

Long Island University

**Scrambling at the United States Military Academy:
A Leader Development Tool Misutilized**

For

LD 720

**The American Military Experience
and the
United States Military Academy**

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1 February 1999

Throughout the thirty year history scrambling has existed, rarely has it satisfied the developmental need of the West Point cadet. The current policy of scrambling the second class (2^o) cadet before his or her academic year hinders and detracts from the individual leader development of the cadet. The official purpose of class scrambling is to provide multiple opportunities for individual leader and social development. However, the actual effect of scrambling contributes more to the disruption of dysfunctional norms and the redistribution of minorities. The obvious benefit to this outcome is the reason this criticized policy remained in effect and survived through numerous staff studies.

Leader developers at the United States Military Academy have addressed the effects of scrambling and have recommended how to optimize the leadership opportunities available throughout the four-year educational experience. Consistently, the Academy's need to equalize demographics and eliminate inappropriate behavior overshadows the recommendations. Difference of opinion regarding the necessity of scrambling raises the question not only of *if* but *when* the optimal time of redistribution should occur.

"Scrambling" is a slang term referring to the random reassignment of all cadets of one class from their original cadet company.¹ Scrambling came into existence primarily to redistribute the physical and academic talent within the Corps. Recently, justification in the 1990 Leader Distribution Plan espouse a focus on the development of each individual as a leader".² The 2^o academic year (AY) scramble is one of four separate actions taken to

¹ United States Military Academy, *Preparing For West Point's Third Century: A Summary of the Years of Affirmation and Change, 1986-1991*. (West Point, New York, June 1991), 32.

² Dave R. Palmer. *Memo to Member of the USMA Staff & Faculty, Subject: Leader Distribution Plan*. (West Point, New York, 14 March 1990), Encl. 1.

equalize and distribute the talent of the Corps. First is the assignment of new cadet candidates to eight lettered companies before Cadet Basic Training (CBT). Demographics and perceived performance potential become the basis of company assignments.³

Individual testing ability from standardized tests largely determines a cadet's perceived talent. Unfortunately, this often proves to be subjective and incomplete. CBT resignees and performance evaluations mandate a second redistribution of talent. During reorganization week, fourth class (4^o) cadets are again scrambled and assigned into thirty-two lettered companies. The premise of this scramble is to equalize the talent among the corps and provide a fresh environment for slow beginners. Reorganization before Cadet Field Training (CFT) is the third scramble of cadets. This like the CBT scramble is not permanent. The thirty-two permanent lettered companies fill into the eight summer training companies. Third class (3^o) cadets enter CFT in a new and unfamiliar environment. Friendship bonds do not effect tactical missions. Theoretically, scrambling before CFT provides low aptitude cadets as fresh an environment as possible.⁴

The notion of scrambling developed in 1956 when academy officials noted negative connotations and stigmas associated with certain cadet companies. Disparaging labels coupled with the overwhelming disparities in performance during intramural sporting events prompted a re-evaluation of cadet assignment methods within the Corps. From 1802 to 1956, cadet height effected the assignments of cadets to their permanent academic year companies. Proper aesthetics on the parade field was achieved. In 1957, Operation Equality broke the tradition of height being the only criterion and reassigned

³ C.W.G. Rich, *Memo to Superintendent, Subject: Operation Equality*. (West Point, New York, 28 March 1960), 4.

⁴ United States Military Academy, *Operation Scramble*, (West Point, New York, 1962), 1.

cadets based on scholarship, physical fitness, leadership, varsity athletic ability, as well as height. The academy achieved height equality by increasing the existing six-inch height spread from the mean height to a twelve-inch spread. Upon the entrance of the Class of 1967, the academy achieved total integration.⁵ The purpose of Operation Equality was to achieve equal distribution of talent or lack thereof, and produce companies of approximately equal strength. Cadets received an assignment to one permanent company throughout their tenure at the academy.

