

Engines of War: The Evolution of Tactical Training
for the Corps of Cadets, 1918-1942.

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Little more than twenty years after the signing of the Armistice, German tanks, mechanized infantry, and dive-bombers raced across Poland to start World War II. Between November 1918 and September 1939, the German Army transformed the potential of the tank and the airplane into the realities of modern warfare. The American experience during the same period was different. Americans were reactive in developing a modern doctrine and organization for mechanized warfare. America entered World War II unprepared to fight modern armored warfare.⁽¹⁾ The blame for this was shared by many elements of the United States interwar military establishment. The question then arises: what did the United States Military Academy do in the interwar period to train graduates in the use and understanding of mechanized doctrine?

On the surface, it is an argument between training with horses and training with tanks. While these two engines of war represented the old and the new, they also served as the symbols of deeper arguments.

The nature and extent of cadet tactical training during the interwar years reflects competition for resources and differences in philosophy. Time was, and continues to be, the most scarce resource available when considering cadet training. Competition over time was a great influence on the type and amount of all training at the Academy.

There were also philosophical arguments within the context of tactical training. A key point emerged between those who

⁽¹⁾ Bradshaw, "Oral History Interview of GEN Bruce Palmer," May 29, 1975, p 3

considered West Point only as a starting point in officer training, and others who thought it was (or should be) an end to itself in producing qualified lieutenants. The extent of training with men or training with machines to master modern warfare was still another argument. Finally, this argument reflected conflict between the status quo and innovation at West Point during the interwar period.

WORLD WAR I AND THE 1920s

In 1918, while General John J. Pershing formed a tank corps in the Allied Expeditionary Force (AEF) and tried to turn stalemate into open warfare, the Commandant of Cadets at USMA was requesting more horses for training. Lieutenant Colonel Jens Bugge, then serving as Commandant of Cadets, wrote in 1918 that 250 additional horses were "urgently needed" to maintain the proper level of training. He felt strongly about the issue saying:

Unless this is obtained the amount of riding instruction given to cadets must be curtailed. This is already limited and should not be decreased. (2)

The Commandant was clearly not interested in changing the status quo with regards to the use of the horses or of tanks at this time. To his credit Bugge did recommend increased instruction in tactics and leadership and wanted to make the Tactical Department equal to all other departments. (3) Bugge may

(2) USMA, Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1918 p. 18

(3) USMA, Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1919 p. 20

have introduced these changes with some vision of the future and based upon the lessons of war in France, but a clearer theme that emerges was USMA's role in terms of military training. In the 1919 Annual Report he said:

It is thought that all instruction given cadets should be limited to such things as are absolutely basic for all officers, no matter what the branch of service. Infantry drill is absolutely essential for everybody; similarly, to learn how to ride is absolutely essential. However to become an expert in equitation is something that should be required if the man decides to go into the mounted service.⁽⁴⁾

This view of USMA's role, to provide cadets with only general subject matter knowledge, was echoed by Douglas MacArthur in 1920. Not only did MacArthur concur with Bugge that military training at USMA be elementary, fundamental, and general, but he also asserted that it should "impart a general conception of all branches and of the special functions of each."⁽⁵⁾ MacArthur also realized that lessons to be learned from WW I required evolutionary change. These factors, and MacArthur's view that the Military Academy existed to serve as a feeder to the Army, help explain the changes he instituted for military training.

MacArthur instituted or formalized many changes during his tenure as Superintendent.⁽⁶⁾ The change most pertinent to this

(4) Ibid p. 20

(5) USMA, Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1920, p. 7.

(6) Philips, Charles E. "Douglas MacArthur: Father of the New West Point?" West Point, New York: Unpublished Graduate Student Paper, HI 600, December 1989.

inquiry was the movement of first and third class summer training to Fort Dix, New Jersey for the purpose of:

having the corps come in contact with the life of the enlisted man, of obtaining more extended drill than is possible on this reservation, of gaining insight into the administration of large bodies of troops, and of broadening the horizon of the cadets by complete change of scene and environment."⁽⁷⁾

This was an attempt to make cadet military training more relevant to the Army and service as an officer after graduation. MacArthur did not specifically list training with mechanized forces as an objective, but he did integrate machine-guns, chemical weapons, and airplanes into the traditional summer training in artillery and equitation.⁽⁸⁾ However, his focus was on training cadets to lead a new breed of soldier, not how to use a new doctrine.⁽⁹⁾

Training away from West Point was curtailed when Brigadier General Fred Sladen replaced MacArthur as Superintendent in 1922. The National Defense Act of 1920 removed large troop units from Fort Dix, and with them the conditions for training at Dix that MacArthur outlined in 1920.⁽¹⁰⁾ Like MacArthur, Sladen felt that West Point was the first step in the process of training officers. But Sladen believed that cadets could be trained to the same standards on West Point as they could on a major Army

(7) USMA, Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1921, p. 5..

