

## The Order of Merit

The key to the question: To be, or not to be ranked into a branch of the army between 1818 and 1833.

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It is December 1989 and there are rumors that the Superintendent will release his formula for determining the cadet Order of Merit before the Christmas break. The air around the Corps is filled with anticipation as the cadets wonder how the formula will effect their chances of selecting the Army branch of their choice. The fear of being ranked into an undesired branch is ever present in the minds of many cadets. The term "being ranked" refers to those cadets who do not receive their first choice of branch assignment. This "ranking" normally occurs when the non-Combat Arms branches are close to reaching their maximum level of fill before the Combat Arms branches reach their minimum. But, ranking is not a new issue for the cadets. Its origin is traced back to the nineteenth century during the Superintendency of Sylvanus Thayer.

In 1817, when Thayer arrived at the Academy ready to fulfill his duties as the Superintendent, he brought with him a variety of reforms which would become the foundation upon which West Point stands today. One of these reforms, the Order of Merit, is the topic of this research paper. Between 1818 and 1833 the Order of Merit became the tool which determined which cadets would have a choice in their branch assignments in the Army and which cadets would not.

Prior to 1818 there were at least three attempts to establish a system for commissioning cadets into the Army. The first attempt was made by Joseph G. Swift, USMA

Superintendent 1808. In opposition to the previous system of commissioning all cadets into the service of the United States, without regards to specific branches, Swift proposed that cadets be trained in Engineering, Artillery, Cavalry, or Infantry and their progress in several classes and examinations should show their qualification for a particular branch.<sup>1</sup> This proposal was not implemented and the Academy continued to have cadets commissioned into the service of the United States.

By 1812 cadets were "promoted into branches of the army according to existing vacancies and their individual merit at the time of completing the course at West Point."<sup>2</sup> With a war going on it was difficult to fill the required vacancies with cadets who had completed their course of studies at West Point therefore, this system was never fully implemented. In 1814, realizing the danger of getting unqualified officers, the Secretary of War made an effort to correct the commissioning problem.

In a request to the Academy for seventeen Lieutenants the Secretary of War stated:

The rule of Commissioning as Officers the Cadets who are most advanced in their education - is indispensable with regard to the Engineer Corps - but in relation to Infantry or Artillery, appointment is subject to much qualification....Hence it is, that when age, physical constitution, a preference for these last mentioned Corps, and a tolerable knowledge of books, indicate the fitness of a young man for an Ensigncy or Lieutenancy - you will transmit his name forthwith to this Department.<sup>3</sup>

Although his main goal was to insure the quality of Engineer officers, the Secretary's letter was the first mention of cadets having a preference for a particular branch. The available research material does not indicate whether or not the Academy followed up on the Secretary's view of cadets having a branch preference. Sylvanus Thayer would be the first to pay heed to the Secretary's wishes.

The year 1817 marked the beginning of a new course for the Academy with Thayer at the wheel. One of his first reforms, that had an impact on branch selection, was the establishment of the Academic Board. The Board consisted of the superintendent, the heads of the academic departments, and the commandant of cadets. Along with other academic duties the Board was responsible for recommending the branch of the army that each cadet was best qualified to enter based on his four year class standing.<sup>4</sup> Thayer then gave the Board the mission of establishing rules by which the Academy would promote the under three classes and commission the first class, who had successfully completed their four year course requirements, into a branch of the army.

By 1818 the Academic Board had completed its mission and agreed on a method of assigning cadets a general relative order of merit. The method entailed assigning a weight to each course of instruction: French, 1; Math, 2; Philosophy, 2; Geometry, 1/2; Drawing, 1; Engineering & Art of War, 2; and Drill & Conduct, 1 1/2 and the sum of these weights translated into the rank each cadet held in his class.

Although there were modifications to the academic courses between 1818 and 1833 there was no indication from the research data that the weights changed nor how they were derived.<sup>5</sup>

In January 1818 the Academy sent a memorandum to the President requesting approval of its "rules for the promotion of the cadets of the United States Military Academy" proposal. Within a few days the Academy received a letter from the Secretary of War, J.C. Calhoun, which conveyed the President's approval of the five rule proposal. The first rule dictated that in promoting cadets, their rank would be determined according to the principals of general merit established by the Academic Board. The second rule dictated that the distribution of cadets, into the branches of the army, be made in accordance with their qualifications, talents, and without violating the principle of order of merit. The third rule dictated that no cadet be promoted from the Academy without completing his courses and receiving a diploma. The fourth rule dictated that if a cadet resigned or was separated from the Academy and sought a appointment in the Army, that he not be appointed before those in the class of which he previously belonged and not to a rank higher then anyone in that class. The final rule dictated that no cadet dismissed from the Academy for conduct reasons be eligible for any office or post in the Army until at least five years after the graduation of his previous class. These rules were incorporated into the

Rules and Regulations for the Government of the Military Academy.<sup>6</sup> While the staff of the Academic Board was working on the order of merit, Thayer was formulating a plan which would adhere to the 1814 commissioning rule.

