

UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY



ACCEPTED FORM OF HAZING OR LEADER DEVELOPMENT TOOL?  
THE HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF FOURTH CLASS KNOWLEDGE

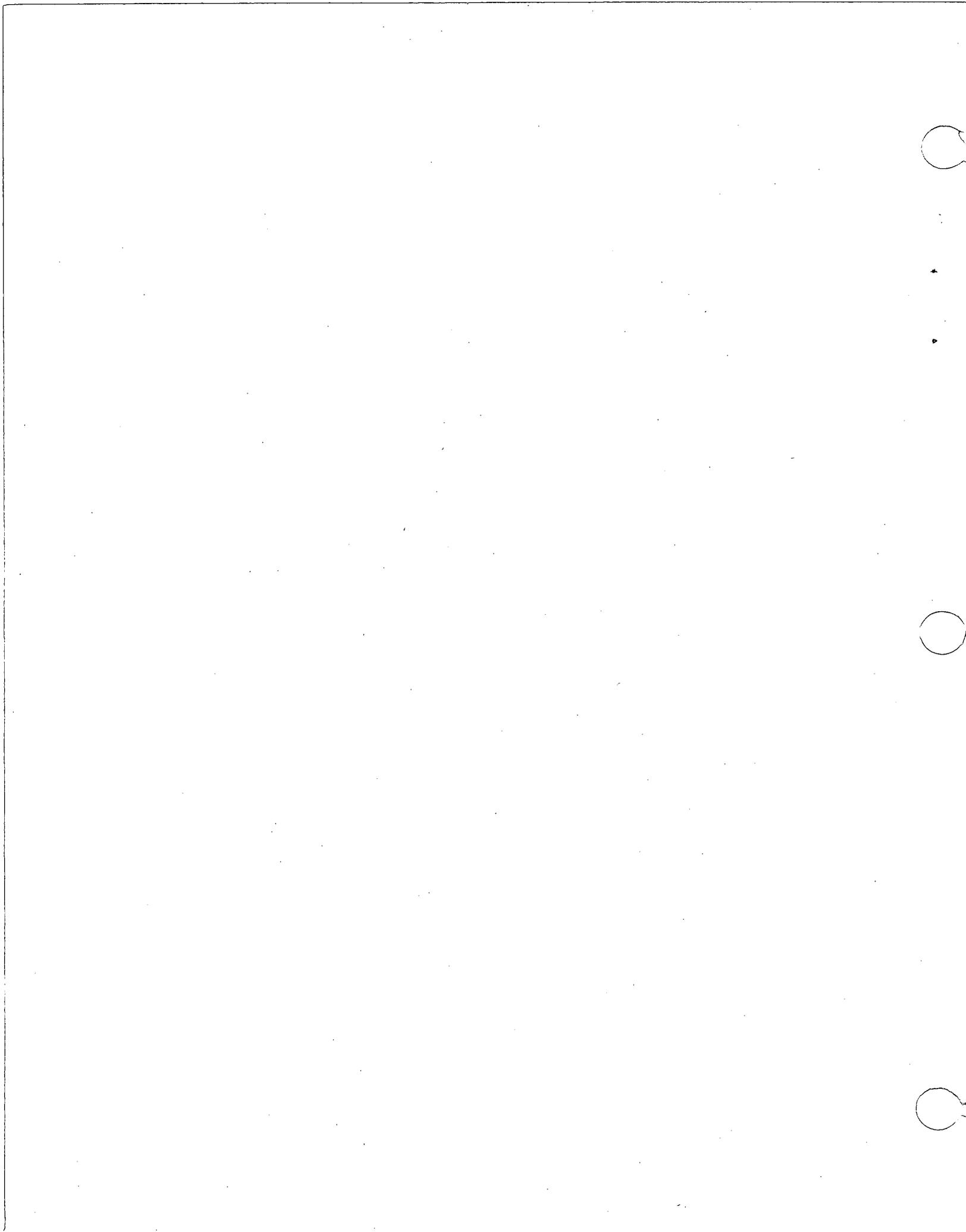
Submitted to

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When queried about their cadet experience, many if not most graduates of the United States Military Academy will recall vivid memories of their requirement as a first year cadet or Plebe to memorize and recite a myriad of facts, anecdotes, and legends about West Point and the Army. Steeped in tradition which sometimes clouded their origins and purpose, such data became known as Fourth Class knowledge or Plebe poop. Popular culture has captured and portrayed this unique aspect of the West Point experience in books, full-length motion pictures, and a series of television documentaries about the Academy. Most recently, an article about the Academy published in Rolling Stone magazine refers to Plebe knowledge four times, indicating that both the tradition and outside perceptions still exist.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, these many references only address Fourth Class knowledge as an interesting or curious practice, devoting little time, if any, towards explaining its history or purpose. Plebe knowledge has remained a subtle yet important fixture within West Point culture for nearly a century, but little has been done to fully explore its historical evolution. The following paragraphs examine this curious element of cadet life, and reveal that Fourth Class knowledge emerged out of the tension between the Administration's desire to stamp out hazing and the Corps' persistence in continuing the practice. During most of its history, Plebe knowledge represented compromise on the part of Academy officials to allow the continued harassment of Plebes by channeling upperclass energy into a practice considered more constructive than the severe forms of hazing that had plagued the Academy at the turn of the Century.