Both the evolution of military instruction and the class system play a pivotal role in the notion of scrambling for leader development. Military instruction during this period expanded into a progressive four-year program that coincided with the cadet's military training. The curriculum centered on challenges of leadership and a practical understanding of effectively treating. The instruction served as a capstone for the first class (1^o) cadets before graduation and prepared the 2^o cadets to lead the new cadets between their second and first class year.⁶ The Fourth Class system remained the cadet development structure during this period. However, the fourth class system failed to create an atmosphere of development. It promoted an environment of unprofessionalism and hazing. Developing the 4^o was the responsibility of all three upper classes. An unhealthy "we verses them" attitude existed between upperclass cadets and the 4^o cadets.⁷ Instructional reforms, such as leadership theories, group dynamics, and organizational

⁵ C.W.G. Rich, *Memo to Superintendent, Subject: Operation Equality*. (West Point, New York, 28 March 1960), 1.

⁶ Jack Kelly, *Putting the Cart Before the Horse: The Timing of PL300 in the Current Curriculum at USMA.*, (West Point, New York, November 1997), 6.

⁷ Lori A. Stokan, *The Fourth Class System: 192Years of Tradition Unhampered by Progress from Within*, (West Point, New York, November 1994), 13.

change would not influence the curriculum until the late 1970's. Subsequently, the fourth class leader development system would remain in place until the early 1990's.

In 1962, Operation Scramble became the first official redistribution exercise. Its purpose was to strengthen the leadership experience. Unfortunately, it did not live up to its expectations.⁸ Dissatisfied with the operation of the four-class system, members of the United States Commandant of Cadets (USCC) staff and the subordinate Military Psychology and Leadership (MP&L) department recognized that a true class system did not exist⁹. The perception was that the 1^o cadets were reluctant to take command of classes with which they had lived for the past two to three years. The original proposal avowed the establishment of a strong First Class System and a fresh environment for those who had encountered early difficulties.¹⁰ The Commandant and his staff modified the original plan to scramble the 1^o cadets to 2^o cadets before reorganization week. The USCC staff members recommended a 2^o scramble for it provided a better balance between retention of desirable traditions, policies, spirit, and comradeship in a company. It also provided an elimination of major undesirable behavior due to undue familiarity.¹¹ The effectiveness of the scrambling operation was questionable. The objective of detaching close association with their company mates succeeded but created considerable disruption within the company. Tactical Officers and cadet leaders cited disruptions within the companies and a loss of cohesion and esprit de corps. Faculty members from the MP&L department developed a detailed discussion paper concerning the effects of Operation

⁸ Richard Eckert, *Memo to Commandant of Cadets. Subject: Evaluation of Operation Scramble.* (West Point, New York, 12 February 1963), 2.

⁹ Sam Walker, *Memo to Commandant of Cadets, Subject: Talking Paper-Reassignment of New Second Class Prior to Reorganization Week.* (West Point, New York, 28 March 1962), 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Scramble. The MP&L department challenged that the break up of small unit solidarity and esprit was related to a decrease in the cadet's feeling of identification with the academy and its values.¹² Comments from cadet company and battalion commanders suggested a certain amount of hostility between the 2^o and 1^o, which resulted in a reduced feeling of loyalty and solidarity in their relationships in the new company.

In a leader development sense, the MP&L discussion members stated opinions against scrambling, "while it makes for increased uniformity, it provides less chance for company commanders and classmates to assess the relative abilities of potential cadet officers."¹³ Additionally, in analyzing the cadets' four-year experience, the same author noted:

It appears obvious that the impact of this system is to break up company and class solidarity, minimize company esprit and isolate the individual from the strong ties and relationships which provide his support and protection, while distributing his contacts and loyalties across a broader segment of the Corps. Available evidence tends to indicate that this frequent shifting tends to increase friction between the First and Second Classes, to create some confusion about standards, SOPs (Standing Operating Procedures) within companies as well as limiting the satisfaction and values which a cadet can obtain as a member of a company.¹⁴

For various unknown reasons, the final recommendation from the USCC staff advocated a continuation of the present system of assigning 4^o cadets. If additional scrambling were required for developmental purposes, the optimal time would be at the completion of

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² United States Military Academy, *Detailed Discussion of Operation Scramble*, (West Point, New York, 1962), 5.

