

The Evolution of the Tactical Officer Education Program

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Throughout the history of the United States Military Academy the Tactical Officer (TAC) has played an important role in providing the nation with Leaders of Character. The role of the TAC can be traced back to 1818 with Captain John Bliss the first "Commanding Officer of the Battalion of Cadets" and instructor of Infantry Tactics. The initial responsibilities of this office included inspector of the Cadet Commons. TACs have a unique opportunity to influence a substantial number of America's future leaders. In developing these young men and women, the TAC's role is vital and one that few other officer can surpass. They will help define for cadets the nebulous images created by the words soldier, leader, commander, and manager.¹

Before 1969 the Academy believed field experience as successful company commanders gave TACs the necessary tools to accomplish their mission. The TAC's responsibility does not end with military development, but includes all areas of cadet development.² Throughout its evolution the TAC's role has expanded in many directions, increasing in responsibility and necessitating increased officer education. Therefore, the

1 William John Pokorny, "The Evolution of the Tactical Officer at West Point," Assembly (March 1985): 18; United States Corps of Cadets, Tactical Officer's Guide ([West Point]: United States Military Academy, August 1980), 1; United States Corps of Cadets, Tactical Officer's Guide ([West Point]: United States Military Academy, March 1979), 1.

2 Thomas S. Bowen, "The Eisenhower Fellowship: West Point's School for Tactical Officers," Assembly (May 1992): 18.

Academy now believes that experience in behavioral science and organizational development is as important as military competence for serving in this position. Training in this area provides TACs with the skills they need to turn cadets into second Lieutenants.

The trend toward requiring TACs to have graduate degrees began in 1969 with Brigadier General Bernard Rogers, then Commandant of Cadets. General Rogers' theory was twofold. First, he recognized the importance of the TAC's role. He felt TACs had to be more than unit commanders, they had to be advisors, counselors, and teachers. Although a believer in the value of behavioral science and organizational development, General Rogers also wanted his TACs to have the same educational advantages of advanced civil schooling as the academic instructors. He thought TACs needed academic credentials comparable to those of the instructors to avoid conflicts between the two groups of officers.³

While the number of TACs with graduate degrees was increasing, understanding among the Superintendent, Commandant, and faculty of the importance of educating TACs continued. They believed TACs needed to be properly prepared for working with young adults at USMA. This focus took into account that the Military Academy's structured culture is unique when compared to civilian institutions. This attitude sparked the change in the

³ Bowen, "The Eisenhower Fellowship: West Point's School for Tactical Officers," 18.

way West Point prepared its TACs and marked the beginning of the "Eisenhower Program", formerly the "Fellowship in Leader Development."⁴

With the institution of a "First Class System" in the late 1950's, the cadet chain-of-command gained greater responsibility and authority. With the laudable intent of giving the cadet increased leadership experience, the Academy began to change the TAC's role from his previous command function that required him to:

...perform the duties normally devolving upon a company commander. These will include such inspections of barracks, personnel or records as may be necessary to enforce orders and regulations and required standards of policy and discipline.

By 1969, the Commandant verified the evolving role of the TAC with a memorandum to the Superintendent:

"2. A study was made to probe the advantage of graduate school for prospective tactical department officers in view of the following: ...the role and duties of the Tactical Officer has (sic) been changing from those common to the tactical unit commander to those of counselor, advisor, and teacher requiring vastly more professional skill, academic background and adroit management.

3. In view of the above, it is recommended that:

a. Appropriate measures be taken to request and secure validation for all Tactical Department spaces not currently validated for graduate training."⁵

⁴ John M. Wattendorf, interview by Thurinton W. Harvell, 23 September 1994, West Point.

⁵ United States Corps of Cadets, Orders ([West Point]: United States Military Academy, 1939); United States Corps of Cadets, Memorandum from BG Bernard W. Rogers to the Superintendent ([West Point]: United States Military Academy, 1969).

The 1976 Borman Report commented on the delegation of authority to the cadet chain-of-command and the confusion over the proper role of the company TAC. Indeed, the role of the TAC as seen by academy leadership had been blurred over the years.