To understand the emergence of Fourth Class Knowledge, one must first take into account the history of hazing at West Point. During the late Nineteenth Century and early Twentieth Century, West Point struggled to curtail the destructive practice of hazing within the Corps of Cadets. Although cadets had practiced hazing prior to the Civil War, such behavior

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<sup>1</sup>David Lipsky. "War and Peace at the New West Point," Rolling Stone, 25 November 1999, 75, 78, 85, 93.

consisted primarily of harmless pranks played by upperclass cadets on the new cadets during their summer encampment.<sup>2</sup> After 1865, however, hazing took on a more sinister nature and included exhausting physical exercise or the requirement to perform demeaning, humiliating tasks.<sup>3</sup> West Point authorities attempted to suppress hazing in the years after the Civil War, but achieved only limited success. Despite the efforts of successive superintendents, the practice inevitably resumed on an almost timed schedule of every five years.<sup>4</sup> Colonel Albert Mills, appointed superintendent in April 1898, sought to end the recurring problem by instituting the grading of First Classmen on their enforcement of regulations, especially those against hazing.<sup>5</sup> Despite his gains, Mills' efforts met with resistance from the Corps. Douglas MacArthur, who entered West Point the following year in June 1899, noted in his memoirs that hazing was not only present, but had been conducted "with methods that were violent and uncontrolled."<sup>6</sup> In December 1900, he was one of several cadets called to testify as a witness in a Congressional court of inquiry ordered by President McKinley to investigate both a specific hazing incident and the extent to which plebes were subject to hazing.<sup>7</sup>

The Congressional inquiry centered largely around the death of Oscar L. Booz, whose untimely death from tubercular laryngitis had allegedly come about from hazing he endured as a cadet. Testimony revealed that Booz had been subjected to various forms of malicious hazing including being forced to drink substantial quantities of Tabasco sauce. Although the investigation concluded that Booz's requirement to drink Tabasco sauce did not lead to his death, the committee exposed the severity and breadth of the hazing problem. They documented over

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose. Duty, Honor, Country: A History of West Point (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), 222.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> George S. Pappas. To the Point: The United States Military Academy, 1802-1902 (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1993), 420.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 411.

<sup>6</sup> Douglas MacArthur. Reminiscences (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 25.

one hundred distinct methods used by upperclassmen to harass the Fourth Class Cadets, and classified the practices into three general categories corresponding loosely to their intended purpose.<sup>8</sup> The first grouping involved those practices done professedly for the good of the Plebes such as “bracing”. The second class involved things done to punish Fourth Class violations of the upperclass code, and were often of a more physically violent nature such as “sitting on a bayonet”, “wooden willys”, and “eagling”. The final grouping included practices designed solely to annoy the Plebes such as “qualifying” or eating large amounts of unpalatable foods.<sup>9</sup>

Although the investigating committee focused largely on the physical and malicious forms of hazing, cadet testimony revealed a few other upperclass practices that fell within the third category of annoyances. Because of upperclass delight in the many other, more serious forms of hazing, these annoyances appear to have been exercised less frequently. However, their presence establishes the precursor to Fourth Class knowledge. Cadet William R. Bettison described one practice known as the “barnyard,” which existed as one type of “funny formation”. According to Bettison, Plebes were required to make the different noises of various farm animals.<sup>10</sup> Cadets George R. Spalding and Orville N. Tyler spoke of another form of “funny formation” that occurred when newly arrived Plebes went to the hospital for their initial physical examinations. Both reported that the new cadets were required to answer foolish questions and sing songs.<sup>11</sup> Though their testimony did not specify exactly what songs were sung and what questions were asked, those recitation requirements were likely passed on and laid the foundation for the earliest knowledge requirements. Historian Stephen Ambrose noted that

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Congress. House. Investigation of Hazing at the United States Military Academy. 56<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., H.R.2768, 9 February 1901, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 3-5.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 352.

practices such as these often persisted within the Corps because each class knew that its predecessor had indulged in the practice.<sup>12</sup>

The final Congressional report resulted in a rider to the Academy appropriations bill directing that any cadet guilty of hazing or condoning hazing by others be summarily dismissed. Despite their efforts, however, the committee conceded that cadet ingenuity in devising new forms of hazing had proven so great that it remained impossible to name and describe them all in a statute. They therefore directed that all forms not specifically described be addressed under future lawful regulations.<sup>13</sup> Such vagueness left much to be interpreted by both cadets and Academy officials, and contributed further to the emergence of Fourth Class knowledge. Cadet testimony had already revealed the widely held conviction that verbal questioning or annoyance fell outside their definition of hazing. Many of the cadets who testified stated that they considered hazing to involve some form of physical exercise. When addressing the “funny formations”, both Cadets Bettison and Spalding told the committee that these occasions did not amount to hazing. Cadet Bettison further stated,

It [funny formation] does not subject the fourth classman to any indignity whatsoever and it does not subject him to any annoyance. They get as much fun out of it as we do.<sup>14</sup>

In the wake of the Congressional findings, Superintendent Mills and the Commandant of Cadets, Lieutenant Colonel Otto Hein, continued to clash with cadets in an attempt to control the practice of hazing. Their efforts to suppress the more serious forms had been noted by the Congressional inquiry, and both remained firm in their convictions. In his historical account of the Academy, To The Point, author George Pappas notes that in response to Mills' efforts, the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 424, 462.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose. Duty, Honor, Country: A History of West Point (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), 276.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Congress. House. Investigation of Hazing at the United States Military Academy. 56<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., H.R.2768, 9 February 1901, 16.