¹³ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴ Ibid., 4.

Camp Buckner before their 3^o year.¹⁵ However, these recommendations were not implemented and carried little weight. The operation inadvertently ended due to the expansion and reorganization of the Corps. Cadets remained stabilized in their academic companies, however the institution did not.

The era from 1960 through 1990 proved to be a turbulent time for the United States Military Academy. The increased number of minorities, the admission of female cadets, and society's anti-military sentiments created a hostile environment. Hostile reaction toward change and dysfunctional norms were inevitable. The need to extinguish inappropriate behavior became the academy's destiny. Racial upheaval, drug abuse, and an upsurge in violent crime riddled the domestic scene. Internally, the size of the Corps of Cadets almost doubled, as did the Academy's problems. Media focus on West Point prompted increased attention from both the Defense Department and the Department of the Army. In February 1964, Congress authorized an increase of the Corps from 2,529 to 4,417 and the construction necessary to accommodate these cadets.¹⁶ With increased admissions of African Americans and other minorities, it became important to ensure a proper distribution within the Corps. As late as 1968, there were only thirty African Americans at the Military Academy. However, due to an increase in the number of qualified minorities, by the fall of 1970, there were almost one hundred.¹⁷

The increasing number of cadets, with the corresponding factors of changing societal values and racial diversity, compounded the problems of maintaining good order and discipline. In October 1975, President Ford signed into law Public Law 94-106 that

¹⁵ United States Military Academy, *Operation Scramble*, (West Point, New York, 1962), 1.

¹⁶ Theodore J. Crackel, *The Illustrated History of West Point*. 1991, 265.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 284.

required the admission of women into all service academies. Long standing traditions such as gender based enrollment and mandatory chapel service began to deteriorate. Military instruction and the existing class system also took its share of scrutiny. A 1969 study of the Fourth Class System found many deficiencies. The report highlighted upperclassman fostering poor leadership practices and concluded that the essence of the system was negative and it taught improper leadership techniques.¹⁸

In 1974 the Commandant, Brigadier General Ulmer, directed a feasibility study from the Office of Military Leadership (OML) regarding the reshuffling the Class of 1977 for AY 74-75. A mixture of institutional goals and individual concerns drove the intent.

The advantages were:

- to enhance the commonality of standards across the brigade base
- enhance the opportunity for cadets identified early as low performers from a leadership standpoint to continue their development in a new environment
- enhance the opportunities for cadets to become familiar with a large majority of their classmates
- dissolve undesirable cadet cliques.¹⁹

The feasibility study took the commander's intent and added the dimensions of the Fourth Class System, the Leader Evaluation System (LES), honor, conduct and discipline, esprit de corps, and overall leadership development. The final product summarized the advantages and disadvantages of scrambling each class. The study group determined that the appropriate course of action was a combination of 3° scrambling after CFT and the 1° re-billeted in separate living areas.²⁰

¹⁸ W.R. Richardson, "The 4th Class system...Part Two: The Present," Assembly, (West Point, New York, 1963).

¹⁹ Harry A. Buckley, *Memo to Commandant, Subject Class Reshuffling*. (West Point, New York, 1974), 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 4.

Although the Commandant intended to implement the recommendations, the EE304 honor scandal forced a change in plans. The result was to scramble both the 2^o and 1^o cadets to reduce class cliques and undesirable norms. If no scrambling occurred, five to seven companies would have been decimated by class losses. The honor violations extended well beyond the 1^o cadets into other classes within the same lettered company.²¹ Scrambling for leader development played a secondary role in this redistribution exercise.

