy infantry weapons, and the organic weapons of the infantry proved effective in halting them”.¹¹ On numerous occasions, American soldiers found themselves fighting independently as small units during the Korean War. “The shortage of manpower and the hilly terrain of the Korean peninsula increased the dispersion and isolation of defending units”.¹² It was obvious that small unit leadership was one key to success on the battlefield.

This new focus was obvious Third Class during the Third Class summer of 1951. CFT included “the instruction in tactics and techniques of small units; the care, employment, and firing of type (special) weapons... emphasis during the period is placed on practical work”¹³ exercises in tactical leadership of the Third Class cadets. Many of the exercises focused on close-quarters combat, which mirrored the experiences of American soldiers in Korea. American soldiers also learned the hard way that physical fitness was extremely important. There were cases where soldiers were too fatigued to continue to

⁹ House, p. 150.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 153.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 150.

¹² Ibid., p. 149.

¹³ USMA, United States Military Academy Catalog, West Point, USMA, 1951-52, p. 62.

fight. An example is Task Force Smith. During the initial North Korean offensive, some American soldiered were too fatigued to withdraw south.

The Army learned that officers at platoon level fought fiercely with their soldiers during combat with the numerically superior CCF. During the summer of 1956, the Commandant of Cadets, BG John L. Throckmorton, made the appropriate changes. BG Throckmorton was a fanatically successful regimental commander in Korea. First, he gave specific directives to enhance small unit leadership development. His directives for the Third Class were as follows:

- (1) To conduct individual and unit field training.
- (2) To maintain a high level of physical conditioning.
- (3) To foster the development of unit teamwork.
- (4) To inculcate a positive attitude.¹⁴

There were also training objectives for the First Class cadets. "By assumption of command of the Third Class units, (the First Class were) to learn the duties, responsibilities and problems of junior officers".¹⁵ With this experience, CFT ensured that the leader development of cadets for future officership maintained its same focus from the WW II era.

As Fourth Classmen, the cadets learned the importance of self-discipline and good followership. "The next step is the learning of the basic technical skills of the troops with which this future officer will serve".¹⁶

USMA also revised the practical work exercises where the cadets could understand the range of capabilities of the American Army during the Cold War. The

¹⁴ USMA, Camp Buckner: Summer Training Camp, West Point, USMA, 1956, p. 1.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 1-2.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 1.

Commandant recognized that the demands of a modern war require every officer who commands a unit of any kind in combat to be familiar with the capabilities and limitations of all units they support or by which they are supported. Another major change was the implementation of performance-oriented training. The Commandant outlined the practical work focus with the following objectives:

- (1) To qualify each cadet with the M-1 rifle.
- (2) To familiarize each cadet with the Infantry Weapons of the Regimental Combat Team with emphasis on the Light Machine Gun.
- (3) To train cadets in field firing technique.
- (4) To train cadets in ground combat techniques to include Infantry Squad and Platoon Tactics.
- (5) To familiarize cadets with the organization of equipment and capabilities of the Tank platoon, the Field Artillery Battery and Engineer Combat Company as part of the Combined Arms team.
- (6) To familiarize each cadet with field type operations of antiaircraft Artillery, Quartermaster Corps, Transportation Corps and Corps of Military Police.
- (7) To familiarize each cadet with basic signal communication with emphasis in that found in small combat units.¹⁷

The significant difference in these directives was the strong emphasis on training that integrated combat arms with support branches of the Army to give the cadet more insight into combined arms operations.

With the election of President Kennedy, USMA experienced another expansion of the Corps of Cadets. A number of changes took place at West Point and the Army. The end of the 1960's found the United States engulfed in the Vietnam War. American soldiers fought in a new type of war characterized as unconventional. To deal with this new type of warfare, the Kennedy Administration created the Army Special Forces in the early 1960's. However, there were changes in tactics as well as organization. "The new

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 2.

administration quickly approved ongoing army studies for a different division organization, the Reorganization Objectives Army Division (ROAD)".¹⁸ The Army also implemented the use of airmobility on the modern battlefield. Small unit leaders would now have to understand the capabilities and limitations of aircraft. This new ability was, of course, tied to the strategic goal of the American government. "The Kennedy administration's dedication to flexible response also brought the long-standing question of helicopter mobility to resolution. The result was a noteworthy new capability in air-ground interaction and in tactical operations in general".¹⁹

Changes took place at West Point as well. Cadet training at CFT took a new twist with the implementation of limited special operations exercises. New additions included the provision of "RECONDO (ranger type) training in patrolling, mountaineering hand to hand combat and survival techniques...".²⁰ The emphasis on special operations became even stronger the next year. USMA added a formal cadet orientation to Army Special Forces.

Throughout the summer of 1966, training at Camp Buckner emphasized current tactics, techniques, and operations in Vietnam, both in primary instruction and as instructional backdrops. For example, the instruction in mines, obstacles, and booby traps focused on those employed and encountered in Vietnam. As an instructional backdrop, simulated VC base camps were constructed to serve as objectives for patrols during RECONDO training.²¹

The unconventional nature of the Vietnam War also created the need for cadet training in the realm of morality. American soldiers found themselves in a situation where

¹⁸ House, p. 158.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 160.

²⁰ USMA, United States Military Academy Catalog, 1966-67, p. 145.