(8) USMA, Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1920, p. 9.

(9) USMA, Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1920, p. 10.

(10) USMA, Bugle Notes, 1924-1925, p. 93-94.

post. However, when summer training returned to the confines of West Point proper, the focus of military training shifted. Summer training conducted out of Fort Clinton was seen primarily as a break from academics.

The summer period for the first and third classes is one of relaxation from academic work, and the afternoon and evening periods are largely available for recreation. It is therefore the period during which the relatives and friends of cadets count on visiting them and at the same time seeing the historic spot and great national institution at which they are receiving their education. (11)

This union of military training with rest and relaxation, dichotomous by today's standards, is even more difficult to understand when considered in the context of the Academy's mission. Sladen said that the purpose of tactical training was not "intended to produce glorified drill sergeants, or to qualify the cadet to be a subaltern officer in one particular branch of the service." (12) However directives from the War Department:

has placed upon this institution the added responsibility of covering in the course on military instruction that portion of the former basic courses at the Special Service Schools which was intended to qualify the student for troop leading. (13)

This codified West Point's role to produce only officers who could "perform the duties of the lowest grade in any of the branches into which he may be commissioned" but who could

(11) USMA, Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1923, p. 7.

(12) Ibid, p. 3.

(13) Ibid, p. 5.

understand how all branches worked together.⁽¹⁴⁾ In my opinion the positive aspect of this philosophy is the beginnings of a combined arms mind set; the drawback being a lack of effort to train with new concepts or technical equipment for fear of developing specialists.

The one noticeable exception to this aversion for specialize training was the First Class flight training program. Begun in 1922, and conducted most years at Mitchel Field, Long Island, this training was eventually expanded to twenty hours of flight training for all First Class. The first exposure to mechanized training did not occur for another six years.⁽¹⁵⁾

In the summer of 1928, The Tank Center at Fort Leonard Wood was added to the first class summer trip. This could have been the start of modern armor training for the cadets but the armor "training" consisted of little more than a static display and a short demonstration. Cadets arrived at Fort Leonard Wood the morning of 29 June, and were back on a train at 1300 that same day for their return to West Point.⁽¹⁶⁾ The trip was repeated the following year (to Fort Meade, Maryland) but stopped after that.⁽¹⁷⁾ It is also interesting to note that in 1928, the number of hours for First Class riding instruction was doubled

(14) Ibid, p. 6.

(15) USMA, Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1924, p. 3.

(16) USCC, Training Schedules, 1928-1929, p. 0141.

(17) Both USCC Training Schedules and Annual Reports of the Superintendent for 1930 show that this part of the First Class trip was discontinued, but with no explanation.

(18), and in 1930, equitation instruction received special emphasis to improve the riding skills of the corps. (19)

The doubling of riding hours in 1928 was accomplished by adjusting the schedule and increasing the size of each training session (20) while the added emphasis on riding was, in my opinion, a reflection of the great role the horse still played in the Army of 1930. Training with horses was the focus of mounted, mobile training for the Corps of Cadets throughout the twenties. Understanding of the Army's position on armor and mechanization during this time helps explain this continued training with horses at West Point.

Following World War I, considerable debate ensued on the proper organization and use of tanks. Both Patton and Eisenhower attempted to advance the use of armor as a separate branch but were told that their views were dangerous. (21) Patton's own resistance to fully embracing mechanization was also tied to his philosophical belief that "Oil and Iron do not win battles-- Victory is to men not machines." (22) Patton also had this to say with regards to the future importance of armor:

Having had the honor of commanding tanks in action we are the last to belittle their importance, but knowing their limitations as we do we are unalterably opposed to the assigning to them of powers which they do not

(18) USMA, Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1928, p. 2.

(19) USMA, Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1930, p. 3.

(20) USMA, Annual Report of the superintendent, 1928, p. 2.