Reassignment of the new third class does the least to accomplish the objectives of the scramble. The reassignment of the new second class will satisfy all the objectives of the program to some degree but because this class is not the class in power, it will not have the same influence and impact on standard or norm setting as will the new first class.²²

The Academy scrambled both the 1^o and 2^o cadets to reduce inappropriate relationships, class cliques and undesirable norms toward honor violations. Additionally in 1977, the 3^o was scrambled to allow a year for a settling in period before assuming chain of command duties as first classmen.

Although the academy took corrective action against the cheating scandal, General Bernard W. Rogers, then the Chief of Staff of the Army directed the West Point Study Group to review every aspect of the academy. Major revisions in academic departments were soon underway. Leader development took on a new focus. In 1977, the Office of Military Leadership re-designated as the Behavioral Science and Leadership Department (BS&L) taught motivation, stress, group behavior, organizational change, and leadership skills. The department gave formal instruction in counseling, decision-making, problem

²¹ DA, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for personnel, West Point Study Group Report. (West Point, New York, 18 January 1978), 3,4.

²² Harry A. Buckley, *Memo to Commandant, Subject: Reassignment of Cadets (Scramble)* (West Point, New York, 18 April 1977), 2.

solving, communications and team building. The philosophy behind this program was to provide 2^o cadets with the leadership skills necessary in leading the Corps of Cadets during their 1^o year.²³ Additionally, the changes would allow cadets to practice these skills in a "leader laboratory" where cadets could theoretically develop their leadership skills before graduation. The existing leader development during this period is still the Fourth Class System. 1^o cadets held all leadership positions in the Corps from squad leader up.

In 1979, the Superintendent revisited the issue and for the first time in history implemented scrambling based primarily on the developmental needs of the cadets. The Commandant's major concern at the time was creating a perception that scrambling was not done for a negative reason.²⁴ The Commandant, Brigadier General Joseph P. Franklin, informed the USCC staff that ". . . the importance in any scramble decision that the right reason for a scramble, regardless of its configuration, be clearly understood by all concerned, especially the cadets".²⁵ Even though USCC staff members recommended scrambling at the start of the 2^o academic year, the Commandant believed and ultimately recommended to the Superintendent that:

A 3^o scramble before Cadet Field Training (CFT) would best achieve the positive results the academy was after. It provides the anticipated Yearlings a "new start," both with classmates and upperclasses, after they have formed some relationships in Cadet Basic Training (CBT), experienced a year of familiarization in a regular company, and had their horizons expanded somewhat by CFT. It also gives the Academy a better chance to assess the cadets as they progress from Yearlings to First Classmen.²⁶

²³ Howard T. Prince. "The Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership: Contributing to an Army of Excellence." *Assembly*. (West Point, New York, 1985), 10.

²⁴ Franklin, Joseph. *Memo to Superintendent, Subject: Corps-Wide Scramble of One or More Classes of Cadets*. (West Point, New York, 5 July 1979), 1.

²⁵ Dennis R. Bruzina, *Memo for Record, Subject: Meeting w/Commandant Re-Scramble*. (West Point, New York, 13 April 1979), 1.

²⁶ Franklin, Joseph. *Memo to Superintendent, Subject: Corps-Wide Scramble of One or More Classes of Cadets*. (West Point, New York, 5 July 1979), 1.

The Superintendent followed the recommendations and implemented scrambling before CFT, which continued until 1984.

Between 1985 and 1990, no scrambling occurred at the Academy. The elimination of the 3^o scramble was a concerted effort to examine the validity of scrambling over time. Coinciding with the validation period of scrambling, the Office of Institutional Research discovered an interesting phenomenon. The attrition rate of women drastically increased during the second semester of their 3^o year.²⁷ No evidence exists to why this occurs, but it is the only abnormal trend amongst the Corps. With this trend in effect, it becomes hard to predict the amount of females in each lettered company. In the premise of social development, this phenomenon makes a compelling argument for the need to redistribute the Corps before the 2^oAY.