Thayer realized the importance of having very qualified officers in the Engineer branch and instituted a policy which reserved that branch for the top two graduates:

When any Cadets not exceeding two in a class shall be distinguished in a remarkable degree for their scientific attainments, the fact to be particularly set forth in their diplomas and such Cadets only to be recommended for promotion in the Corps of Engineers.<sup>7</sup>

Following this guidance the Academic Board preceded to rank all first class cadets by order of merit and assign them into a branch of the army. Cadets must have had some input into the branching process because the annotation of "by request" appeared next to some of the branch entries. This annotation did not appear beside every entry and a trend became apparent. Only cadets rating high in the order of merit were granted requests for a specific branch.<sup>8</sup> The Board viewed the highest ranked cadets qualified for all branches, the next for all except the Engineers, and the bottom rated cadets were deemed qualified only for the Infantry or the Cavalry.<sup>9</sup> Research into the Register of Graduates confirms that the recommendations of the Academic Board were implemented.

With the President's permission to determine a cadets' qualification for a branch of the army, the Academic Board and its members became a very powerful force at the Academy.

Strict adherence to the established weighting guidelines was not always the procedure of the Academic Board and at times just a word from an instructor could mean disaster for a cadet. An example of the Board's manipulation of the order of merit occurred in 1819 to first class Cadet Woolley. According to the Academic Board Cadet Woolley was rated last in order of merit out of 26 first class cadets. Based on the established weighting guidelines however, he should have been rated higher. The following chart is a graphic display of some of the cadets in Cadet Woolley's class:

| WEIGHT   |    | 2    | 2     | 2    | .5   | 1    |         |
|----------|----|------|-------|------|------|------|---------|
| NAME     | OM | MATH | PHILO | ENGR | GEOM | DRAW | TOT     |
| Eliason  | 1  | 2    | 3     | 3    | 2    | 15   | 32      |
| Bowes    | 5  | 6    | 5     | 5    | 10   | 10   | 47      |
| Turnbull | 8  | 14   | 13    | 10   | 7    | 3    | 80.5    |
| Strong   | 24 | 24   | 24    | 23   | 25   | 6    | 160.5   |
| Woolley  | 26 | 1    | 1     | 26   | 3    | 22   | 79.5 10 |

The top numbers represent the weights given to each course. According to the chart Cadet Eliason was rated first in order of merit because the sum of his rating in each course, multiplied by its weight, is smaller than the other cadets. The eighth and ninth (not listed) rated cadets' totals were 80.5 and 71 respectively. An analysis of the entire order of merit reveals Cadet Woolley's total would place him at least tenth in the order of merit. The Board explained that "Mr Woolley being totally deficient in the course of Engineering, was put back." It should be noted that there were at least three other first class cadets in that class who were so deficient that they were not included in the rating, perhaps making Woolley 26th out of 29.<sup>11</sup>

The cadets perceived the power of the instructors to be just as strong as those of the Academic Board. Cadet Burbridge expressed his concern for his academic status and the power of the faculty in the following passage:

"I believe there is not more 8 or 10 who is higher than me (when we say higher in conduct we me [sic] few reports) I cant [sic] say so of my french Professor for I think he is the most open partial man that I ever saw. I don't believe I am deficient by any means but it principle lays on the proffesor [sic] who instructs us & I am afraid to risque [sic] him for if he gives it as his opinion that I am deficient I will most certainly be dismissed."<sup>12</sup>

The power of the Board was not just a perceived power. In the 1818 memorandum to the President the Board restated the ruling which granted them authority to designate a cadet's branch of the army. The Washington reviewers did not agree with the Board on this issue. The reviewers preferred that the cadets be allowed to choose their branch, according to their order of merit rating, until all vacancies were filled. The Academic Board ignored the reviewers' suggestions and retained its authority over cadet branch assignments, making some exceptions for individuals who provided a valid reason for requesting a particular branch ("by request" annotations).<sup>13</sup>

My initial thesis was that cadets had no choice in their branch assignments, however, after reviewing the available data there is little support for such a claim. There is support for the fact that certain cadets were able to request a particular branch and were commissioned into that branch. There is also evidence to support the claim that

the cadets who were rated at the bottom of their class were assigned or "rated" into that branch. Although this term was not used during the Thayer era it aptly describes the cadet branching from 1818-1833.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Edgar Denton III, "The Formative Years of the United States Military Academy, 1775-1833." (Ph.D. diss., Syracuse University, 1964), pp. 62-3.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 50-1.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>4</sup>James L. Morrison Jr., "The Best School in the World": West Point, the Pre-Civil War Years, 1833-1866 (The Kent State University Press, 1986), p. 4.

<sup>5</sup>"Proceedings (Staff Records) Vol. 1, 1818-1835" (U.S. Military Academy Archives, Series 14: West Point, New York), pp. 6.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 41-3.

<sup>7</sup>"The West Point Thayer Papers, 1808-1872," (Cindy Adams, ed. U.S. Military Academy, West Point, New York). unnumbered.

<sup>8</sup>"(Staff Records)", pp. 77.

<sup>9</sup>Denton, "Formative Years," p. 186.

<sup>10</sup>"(Staff Records)", p. 75.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 76..

<sup>12</sup>"Thayer Papers," unnumbered.

<sup>13</sup>Denton, "Formative Years," p. 186.

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