(21) Ninninger, "Part II: The Tank Corps Reorganized," p. 35

(22) Blumenson, The Patton Papers 1885-1940, p. 843.

possess. Such action not only foredooms them to failure but also condemns the Army which relies solely on them to disaster and defeat. (23)

Even though Patton would become synonymous with armored warfare in World War II, his comments from the 1920s reflect the lack of vision most American officers had for modern armor in combat.

Regardless of where Patton or any others thought the tank should be in the Army's organization, Congress settled the matter with Section 17 of the National Defense Act of 1920. That law assigned all of the Army's tank units to the infantry. For the next ten years, the focus of tank development would be infantry support. This restricted the speed and maneuverability of armor forces in the American Army and left horse cavalry as the only true force of maneuver. (24)

More than any other factor, the limited military budgets of the 1920s affected the development of the tank and tank units in the United States Army. (25) Combining limited resources with the Army's bias for foot infantry, it is little wonder that West Point did not conduct more training with armor. Close order drill was the mainstay of infantry training for cadets, and cavalry branch only owned horses.

THE 1930s

(23) Ibid, p. 846.

(24) Ninninger, "Part II: The Tank Corps Reorganized," p. 36

(25) Ibid, p. 38.

The twenties were a period of stagnation for mechanized units and training, but the thirties were a period of change and growth. The man most responsible for promoting mechanization throughout the army, and in particular the cavalry, was Army Chief of Staff Douglas MacArthur. (26)

Throughout the first half of the 1930s cadet summer training continued to consist of infantry and cavalry small unit training on West Point, with trips to military installations for instruction in aviation, field artillery, and coastal artillery firing. By the middle of the decade, however, some very promising trends in mechanized training were initiated.

During the summer of 1934, the First Class trip included Fort Benning and the Infantry Center. The purpose of the trip to Fort Benning was to introduce cadets to the new infantry organizations and equipment, and to demonstrate combined arms operations with infantry, artillery, armor, and aviation. The cadets felt that these trips to Fort Benning did more to improve their understanding of modern warfare than all other military instruction at West Point. As one cadet would write:

within a few days all of us saw and most of us absorbed more of the rudiments of good field-soldering and combat practice than all the theoretical study with sand tables and mimeographed marked problems would illustrate in months. (27)

(26) Ninninger, "Part III: The Experimental Mechanized Forces." p. 39.

(27) Drum, "Over 97,000 Acres Called Ft Benning," p. 6.

Yet, the trip to Fort Benning was discontinued by the Superintendent, Brigadier General Jay Benedict, in 1939. Benedict conducted studies to see what would be the proper balance of instruction with command and leadership and decided that the First Class would develop more by instructing the Fourth Class on West Point.⁽²⁸⁾ In the memorandum dated March 16, 1939, Benedict also advised the Commandant that:

Care will be exercised that interest in the mechanics and manipulation of new equipment and armament does not predominate over basic principles in the tactical use thereof.⁽²⁹⁾

Benedict was clearly one of those who felt that West Point only needed to provide cadets with a general understanding of the branches. Seeing time as a critical resource, he felt that West Point could not train individual cadets to be proficient as junior officers in their branches. Such training, he concluded, would have to be accomplished by the units that cadets would serve with after graduation.⁽³⁰⁾

However, Benedict must have seen the value in armor instruction for he continued to support bringing a mechanized platoon from Fort Knox to augment cavalry training on West Point.⁽³¹⁾ He also provided the cadets with an armor orientation on West Point by having the 7th Cavalry Brigade conduct a

(28) USMA, Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1939, p. 4.

(29) Benedict, Jay L., Memorandum dated March 16, 1939, p. 3

(30) Ibid p. 1

(31) Ibid p. 2

demonstration on August 30, 1939.⁽³²⁾ But, as illustrated in the quotation above, he must have been concerned about cadets wanting to specialize in a "technical" field like armor.