Corps informed the Superintendent that while they were willing to cease physical exercise for plebes, they would not accept restrictions against annoying, harassing, or bracing plebes.<sup>15</sup> This annoying or harassing behavior included the learning of inconsequential definitions. A subsequent Congressional investigation in 1909 concluded that such behavior had in fact continued over the eight year span. Though recorded as a minor violation and given far less attention than the other acts of hazing allegedly committed by the upperclass cadets under suspicion, asking foolish questions had apparently persisted as a means of harassing Plebes.<sup>16</sup> Again, however, the committee records fail to record the subjects of those questions.

Though brought to public attention by the inquiries of 1900, hazing was not a practice found only at West Point. In his book Broken Pledges, author Hank Nuwer recounts incidents of hazing at civilian colleges and universities as early as 1838. Hazing elsewhere was no less prevalent at the time of the Booz incident. Deaths from hazing occurred at Cornell University in 1884 and 1899, and incidents resulting in serious injury occurred at New York University in 1899, LeHigh University in 1901, and Purdue University in 1901.<sup>17</sup> In 1918, Superintendent Samuel Tillman noted that one of the difficulties affecting the Academy's ability to curtail hazing stemmed from the fact that "hazing in various forms has been and is practiced at so many educational institutions without most of the saving features which attach to the practice here."<sup>18</sup>

Tillman's reference emerged in his Annual Report of the Superintendent, where he addressed in great detail the history of hazing at West Point. An incident in August 1917 had prompted yet another investigation, and resulted in the court martial of seven Third Class cadets

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 352.

<sup>15</sup> George S. Pappas. To the Point: The United States Military Academy, 1802-1902 (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1993), 414.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Congress. House. Hazing at the United States Military Academy. 60<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., H.R.1455, 17 February 1909, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Hank Nuwer. Broken Pledges: The Deadly Rite of Hazing (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1990), 287.

for violation of regulations against hazing.<sup>19</sup> Describing the evolution of hazing and attempts to control it, Tillman noted that in the years between 1890 and 1910 cadets had introduced many new forms of "annoyance" in response to increased regulations. According to Tillman, previous Academy officials had accepted a certain degree of this behavior. He stated,

The fact that many practices have been countenanced, though not openly authorized, shows that the controlling authorities recognized advantage in them: one main advantage consisted in the quicker attainment by the new man of the mental and physical bearing of a West Point cadet.<sup>20</sup>

Tillman's comments reflected an attitude that would not only influence the formal emergence of Forth Class Knowledge, but continue to influence its growth for decades to come. The notion that cadets must develop individual discipline by enduring a rigorous Plebe year had taken hold, and strongly influenced the thoughts and deeds of cadets and faculty alike. Tillman recognized, however, that neither Congress nor the American public would tolerate the most brazen acts of hazing and sought to end their recurring presence. Hoping to control the abusive and unacceptable nature of hazing he recommended,

...bestowing recognized and specified authority over new cadets upon certain upperclassmen to be exercised at all times to bring about the rapid military development of the new men, [but that] all other attempts at control of these men to be punished to the extreme limit of the regulations.<sup>21</sup>

Superintendent Tillman did not have the opportunity to implement his recommendation, but his successor, Brigadier General Douglas MacArthur, formalized the work into regulations governing relations between Plebes and upperclass cadets. In response to a cadet suicide and perhaps influenced by his own personal experience, he met with a selected group of First Classmen in 1919, and asked them to study the Fourth Class orientation system and report on it.

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<sup>18</sup> U.S. Military Academy. Annual Report of the Superintendent (West Point: U.S. Military Academy Printing Office, 1918), 11.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

They drew up a pamphlet on plebe customs, listing acceptable and unacceptable practices, and forwarded their recommendation to the Commandant of Cadets on August 4, 1919. Although this pamphlet did not address the memorization and recitation of knowledge, a study of the Fourth Class system conducted in 1958 asserts that during the period from 1919 to 1923 it was known that Fourth Classmen were required to recite on demand.<sup>22</sup> Much like the previous Congressional investigations, however, the study failed to discuss the content of those recitations or cite evidence supporting that claim.

Within the context of this struggle between the Administration and the Corps over hazing emerged the now familiar cadet handbook known as Bugle Notes. Intended as a guide to assist in the socialization of new cadets, the first edition was published in 1907 under the auspices of the West Point Chapter of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). With a contributing editorial staff comprised of cadets, this introductory edition included a brief history of West Point and the Military Academy, the significance and description of the various monuments and buildings of the post, the words of "The Corps", and a selection of Army spirit yells. Subsequent editions remained relatively unchanged until inclusion of the Alma Mater and a selection of Army songs in 1918. The 1922/1923 edition of Bugle Notes added the traditions and customs of the Corps that had been drafted by the First Class Committee in 1919 and approved by Superintendent MacArthur. The 1924/1925 edition of Bugle Notes marked the first time a required list of items for memorization was established and published. This list included "The Corps", the "Alma Mater", "Scott's Fixed Opinion", officer and cadet rank insignia, West Point points of interest, and Army songs and yells.

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<sup>22</sup> U.S. Military Academy. Evaluation of the Fourth Class System (Report to the Superintendent). 1 April 1958. Archives, U.S. Military Academy, West Point, 21.