In 1986, Lieutenant General Dave R. Palmer arrived as superintendent and vowed to regain stability of the Corps. The programs and policies he instituted largely remains in effect today. At first, he was resistant toward the practice of scrambling. He believed the issue had a negative connotation and did not want to scramble in the context of honor.²⁸ A strong position in support of scrambling arose during the change from the "Fourth Class System" to a "Four-Class System". Identified as a potential structural mechanism, scrambling would enhance the goals set out by his new proposed development

²⁷ United States Military Academy. Briefing for COL Nagayama on Women at the US Military Academy. *Attrition Men and Women (Classes of 1980-1990)*. (West Point, New York, April 1991).

²⁸ Stephen, Grove, Stephen, *Historical Overview of Scrambling at West Point*. (West Point, New York, 20 February 1997), 2.

system.²⁹ In 1988, at the onset of the Cadet Leader Development System (CLDS), 2^o cadets entered summer detail training in squad leader in both CBT and CFT. In 1989, CLDS replaced the Fourth Class System and became the new leader development system. Based on the potential advantages CLDS had to offer, the Superintendent re-implemented scrambling for the rising 2^o in the summer of 1990. The official name of the scrambling exercise became the Leader Distribution Plan. Specific advantages were:

- a. The concept of having the first two years as development and last two as assessment.
- b. Shifts focus from unit performance to individual development
- c. Balance leadership opportunities across the companies
- d. Reduce the adverse impact of cliques and negative norms
- e. Balances demographic characteristics
- f. Exposes cadets to new leader styles and other classmates
- g. Provides cadets of concern and weak performers a fresh beginning in a new company
- h. Lessens the dilemma of 'friend versus leader' relationships
- i. Provides an opportunity for the Tactical Officer to have a greater positive influence on developing the individual and the company climate.³⁰

Clearly, the cited advantages had a developmental overtone however the timing of the scramble had its critics. Nevertheless, in 1990 General Palmer implemented the Commandant's "Leader Development Program" by scrambling the 2^o at the start of their academic year.

The transformation of the Company Tactical Officer (TAC) from a disciplinarian role to a leader developer further reinforces the criticism toward the timing of scrambling. The final report of the West Point Study Group, published in July 1977, stated that increased leadership opportunities for the cadets and opportunities for the TAC to spend

²⁹ United States Military Academy, *Preparing For West Point's Third Century: A Summary of the Years of Affirmation and Change, 1986-1991*. (West Point, New York, June 1991), 32.

more time in cadet development were worthwhile objectives. The study group argued that the TAC had drifted away from the cadet development, finding him or herself in a maze of administrative turmoil.³¹ The final report argued that TACs frequently were not setting the norms in the cadet companies.³² The Borman Commission and the West Point Study Group differed on the necessity of scrambling. The Borman Commission's report suggested that cliques and dysfunctional norms *could* be dealt with effectively by scrambling³³ where as the DA study group reached an opposite conclusion. Their findings suggested ceasing scrambling operations in order to build cohesion within the companies.³⁴ Lieutenant General Goodpaster, then the Superintendent, disregarded the recommendations of the DA Study Group and continued scrambling with the Class of 1979 at the start of 2^oAY.

As the role of the tactical officer evolved, past, current, and future tactical officers have debated the issue of the 2^oAY scramble. Is it a developmental necessity or does it hinder the developmental process? In April 1998, a USCC tactical officer attempted to answer that question. He undertook a staff study on the effectiveness of the Leader Distribution Plan.³⁵ The study surveyed fellow tactical officers, NCOs, professors, and cadets. Furthermore, he conducted an informal electronic poll of tactical officers, NCOs, and professors concerning which class would receive the most benefit from an AY scramble. Of the thirty-

³⁰ James R. Siket, *Memo to Policy Board Members, Subject: Leader Distribution Plan*. (West Point, New York, 7 March 1990), Encl. 1.

³¹ DA, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for personnel, *Final Report of the West Point Study Group, 1977-78*, 98-99.