The Final Report of the West Point Study Group, published in July of 1977, revealed that increased leadership opportunities for the cadets and opportunities for the TAC to spend more time in cadet development were both worthwhile objectives. In recent years, however, something has gone awry. The Study Group argued that the TAC has drifted away from the cadet development, finding himself constantly involved in his own maze of "administrivia." The individual TAC does not bear sole blame for his isolation from cadets. The institution has failed to describe his role in clear, operational terms and has failed to give him a clear, coherent statement of purpose.⁶

The Final Report argued that TACs frequently were not the ones setting the norms in the cadet company. The attenuation of his authority and responsibility, lack of a clear sense of role and identity, and absence of coherent philosophy were perhaps the most serious institutional shortcomings with the tactical department at West Point. The report discussed how the TAC is uniquely a focus of cadet development and no part of the institution will function well if the Tactical "system" functions

⁶ Department of the Army, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Final Report of the West Point Study Group ([Washington, D.C.]: U.S. Department of the Army, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, 1977-78), 98-99.

poorly. But the "system" requires careful selection of the TACs and procedures to ensure they receive support from the rest of West Point, and that the structure of the Tactical staff is supportive, and that they receive adequate orientation. Also, clear lines of communication from the Superintendent and Commandant of Cadets expressing a coherent philosophy are necessary. This type of system will allow TACs to air views and concerns to the West Point command authorities. Also, the TAC must be willing to make the personal sacrifices required if he is to devote himself to developing cadets into Army officers.⁷

The final report provided some key areas of consideration to improve the TAC program. The report suggested the institution of a better selection process for TACs that included such criteria as wide military experience, academic achievement, and outstanding performance as an officer. Prospective TACs should also undergo personal interviews, because written evaluation reports may not fully disclose the true officer characteristics.⁸

The report states that USMA must provide a better orientation for newly assigned TACs. This program should be comprehensive to ensure it developed an understanding of the objectives of the Academy and the way TACs are achieve them. The suggested program should include at a minimum:

- a. Mission, goals, environment, and cadet systems (i.e.,

7 Ibid., 105-106.

8 Ibid., 25.

Disciplinary System, Fourth Class System, Leadership Evaluation System, Ethics and the Honor Code and System, and Regulations).

b. Leadership and academic development philosophy and program.

c. Staff and faculty officer responsibilities for cadet leadership (academic development, enforcement of regulations, and maintenance of standards).

d. Tactical Officer, academic faculty, and cadet relationships.

e. Cadet motivation; attitudes toward issues of concern (e.g., women at the Academy and in the Army, EE 304 status).

f. Skills and methods needed to develop leadership and motivate cadets.

g. Interpersonal skills; performance counseling skills; techniques of group problem solving.

h. Familiarization with the reports and studies that have been significant in the Academy's evolution.

i. Future Army battlefield systems, as part of understanding the goals for cadet development.

j. The relationship between success as a cadet and success in the Army.

The final report also considered instituting a formal exchange program (two years as TAC and two years as instructor), to assist in reducing conflict between academic and military demands on cadets. It would merge two role models in the eyes of the cadets, and reinforce the academic environment in cadet

companies.⁹

In 1986, Lieutenant General David Palmer, then Superintendent, felt that USMA should look at the possibility of developing a graduate program at the military academy. He tasked the department of Behavioral Science and Leadership (BS&L) to define the role of a TAC and develop educational objectives. General Palmer's guidance to the head of BS&L was to do a comparative analysis of USMA's capabilities with other civilian universities to meet educational objectives.¹⁰

It is important to put this evolution into the historical context, because in the late 1980's it was time for USMA's decennial reaccreditation. It is this reason that the concern about the role of the TAC began to reappear. Preparation for the reaccreditation was the leading factor that drove USMA toward stating its goals more clearly. Looking at the stated goals, General Palmer directed the academy to look very carefully at the purpose and mission. The purpose and mission were very clear, and he emphasized that everything the academy did had to lead to this. Reaccreditation requires an institution to conduct a self study. The self study conducted by USMA provided the strategic guidance of "2002 and Beyond." Historically the role of a TAC clearly relates with military development, but not paying much attention to the intellectual and physical sides of developing

⁹ Ibid., 25-26.