The emergence of the memorization requirements in the 1924/1925 Bugle Notes stemmed from the combined efforts of Superintendents Tillman and MacArthur. Their steps to codify the Fourth Class System further reduced the occurrence of physical hazing, but fostered the introduction of other less harmful techniques. Verbal harassment replaced physical hazing, and Fourth Class knowledge provided the means for such behavior. The foolish questions of 1901 and 1909 now became the primary tools for annoying the Plebes. Tillman's comments from his 1918 Superintendent's report indicate that Academy officials saw a certain degree of merit in this lesser form of hazing. It remains unclear why no memorization requirements were listed in Bugle Notes between introduction of traditions and customs of the Corps in 1919 and the 1924/25 edition, but certainly Academy officials sanctioned the addition. Records pertaining to the Fourth Class System indicate that subsequent cadet recommendations regarding Fourth Class knowledge always required approval by either the Commandant of Cadets or Superintendent.<sup>23</sup>

Once introduced, Fourth Class knowledge requirements remained unchanged until publication of the 1933/34 Bugle Notes. In addition to the memorization requirements of 1924/25, a section titled "Plebe Knowledge" was added to the book. This new section included many of the knowledge items viewed by later generations of cadets as the "traditional" Plebe knowledge items. Included were: "What time is it?", "How is the Cow?", "Where do Plebes Rank?", "What is the definition of leather?", "How many gallons in Lusk Reservoir?", "How many names on Battle Monument?", and "I do not understand." Also required for the first time was the answer to the question, "How many days, Oh Cataline?"<sup>24</sup> Curiously, this piece of knowledge changed much during later years and often became the subject of debate regarding its

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<sup>23</sup> Recommendations from a number of Fourth Class Customs Boards to the Commandant of Cadets exist within the Fourth Class Customs and Privileges Files of the USMA Archives.

relevance. Although all of these items had been contained in the 1924/25 Bugle Notes in a section titled "General Information", they had not been required for memorization.

Unfortunately, that first official record of their existence offered no explanation as to the origins or meaning of these "foolish questions". It seems doubtful that the class of 1924 or its members on the Bugle Notes editorial staff could have conjured up all of these unique questions. They more likely recorded what had previously passed verbally from class to class. The nature of the questions again suggests that some, if not all, had been the "foolish questions" recorded by the investigations of 1901 and 1909.

The cadet and Administration attitudes towards Fourth Class Knowledge during these early years proved difficult to capture. Beliefs and attitudes are always difficult to record and remain elusive, but prove more so with the passing of time. Fortunately, Eben F. Swift, Class of 1940, provides one look into the environment of the Academy between the years 1936-1940. Swift wrote a comparison of his own Plebe experience to that of his grandfather's, Major General Eben Swift, Jr., Class of 1876, who is best known for developing the five paragraph field order. Swift describes the Plebe system of his day to be one with the apparent purpose of "indicating many of those unfit to be officers either because they were poorly motivated or mentally, physically, or temperamentally unable to meet the rigorous disciplinary and academic requirements of West Point."<sup>25</sup> In effect, the system was to ensure the survival of the fittest. Plebe knowledge became a tool of the upperclass within this environment. Swift notes that had he been able to spend more time on mathematics than on the excessive number of hours spent "memorizing such frivolous passages as 'How many gallons in Lusk Reservoir', 'How many

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<sup>24</sup> U.S. Military Academy. Bugle Notes 1933-1934 (West Point: U.S. Military Academy Printing Office, 1933), 137-138.

<sup>25</sup> Eben F. Swift. "The Plebe System at West Point; 1872-76, and 1936-40: A Comparison," p. 10, Archives, U.S. Military Academy, West Point.

days to furlough, or graduation, or the Harvard trip?’, etc.,” he could have done better in mathematics and improved his class standing in other academic subjects.<sup>26</sup>

On September 4, 1945, Major General Maxwell Taylor assumed the position of Superintendent, and perhaps influenced to some degree by the Superintendent during his cadet years, Brigadier General MacArthur, he undertook a review of the Fourth Class System. Much like MacArthur, Taylor appealed to the senior cadet officers to eliminate any practice not directly related to making a better cadet.<sup>27</sup> In 1947, the Fourth Class Customs Committee, chaired by Cadet Captain Raymond O. Barton, Class of 1948, drafted a proposal titled Fourth Class Customs and Administration of the Fourth Class System. Included in the proposal were additions to past knowledge requirements including the Star Spangled Banner, Scott’s Fixed Opinion, branch colors of the Army, names of the cadet chain of command, the five paragraph field order, and the estimate of the situation.<sup>28</sup> Approved with minor revision in 1948 as Administrative Memorandum 95, these additions marked the beginning of the trend to incorporate applicable military knowledge and terms with the more traditional forms of West knowledge. This year also marked the departure from Bugle Notes as the sole source or reference for Fourth Class knowledge. Soon thereafter, the Department of Tactics’ pamphlet Fourth Class Customs and Traditions served as the governing source with a section devoted to Fourth Class knowledge. Bugle Notes served as an additional reference primarily covering those items referring to West Point history and recognized traditions.

Barton recalls that his customs committee included the staffs of both cadet regiments, and the members of the battalion staffs as board members. Their goal was to preserve a system that sufficiently challenged Plebes, but did not allow abusive and degrading activities like

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Theodore J. Crackel. The Illustrated History of West Point (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991), 246.