²¹ USMA, Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1966, p. 17.

the enemy resembled the people for which they fought. This created great potential for immoral acts such as the killing of innocent civilians. Thus USMA saw the need for morality training during CFT. With this knowledge, cadets would be able to ensure their soldiers followed the laws of land warfare. CFT tied the two together so that cadets could gain "leadership experience through troop leading in a combat environment; and [gain a] complete understanding of the individual moral obligations of a member of the U.S. Army".²² The only changes in CFT training were new conditions under which these cadets would lead.

During the early 1970's, the Army found itself dealing with more than the Vietnam War. The Cold War with the Soviet Union intensified with the Army's willingness to use chemical weapons on the battlefield. Overlooking the Fulda Gap, American cavalry squadrons trained for the possibility of fighting a large Soviet armored force. With nuclear warfare as a new condition of the modern battlefield, USMA integrated nuclear, chemical, and biological (NBC) training into the CFT program. The Third Class cadet trained on the "individual protective measures against chemical, biological and radiological attacks; to provide familiarity with....weapons organic to the maneuver battalion..."²³ Additionally, CFT brought more realism to the training program by training cadets on skills that would be key to their success as future platoon leaders.

The trend towards more realism in military training continued after the war, especially in the summer training at Camp Buckner, where sergeants were brought from the airborne divisions to teach branch skills to third classmen.²⁴

²² USMA, United States Military Academy Catalog, 1967-68, p. 95.

²³ USMA, United States Military Academy Catalog, 1970-71, p. 119.

²⁴ Nye, The Inadvertent Demise of the Traditional Academy, 1945-1995, Unpublished manuscript, USMA, 1995, p. 8.

With the Vietnam War winding down, the Army placed significant focus on mechanized warfare. The Soviets possessed large armored forces, so more emphasis fell on mounted training at CFT. "At the Armor Center, Fort Knox, Kentucky, Third Classmen trained as members of mechanized rifle platoons and tank crews in tank-infantry team day and night attack exercises".²⁵

However, there remained a missed opportunity to train the CFT cadet cadre detail. While the Third Class benefited from the training, the First Class did little more than serve as escorts. The USMA Artillery Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) gave this impression. "Detail members are not required to attend any portion of the Field Artillery training nor will evaluations be rendered on them."²⁶ Third Classmen traditionally were the focus of leadership development.

Today, CFT continues to fulfill the same role of developing cadet leadership skills. Numerous changes, such as admission of women, transformed CFT as a developmental tool for all cadets whether they are First, Second or Third class cadets. The Cadet Leader Development System (CLDS) mandates that CFT operate as a field laboratory that will develop multiple cadet classes instead of only one class. 1988 was the significant year of transition. The number of cadet cadre for the Third Class cadets increased. "This increase in the number of cadet cadre members...grew out of a desire of the Superintendent to expand cadet leadership opportunities".²⁷ Unlike the training committees of the past, USMA placed responsibility for Third Class training on the cadet chain of command.

This CFT restructuring established a training environment at Camp Buckner where the cadre are fully involved in the training of their

²⁵ USMA, Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1970, p. 35.

²⁶ USMA, Field Artillery Committee SOP, Camp Buckner, West Point, USMA, 1979, Chapter 4.

²⁷ USMA, Superintendent's Annual Review, West Point, USMA, 1988, p. 80.

subordinates, and the leader opportunities for cadets from Team Leader to Regimental Commander are realistic, challenging, and directly relate to better preparation of the graduate for commissioned service in the Army.²⁸

In the past, CFT never had a structured evaluation system that established clear standards for cadets and cadet cadre. CFT was traditionally an ungraded event that *all* cadets completed. "A clear statement was made of the CFT Baseline Training Objectives or what is required for a Third Class cadet to 'pass' CFT".²⁹

Looking to the future, one has to wonder if CFT will prepare cadets for leadership in the 21st century. Perhaps some of the past benefits of CFT are lost in the efforts to stay with the training pace of the Army. A cadet's experience at CFT must follow the mission of USMA. Some current USMA planners think that CFT lost the focus on combined arms operations. One concern is that the CFT was only an event that sold Army branches. Cadets lost appreciation for other branches and did not fully understand the concept of Battlefield Operating Systems (BOS).³⁰ The solution was to structure CFT military training for cadets that reflected Army training centers such as the National Training Center (NTC) and the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC). Utilization of these models ensured that CFT properly prepared cadets for leadership in the Army of the 21st century. These training centers focus heavily on leading Army soldiers under stressful conditions. Therefore, the focus to leadership development at CFT remains in place much as it was during WW II.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 81.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 82.

³⁰ Lieutenant Colonel Henry J. Keirse, interview by author, West Point, NY., 25 September 1997.

In conclusion, CFT continues to provide the foundation of military leadership development. Since its establishment in 1940, CFT never deviated from the focus of cadet leader development. Changing trends in the Army caused adjustments to Camp Buckner's training conditions. However, the importance of leading soldiers in a field environment remained the focus. To ensure cadets are training properly, USMA must continue to make strong references to the Army combat training centers (CTCs). Additionally, USMA leadership must make certain that all of the CFT training supports the missions and goals expressed within CLDS. Using CLDS will keep West Point focused in terms of leader development. These measures will ensure West Point maintains the focus as outlined by General MacArthur in 1939:

The real function of West Point from the declaration of war, with the exception of those classes which may be incidentally graduated during the period of war, is to prepare officers of the Regular Army for the next war.³¹

³¹ General Douglas MacArthur to Colonel Herman Beukema, West Point, USMA Archives, 10 July 1939.

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