¹⁰ Wattendorf 1994; George B. Forsythe, interview by Thurinton W. Harvell, 29 September 1994, West Point.

cadets. In the past, individuals concerned about the academy raised the issue about the role of the TAC. Knowing this General Palmer wanted to take a good look at this area. While studying the self study issues, the role of the TAC continuously came up, indicating this role was very important.¹¹

The TAC clearly influenced cadets throughout their four year experience at West Point. One may question "What is the West Point experience?" The West Point experience is a culmination of what happens in the classroom, the athletic field, the barracks, religious activities, etc. The next question is who helps the cadet integrate all these variables. The answer was, this is the TACs role. This is a challenging task, and what is the academy doing to prepare them. Clearly the academy is selecting people who are very capable in the area of military training. But not necessary in the area of developing a young adult to be a leader of character in an academic environment.¹²

A cadet company is much different than an infantry company in the army, where the task is leader development opposed to "taking hill 52". At West Point the TAC typically does not take a cadet company as an integrated unit and accomplish a mission as a team. The primary and very difficult task for a TAC at West Point is to develop the individual to be a leader of character. Researchers found that, even though the academy was bringing in

¹¹ Wattendorf 1994.

¹² Military Academy, Strategic Guidance, West Point 2002 and Beyond ([West Point, N.Y.]: U.S. Military Academy, Strategic Guidance, 1993), 6-7; Wattendorf 1994.

people who were successful at company command in the army, they were not necessarily prepared for the responsibility of a TAC as defined by West Point. Although the TAC is the legal commander of the cadet company, the academy does not necessarily want him to run it. The cadet chain of command should be allowed to take on the responsibility of running the company. This gives them experience and help develop their leadership skills. The TAC turns out to be more of a coach or a mentor rather than a commander. But, he also has to accept all the responsibilities of a commander.¹³

It was clear at this time that the role of the TAC needed some clarity and refinishing. Under the direction of General Palmer, USMA conducted a needs assessment including interviews of all the thirty-six assigned TACs, past and present documentation that describes the role of a TAC (USCC PAM 600-1), and interviews with the four Regimental TACs (RTO). Results were verified with the Commandant that produced role dimensions of a company TAC. The results of the needs assessment state: "as a TAC, I am a: role model, counselor, teacher, developer, disciplinarian/judge, climate setter, administrator, and commander." Revealing critical dimensions of the company TAC role are: develop individual cadets to be leaders of character, and create an environment in the cadet company which supports individual development. The role definitions were the key in developing the graduate education program goals. The committee presented a

¹³ Wattendorf 1994.

review of current graduate school programs and a list of USMA's curriculum options to the superintendent.¹⁴

By the 1980s TACs were attending graduate programs, studying in the areas of counseling, student development, personnel services, and human organizational science. A summary of recent graduate school programs were:

Auburn University

- Master of Arts in Community Agency Counseling (Developmental and supportive personal adjustment counseling)
- Master of Arts in College Student Development (Post-secondary student personnel services administration)

University of South Carolina

- Master of Arts in Student Personnel Services (Post-secondary student personnel services administration)

Vilanova University

- Master of Arts in Human Organizational Science (Administration in public organizations)

TACs in these programs were receiving pieces of what the academy wanted them to receive. But no coherent program looked at all the dimensions described in the needs assessment. The academy felt that it could improve the TACs educational background in those areas not addressed in the above programs. Therefore, USMA needed a program designed to help the TAC learn how to be a developer, how to pay attention to the culture in an organization, and how to change it if it needed to be changed.¹⁵

Based on what was known about the behavioral sciences,

¹⁴ Wattendorf 1994; Forsythe 1994.

¹⁵ Ibid.

researchers developed learning objectives to fulfill a graduate program of about one year in the classroom. These objectives would provide the foundation to meet the critical dimensions of the TAC's role. After looking at the educational objectives, and comparing the graduate programs of other universities to what could be done at West Point, General Palmer felt no single graduate program could meet the needs of the academy, so he decided to try developing the program at West Point.¹⁶

In 1988 four volunteers were selected (3 West Point graduates and 1 ROTC graduate, 3 men and 1 women) to go through the pilot Fellowship in Leader Development Program. The program was designed as a two-year masters-level graduate program. Its purpose was to educate TACs for the military academy to be professional leader developers, critical consumers of theory and research, and informed, reflective practitioners. It consisted of fourteen graduate-level academic courses during the first year which included leader skills, direct-level leadership, and indirect-level leadership. The second year would provide a supervised practicum. The goal was to have a professional degree-producing program that placed an emphasis on theory in practice, not research, and provided two major summative experiences; comprehensive oral examination, and a supervised practicum. This multi-disciplinary approach could best be taught at West Point.¹⁷

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

The academic year 1989/90 was the first year of full implementation of the program. In May 1990, the first four officers to complete the program graduated with the USMA Class of 1990 and LTG Palmer officially named the program, "The Dwight David Eisenhower Program of Graduate Studies in Leader Development." In May 1991, eleven officers graduated and May 1992, fifteen officers graduated.¹⁸