“swimming to Newburgh”, “pushing a rifle”, and “picking cherries”. Fourth Class cadets were tested on the knowledge requirements at “Calls”, in formation, and in the Dining Hall.<sup>29</sup> Even with this specific listing of knowledge requirements, Barton’s own personal experience reveals that cadet ingenuity worked its way into the realm of Fourth Class knowledge. When he entered the Academy in July 1944, his father, Major General Raymond O. Barton, Class of 1912, commanded the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. He had landed the division at Utah Beach in Normandy, and had begun the drive into France. A First Class cadet directed that new cadet Barton memorize all articles appearing about his father.<sup>30</sup> Though aggravating and time consuming, Barton remembered the advice of his father to “Keep your mouth shut, do what you’re told, and keep your sense of humor,” and complied with the directive.<sup>31</sup> Though the opinion of Academy officials regarding such behavior cannot be precisely determined, a memorandum from the Staff Judge Advocate, Colonel Robert E. Chandler, to Superintendent Taylor in March 1946, indicates that such practices fell outside the definition of hazing and were acceptable. Pursuant to a request from Taylor, the Staff Judge Advocate researched legal files as far back as 1892 to determine what acts had been previously tried as hazing. In the legal opinion of the Staff Judge Advocate, “hazing or harassing of 4<sup>th</sup> classmen” had previously included some form of physical exercise or exertion, or tasks of servitude.<sup>32</sup> Fourth Class knowledge remained outside the legal definition of harassing or hazing.

In the ten years following the publication of Administrative Memorandum 95, the number of items requiring memorization grew until it comprised a list termed “long and

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<sup>28</sup> Raymond O. Barton, Jr. Draft Memorandum to Commandant of Cadets. 1947. Fourth Class Customs and Privileges File, Archives, U.S. Military Academy, West Point.

<sup>29</sup> Raymond O. Barton, Jr. Letter to author. 16 November 1999.

<sup>30</sup> Raymond O. Barton, Jr., Chairman of Fourth Class Customs Committee, USMA Class of 1948, interview by author, 7 November 1999.

<sup>31</sup> Raymond O. Barton, Jr. Letter to author. 16 November 1999.

imposing” by a 1958 internal study of the Fourth Class System.<sup>33</sup> Although the study traced this steady growth of Fourth Class knowledge requirements as part of its overall assessment of the Fourth Class system, it surprisingly made no comment or recommendations as to the intended purpose or future of the knowledge program. Without an impetus for change, the trend of increasing knowledge requirements progressed unabated. Successive cadet committees proposed additional knowledge requirements that consistently met with approval from Academy officials. Administrative memorandums that had once governed the Fourth Class System were replaced in 1952 by Fourth Class System pamphlets published yearly by the Department of Tactics. The paragraph or two that once sufficed to cover Fourth Class knowledge requirements grew into an entire section within the pamphlet. By 1966 there emerged a separate pamphlet devoted entirely to knowledge entitled Fourth Class Knowledge: History, Legends, Traditions of the Corps of Cadets and the U.S. Army. In 1968, the Office of Military Instruction entered into the knowledge development arena with a proposal from the Director of Military Instruction, Colonel Hugh F.T. Hoffman, Jr., through the Commandant of Cadets to the President of the 1969 Class Committee. The Office of Military Instruction had conducted its own review of Fourth Class Knowledge requirements to determine what information would best enhance cadet knowledge of military doctrine and terminology. Hoffman proposed that a military knowledge section be included in the “Gray book of knowledge”, and that the development of that section be coordinated with a project officer in the Office of Military Instruction.<sup>34</sup>

In 1969, the Commandant of Cadets, Brigadier General Bernard Rogers, directed another study of the Fourth Class System, which included further criticism of the growth and

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<sup>32</sup> Robert E. Chandler. Memorandum to Superintendent of U.S. Military Academy. 24 March 1946, Hazing File, Archives, U.S. Military Academy, West Point.

<sup>33</sup> U.S. Military Academy. Evaluation of the Fourth Class System (Report to the Superintendent), 1 April 1958. Archives, U.S. Military Academy, West Point.

counterproductive nature of Fourth Class Knowledge. The committee noted that the trend of expanding knowledge requirements had continued despite the findings of the 1958 study. Citing introduction of the "gray book of knowledge", greater requirements for "The Days," and use of First Captain's sheets, the committee characterized the growth of the system as both "undesirable and unmanageable."<sup>35</sup> Based on observation and surveys given to both cadets and officers, the committee asserted that Fourth Class knowledge existed largely as a means of harassing Plebes at inspections and meals. According to their findings, knowledge was often used against Plebes in evaluating their performance and aptitude, verged on what could be considered personal service, and proved costly in terms of time spent. This expansion of knowledge between 1958 and 1969 appears to have resulted from upperclass zeal unchecked and condoned by Academy officials. While the study attributes the growth to upperclassmen claiming to be creative, every addition required ultimate approval by the Office of the Commandant or Superintendent. The New Cadet Barracks policy of 1966 reveals that knowledge requirements had, in the opinion of Academy officials, remained outside the scope of hazing much like they had in 1946. The policy directive provided a list of unauthorized practices considered as hazing, which included requiring Plebes to "execute the dying cockroach", "sweat coins to the wall", and "brace against the wall while walking feet out".<sup>36</sup> Whether intentional or not, the message again presented to the Corps again held verbal harassment outside the scope of hazing. Nowhere in the policy letter did officials address the expected standards of upperclass behavior when requiring the recitation of knowledge.

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<sup>34</sup> Hugh F.T. Hoffman, Jr. Memorandum thru Commandant of Cadets to President of Class Committee, 2 April 1968, Fourth Class Customs and Privileges File, Archives, U.S. Military Academy, West Point.

<sup>35</sup> U.S. Military Academy. Preliminary Evaluation of the Fourth Class System. West Point: U.S. Military Academy Printing Office, 1969.

<sup>36</sup> U.S. Military Academy. New Cadet Barracks Policy Letter. Fourth Class Customs and Privileges File, Archives, U.S. Military Academy, West Point.