³² *Ibid.*, 105-106.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Duffy, David. *Memo for Brigade Tactical Officer* (West Point, New York, 11 February 1998), Annex C.

seven responses received, 62% suggested changing the current 2°AY scramble to a plebe scramble; only 29% wanted to maintain the current system. Although the survey did not follow strict control measures, it did provide some insight into tactical officer attitudes toward scrambling. On the premise of leader development, the recommended course of action did not agree with the 2°AY choice.³⁶ New concern toward the residual affect of the increase responsibility the 3° cadet corporals existed:

“The 2° NCOs are not a cohesive group, do not know the company policies and SOPs, and are uncomfortable with their new position. Consequently, team leaders tend to have more informal power than their NCO. On another note, third class know they are leaving the company after the year and take no real stake in the company as a group”³⁷.

Although overwhelming evidence suggests a developmental disconnect for the 2°; USCC commanders determined that the suggested changes did not necessarily warrant a modification in policy.³⁸ The comments from the Regimental Tactical Officers echo the concerns of the institution, such as balance of minorities and women; decreases the chance of unhealthy sub-cultures from forming; and the elimination of dysfunctional behavior. Again, leader development takes a lower priority. One could hypothesize the differences in perception between the company tactical teams and the Regimental Tactical Officers (RTO) exist because the RTOs lack training in behavioral science. Additional staff studies, conducted by the Office of Institutional Research cite other advantages that outweighed the

³⁶ Ibid., 4.

³⁷ Ibid., 2.

³⁸ Charles Peddy, *Memo to Commandant, Subject: Staff Study*. (West Point, New York, 9 March 1998), 1.

developmental needs of the 2^o.³⁹ Included in the list were the promotion of common standards, disruption of dysfunctional subcultures, and balancing demographics and abilities. Although the findings from the Institutional Research Department are still in draft form, the results appear to be inevitable. The current scrambling program remains as is.

As previously noted, scrambling has served many masters, some developmental others not. The advantages of scrambling are compelling in terms of equalizing demographics and eliminating the onset of dysfunctional norms. Operation Equality leveled talent within the Corps in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The original purpose was not a developmental one. Operation Scramble, originated as a leader development tool, failed in that goal. In 1974, the Commandant of Cadets, Brigadier General Ulmer tried to reinstate the original intent of scrambling, as a developmental tool however, the EE304 scandal highlighted unwanted company subcultures. An environment receptive to developmental scrambling became the instrument that ingrained the importance of supporting the maintenance of institutional norms. In 1979, the Commandant of Cadets, Brigadier General Franklin again refocused scrambling on leader development. Although no assessment of this period apparently exists, the attrition rate of female cadets again reinforced the need for redistribution. Despite LTG Palmer's re-initiation of leader development scrambling in 1990, the current assessment of that program indicates that it is not performing well in that context, though it is succeeding in the support of institutional norms.

³⁹ United States Military Academy. *Courses of Action for Scrambling: Advantages/Disadvantages*. (West Point, New York, 14 May 1998), 4-6.

This type of scrambling does serve a purpose and ultimately accomplishes the needs of the academy. However, the purpose of the Military Academy is to provide the nation with leaders of character who serve in the common defense. Everything done in structuring the cadet experience must support that purpose. The current scrambling system overtaxes the 2^o by asking them to come into a new company and immediately assume key leadership positions. Time is lost as the 2^o cadets try to understand their role in the company and his or her relationship with their own class. Third class cadets gain increased prestige and informally become the leader. With the constant reorganization of the Corps, scrambling the 2^o makes it more difficult for tactical officers to track marginal cadets and adjust available leadership opportunities. In this context, a 2^oAY scramble does not meet this class' developmental needs. By scrambling the 2^o cadets, the academy is sterilizing its environment from any unwanted political scrutiny. Dismantling the cohesion and destroying the cohort organization ensures the elimination of undesirable norms from forming. The institution espouses individual leadership development as its primary goal; however, scrambling during 2^oAY does not this goal. Scrambling does provide a solid foundation for leader development, however the optimal timing to enhance individual development remains at the 3^oAY.

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