The program was viewed as academically rigorous (forty-eight credit-hour program) and essential to the purpose and mission of the USMA. The Academy then began to seek Congressional approval to have a degree-producing program that would be a Masters of Arts in Leadership Development. The academy asked the US Department of Education to form a committee and evaluate the program. The committee of civilian professors looked at faculty, the students, and the selection process. It decided that the program was in fact a masters level program. They sent letters to the Secretary of Education, the President of the Senate, and the Vice-President of the United States. The committee recommended that under Title X of the U.S. Code, the Military Academy be allowed to grant the graduate degree. The 1989 report of the Board of Visitors, states:

Topic: The Fellowship in Leader Development (Renamed the Dwight David Eisenhower Program of Graduate Studies in Leader Development, May 1990)

Conclusion: The Board endorses this program as one of the most significant and beneficial initiatives taken in recent years. Monetarily, it saves the Army money, but

¹⁸ Ibid.

effectiveness is far more important than efficiency in this case. The Academy focuses on leader development, and the Fellowship is the linchpin program of all other developmental programs. The Board applauds the quality and rigor of the Fellowship.

Recommendation: The Board urges that the Academy continue the Fellowship at its current level of excellence...also that the Army seek passage of law to authorize the Superintendent to recognize the work being done by the fellows by awarding...the degree of Master of Arts in Leader Development.

Congress deliberated on the issue, but decided the Military Academy could only give masters degrees to everyone who was enrolled in the program up to that time. However after the last student completed the program, they would no longer allow the academy to grant the degree.¹⁹

The reasoning behind congressional disapproval is complex, no one is completely sure on what grounds the decision was made. One belief is that the historical tradition in the United States of keeping the citizen soldier and not wanting a professional army was a contributing factor. The belief being that if the military is granting a masters degree would be too much of a movement towards a professional army. We should keep the education of the military officer in the civilian sector.²⁰

Whatever the reason USMA was compelled to look at alternatives for educating TACs. A number of options were considered. One option was to drop the whole program and simply go back to sending officers to civilian universities. The

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Wattendorf 1994.

academy elected not to take this option, because it was obvious that a lot of progress was made with educating TACs. One of the advantages of having the program at West Point was that it provided the Corps of Cadets as a living laboratory, which gives the officer the opportunity to study and conduct projects with cadets. The other important advantage it provided was continuity between the TACs. The interaction between the fifteen students provides some close bonds that would be helpful as they operated among the Corps of Cadets. Through a common education program TACs would have a better understanding of the cadets experience allowing them to pay more attention to the academic side of cadet life. It was important to the Academy to keep as much of the benefits of the Eisenhower Program as possible while still meeting congressional requirements.²¹

The academy then began looking at universities that were close enough to take advantage of USMA's living laboratory. The academy seriously considered Columbia University in New York City, but the disadvantage of choosing it was that students would have to be located on campus. Columbia's charter did not allow teachers to instruct off their main campus; even though it was fairly close, the commute would be about ninety minutes. This was enough of a disadvantage to eliminate.²²

Long Island University (LIU), on the other hand, thought it could do at West Point what Columbia would not. Two different

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

LIU programs met the requirements of what they believed to be the academy's goal. LIU combined elements of each and called it "Counseling and Development." They also allowed West Point to teach six courses, which they would award twelve credit hours out of the total 44 credit hours towards their masters degree program. These hours allowed the academy to teach what was discovered in the needs assessment, filling the gaps of what was missing from the Eisenhower program. In 1993, the "Eisenhower Program" evolved into the present "Tactical Officer Education Program (TOEP)." TOEP is currently what the USMA uses to educate TACs. While there are some things that the Eisenhower Program had that the new program does not have, the new program also offers some advantages. Interaction with civilian faculty will undoubtedly broaden the graduate students' perspective, which is healthy in educating TACs.²³

Understanding the importance and the need for continued graduate education for TACs, at present and into the future, is crucial to the Military Academy's purpose. USMA has made enormous progress in its efforts to improve the company TAC program. Historically the role of the TAC has been key in the development of the nation's leaders. USMA should be commended on its effort in attempting to provide more opportunity to its leaders and cadets as they strive for excellence. As the academy leadership evolves and new personalities are introduced to West Point, the tactical education program must be put into a

23 Ibid.

historical prospective to preserve the achievements of past and present administrations. Properly preparing TACs is mission essential in the development of our future leaders.

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