Despite its strong criticism, the 1969 study group did find some potential merit in the existence of Fourth Class Knowledge, and made recommendations toward that end. The committee asserted that knowledge could prove functional for the Academy if used to develop Plebes as novice officers by developing verbal skills, self-confidence, essential military knowledge, and pride in the institution. For such benefit to be realized, however, the problem of control must be resolved in terms of both quantity and upperclass attitudes. The committee recommended that Fourth Class Knowledge be codified and strictly controlled. Attention needed to be focused not only on quantity, but content. A majority of officers had indicated that the "trivia" should be eliminated without defining trivial information. The committee left that question largely unanswered and recommended simply that the harassing elements be eliminated starting with "The Days", which now included so many requirements that it took at least five minutes to recite.<sup>37</sup>

Like the findings in 1958, the results of the 1969 study went ignored or unheeded until the cheating incident of 1976 spawned another look at the Academy and its many programs. General Rogers, now the Army Chief of Staff, felt the need for a broad examination of the entire Academy, and in January 1977 directed the formation of the West Point Study Group. For seven months the members of the Study Group probed all aspects of the Academy employing a wide variety of techniques. Fourth Class knowledge received little attention compared to the many other Academy programs reviewed, but the assessment given spoke strongly. The Study Group recommended that the Academy take immediate action to eliminate written examinations on Fourth Class knowledge and eliminate specious material contained in Fourth Class knowledge requirements. Records show that written knowledge examinations were first recommended by

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<sup>37</sup> U.S. Military Academy. Preliminary Evaluation of the Fourth Class System. West Point: U.S. Military Academy Printing Office, 1969.

the second class in 1969 and put into practice shortly thereafter.<sup>38</sup> What the Study Group considered as “specious” remains a mystery, but likely parallels the trivial types of information referred to in the 1969 evaluation. In the view of the Study Group, what originated partly as college humor and partly as a means for preserving tradition had become a purposeful, time-consuming system. The Group also rejected the mix of West Point and Army topics, considering it “bizarre to interlace the traditional with a sort of pseudo-relevance embodied in learning the specifications of missiles, tanks, and other hardware.”<sup>39</sup>

In the wake of the 1976 cheating scandal and the findings of the Borman Commission and the West Point Study Group, the Secretary of the Army called Lieutenant General Andrew J. Goodpaster from retirement to review and implement the 152 recommendations of the two studies. Many of the Study Group recommendations became the guideposts for the 1978/79 USCC Circular 351-1, “The Fourth Class System”. In keeping with the Study Group’s findings, one-third of Fourth Class knowledge memorization requirements were eliminated, emphasis on Fourth Class Knowledge occurred during Cadet Basic Training with only the maintenance of proficiency sought during the academic year, and the content of Fourth Class Knowledge returned to the more traditional items found in Bugle Notes and away from memorizing the specifications and capabilities of military equipment.<sup>40</sup> Although the steps taken in the 1978/79 academic year were substantial, their impact proved relatively short-lived. Knowledge requirements that had been eliminated crept back into Fourth Class System until the total number of items went from 53 in 1978/79 up to 124 in 1980/81 and then hovered between 90 and 100 for

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<sup>38</sup> U.S. Military Academy. Fourth Class Customs and Traditions, Part One, 1970-1971. West Point: U.S. Military Academy Printing Office, 1970.

<sup>39</sup> Dickinson, Hillman; Mackmull, Jack V.; and Merritt, Jack N. Final Report of the West Point Study Group 1977 (West Point: U.S. Military Academy Printing Office, 1977), 118.

<sup>40</sup> U.S. Military Academy. Annual Report of the Superintendent (West Point: U.S. Military Academy Printing Office, 1979), 33.

the remainder of that decade.<sup>41</sup> Written knowledge examinations also remained an element within the system and were administered well into the decade of the 80's.<sup>42</sup>

In July 1986, Lieutenant General Dave R. Palmer became Superintendent, and initiated an important period of change at the Academy. Among other steps taken, Palmer undertook a review of the Fourth Class System with the ultimate goal of determining whether it met the Academy goal of producing leaders who possessed the attributes expected in the Army. He accepted the responsibility of ensuring that the Academy's various programs combined effectively to develop those desired qualities rather than leave that responsibility to chance or the individual in question. An institutional self study completed in July 1989 confirmed that the Fourth Class System actually worked against leader development in some ways because of elements it contained that proved inconsistent with Academy outcome goals. While the written philosophy for the system appeared acceptable, actual practice had consistently deviated from approved norms of positive leadership and respect for the individual. The study noted that history had shown discrepancy between authorized behavior as prescribed under the system, and what cadets had perceived to be countenanced behavior. Too frequently cadets had subverted those activities permitted by the Fourth Class System to their own ends. The study found that one of the processes contributing most directly to inconsistency in the development of stated goals was the nature of one-way communication between Plebes and upperclass.<sup>43</sup> Fourth Class Knowledge remained the primary vehicle for these interactions. During an interview with Lieutenant General Palmer, he noted that a fine line existed between hazing and the type of behavior sometimes displayed by upperclass cadets while testing Fourth Class Knowledge.

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<sup>41</sup> Statistics compiled from Fourth Class Knowledge files maintained in the Office of the Commandant. Visual representation provided in appendix 1.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> U.S. Military Academy. Institutional Self Study 1988-1989 (West Point: U.S. Military Academy Printing Office, 1989), 48.

Colonel Stephen Toffler concurred that knowledge was frequently tested in an abusive manner, defeating any intended purposes behind the requirement. In addition to the questionable behavior it often promoted, Fourth Class Knowledge represented a major imposition upon Plebe time. The self study concluded that the time devoted by Plebes to knowledge represented the equivalent of an additional academic course each term.<sup>44</sup> No efforts had ever been taken to account for or specify the amount of time to be spent on Fourth Class Knowledge and other Fourth Class duties, and the study recommended that knowledge requirements be tailored to fit within the time allocated for the military program of development.

In May 1989, just prior to completion of the self study, Lieutenant General Palmer designated the 1990/91 academic year to serve as a period of fundamental review for of the Fourth Class System, and appointed three separate committees to review the system. One committee consisted of cadets, the second of staff and faculty, and the third included trustees of the Association of Graduates headed by General Sam Walker. Each committee was asked to address from its own perspective the purpose of the Fourth Class System, what the system should consist of, and how it should be administered. Based on the findings of the three committees and the institutional self study, the Cadet Leader Development System (CLDS) was introduced in August 1990 as the structural framework guiding leader development for all four classes. Though still retaining a challenging Plebe experience reflecting past traditions, the focus of CLDS shifted from the activities of the Fourth Class to the development of all four classes of cadets. Each class was to undergo a progressively challenging experience designed to develop leaders of character. Fourth Class knowledge remained as an element of the new system, but was to emphasize traditional cadet knowledge (definition of leather, Army cheers, etc.) during

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 24.

the summer and be more restricted during the academic year to permit a greater focus on academics.<sup>45</sup>

Though CLDS brought about logical, much needed change in place of the Fourth Class System, it has not yet effectively dealt with all of the recommendations that influenced its introduction. The current version published in 1994 as USMA Circular 1-101, addresses Fourth Class knowledge rather loosely, stating that all cadets must learn and maintain certain knowledge outside of the academic program that is essential to development in the military and physical programs. Plebe knowledge requirements are specified in USCC Circular 351-2, New Cadet Handbook, and in Bugle Notes, but their true significance remains somewhat hazy. By failing to provide cadets with an easily understood endstate, Academy officials have left the purpose of knowledge very much open to cadet interpretation. When questioned about its purpose, both upperclass cadets and Plebes respond with a myriad of answers ranging from the "development of attention to detail within cadets" to "creating the ability to quickly memorize and recall information."<sup>46</sup> As previous paragraphs have illustrated, cadets left with ambiguous guidance have often interpreted purpose in manners inconsistent with intended goals.

The current Fourth Class knowledge program also lacks a degree of coordination within the framework of the military program of development. The present development of Fourth Class knowledge involves a somewhat decentralized committee effort. The process centers primarily around the review of USCC Circular 351-2, the New Cadet Handbook. Each year the Cadet First Captain and the previous summer's Cadet Basic Training company commanders review Fourth Class knowledge requirements, and provide their recommendations to the Office of the Commandant. Cadet recommendations for addition or deletion of knowledge

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<sup>45</sup> Larry R. Donnithorne. "An Update on the Fourth Class System," Assembly, November 1990, 25.

<sup>46</sup> Common responses given by cadets during Tactical Officer Education Program study of Cadet Basic Training 1999.

requirements are taken into account as preparations begin for production of the next edition of the New Cadet Handbook. Efforts are taken to ensure that knowledge requirements are tied into both the Cadet Professional knowledge program under the auspices of the Brigade Tactical Department, and Military Science requirements under the auspices of the Department of Military Instruction. The intent of the program is to emphasize Fourth Class knowledge during Cadet Basic Training (CBT) in order to establish building blocks that contribute to the further development of knowledge, skills, and abilities in these other activities.<sup>47</sup> However, this intent does not appear to have reached its full potential. During academic year 1998/99, the brigade tactical department introduced its own knowledge program that represented a significant addition to an already heavy academic load.<sup>48</sup> Still in use, that program adds 37 requirements to that learned during Cadet Basic Training, including description and data of various weapons systems, missions and data about the various branches of service, and other cadet related items.<sup>49</sup> Such a program runs contrary to the recommendations of both the 1989 self study, and the 1990 review of the Fourth Class System. Both sought to limit the amount of knowledge studied during the academic year, and called for a detailed time analysis of knowledge and duty requirements to ensure that any additions within the military program did not infringe upon time allotted for other programs.

The arrival of the Class of 2004 in July 1999 marked the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Fourth Class knowledge as a formal aspect within the West Point experience. As the preceding paragraphs have shown, its emergence as a structured program resulted largely from the tension between the Administration's desire to stamp out hazing, and the Corps' determination to continue the

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<sup>47</sup> Description of current process of knowledge development provided by LTC Jeffrey M. Weart, Special Assistant to the Commandant for Systems and Planning.

<sup>48</sup> Information gathered from Fourth Class Knowledge files maintained in the Office of the Commandant and the USMA internal web page: <http://www-internal.cadet.usma.edu/brigade/Knowledge/BTO-Intro.htm>.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

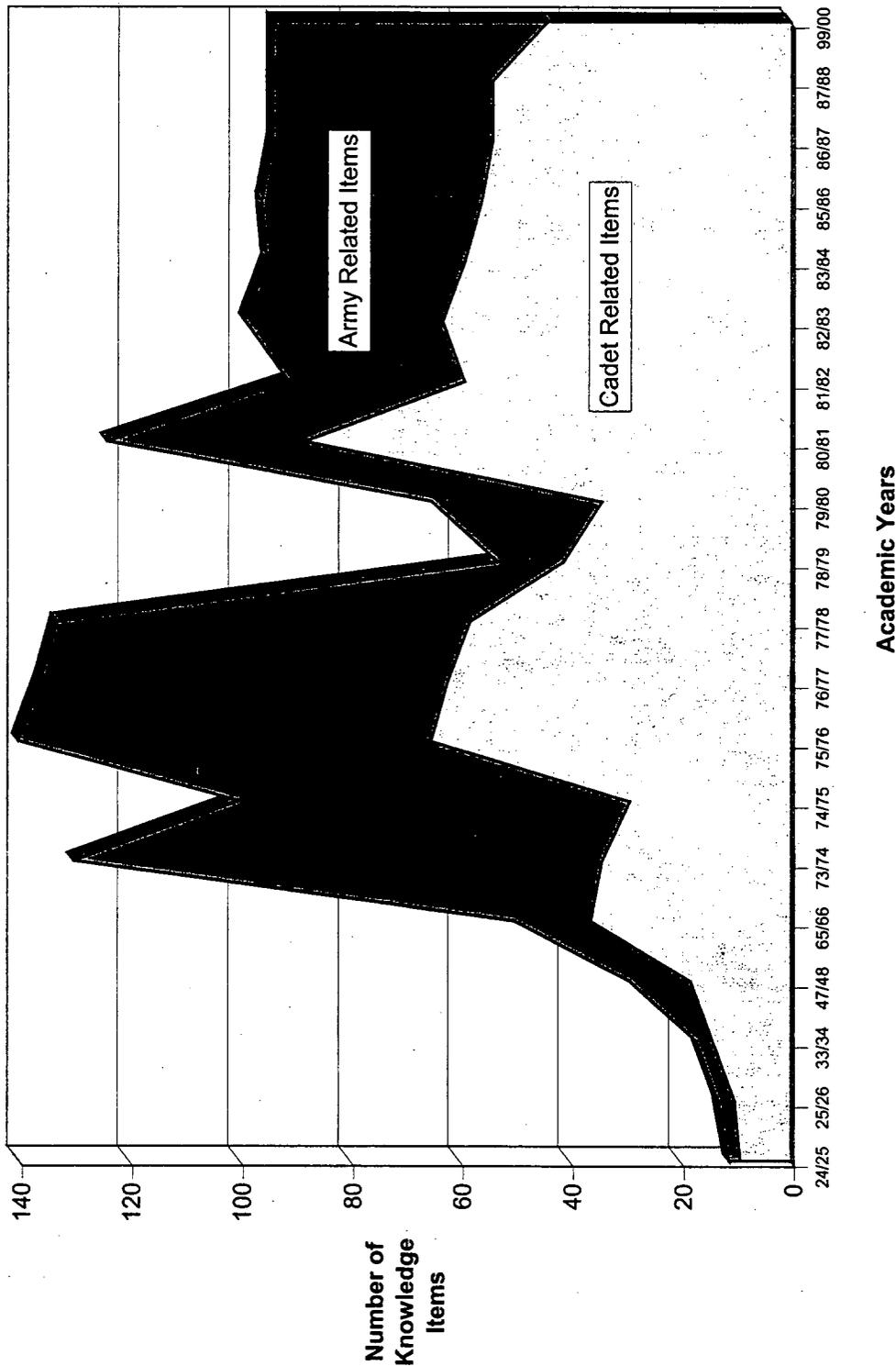
practice. Fourth Class knowledge represented a compromise on the part of Academy officials to allow continued upperclass harassment of Plebes by a means less harmful than the harsh physical hazing present during the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries. Though strongly opposed to the physical abuse and servitude characteristic of most hazing, Academy officials considered a challenging Plebe experience to be effective and viewed Fourth Class knowledge as a constructive practice towards that end. Cadets seized this opportunity, and as history has shown, executed the program with vigor that sometimes compromised any constructive end. Over the course of its evolution, the Fourth Class knowledge program's espoused purpose varied greatly. As USMA enters the Twenty-First Century, Academy leaders must consider the findings of the 1989 self study, and carefully examine whether the current Fourth Class knowledge program contributes logically and effectively towards the goal of producing a leader of character ready to serve the common defense. If coordinated and supervised properly within the military program of development, Fourth Class Knowledge can provide two important benefits. First, if organized properly after a critical analysis of its military content, it will provide cadets with the verbal information necessary to learn and understand more advanced military concepts. Second, inclusion of some traditional knowledge links today's cadets with those who have gone before, and builds their connection with the Long Gray Line. Eben Swift cautioned, however, that if the "grip of that far off hold is so strong as to drag the Academy back to the West Point of his grandfather's day, it should be gently but firmly removed."<sup>50</sup> Finding this balance remains a daunting task, and requires the efforts of an individual or organization possessing both the responsibility and ability of balancing the contributions of both the Department of Military Instruction and the Brigade Tactical Department. Though a relatively

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<sup>50</sup> Eben F. Swift. "The Plebe System at West Point; 1872-76, and 1936-40: A Comparison," p. 25, Archives, U.S. Military Academy, West Point.

minor program given the many activities and programs conducted with these organizations and the Office of the Commandant, its significance should not be undervalued. When considering how many graduates vividly remember their Plebe knowledge, development of future knowledge programs warrants a degree of attention and scientific construct not always evidenced in the past.

**Fourth Class Knowledge Requirements  
1924-2000**



Date collected from Bugle Notes, USMA Archive files on 4<sup>th</sup> Class customs, Regulations, and USCC Circulars. Each knowledge item reflected represents a requirement specified in these resources. Many requirements were dictated by month, so the total number for each year represents the cumulative requirement over the course of the summer and following academic year.

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