On a positive note, cadet cavalry training in the thirties was constantly improved and integrated with mechanized vehicles. In 1930, daily rides were replaced with a five day exercise around Lake Popolopen and vicinity.⁽³³⁾ During the summer of 1934, mechanized vehicles were integrated into the training for the first time.⁽³⁴⁾ Every year after that, until America's entry into WW II, scout cars, half-tracks, and combat cars (light tanks) were a part of First Class cavalry maneuvers. The most sophisticated integration at West Point took place in 1937 when cadets were part of a meeting engagement between horse troops and the mechanized detachment. Cadets also conducted guard and security operations, and defended against an assault by the armored cars.⁽³⁵⁾

This training with horses and mechanized vehicles reflected the Army's doctrinal view of mechanization in the thirties. In his testimony to Congress for the Fiscal Year (FY 35) budget,

(32) USCC Training Schedules, 1939-1940, p. 0311. This demonstration lasted approximately two hours. The cadets assembled at 1300 for a drive-by of the mechanized unit on Thayer Road, and then were transported to the Mounted Drill Field to inspect the vehicles. The brigade departed at 1500 that day.

(33) USCC Training Schedules, 1930-1931, p. 0030.

(34) USCC Training Schedules, 1934-1935, p. 0028.

(35) USCC Training Schedules, 1937-1938, p. 0081-0089.

Chief of Cavalry, Major General Guy Henry, explains his view of horse and armor combined operations.

Both in proper proportions are needed and both must be used in cooperation and coordination with each other. The proportions of mechanization and horse will vary with their [all first-class powers] national pocketbooks and probable theaters of operation. (36)

This combined perspective of horses and armor seemed to be universal, but within five years the German Army would show the world how effective fully mechanized units could really be.

This combination of horse and mechanized cavalry was a part of cadet classroom instruction too. As part of their instruction during the academic year, members of the Second Class received five days of practical instruction in cavalry doctrine and tactics. In the spring of 1938, Major Marion Carson started that year's cavalry instruction with a lecture on the missions and roles of cavalry. In addition to stressing complementary roles for armor and horse cavalry, Carson opined a view of the next war:

Judging from our experience in the last war, it would be months, possibly years, before the manufacture of mechanized equipment could approach the demand. Horse cavalry would have to serve until such time as mechanized cavalry could properly take over the missions it is better able to perform. (36)

(36) Russell, ed The Cavalry Journal, "Statement of MAJ. Gen. Guy V. Henry, Chief of Cavalry, in Hearings before the Subcommittee of Horse Committee on Appropriations on the War Department Appropriation Bill for the Fiscal Year 1935," p. 57.

(36) USCC Training Schedules, 1937-1938, p. 0811-0813.

In retrospect, Major Carson could not have been more wrong in his estimate of mechanized supply and demand in the next war. Yet given the circumstances of his time it is not surprising that he would hold this view. The important implication of his assessment is that it not only reflected a pessimistic view of mechanization, but that it did so on the eve of war and with a positive bias for the role of horse cavalry.

Marion Carson may not have distinguished himself as an innovator in his career, but one member of the Department of Tactics from the 1930s who did was then Major Omar Bradley. Bradley recalled the development of written battle drills for tank platoons as being his greatest accomplishment while assigned to the Infantry Center as an instructor.⁽³⁷⁾ His innovation with tanks did not, however, follow him to West Point. Bradley remembered the introduction of sand table exercises as the most important innovation that he was personally responsible for.⁽³⁸⁾

As mentioned earlier, the question of whether or not graduating cadets were basic branch qualified or should attend basic branch service schools was another issue that had an effect on the nature and extent of cadet military training. In 1937 the Inspector General of the Army, Major General Walter L. Reed, queried the nine corps area commanders if they thought West Point cadets should attend basic service school upon graduation and for how long. One of the commanders who answered yes, Major General

⁽³⁷⁾ Pappas, "Interview with General of the Army Omar N. Bradley, 14 August, 1969," Transcript of tape two, p. 52.

⁽³⁸⁾ Ibid p. 70.

George Van Horn Moseley of the Fourth Corps Area, felt that USMA graduates were not immediately productive members of their commands. But Moseley also felt that West Point could do better in training its graduates.

The answer that I want to make clear is that I am one of those graduates who believe that West Point cannot only give a fine basic education to its cadets, but that West Point can also turn out trained lieutenants, lieutenants not having to be sent immediately to some other school to be taught their basic duties. (39)

The Inspector General's concern was to ensure that West Point was able to accomplish its mission and at the same time provide new lieutenants with proper military training. As for military training, the IG viewed anything other than general knowledge as a postgraduate function. Superintendent (Major General) William Connor disagreed with Major General Reed's 1937 analysis but the Commandant, Lieutenant Colonel Dennis E. McCunniff, concurred.

...due to the developments in arms, tactics and technique of the various branches in the past twenty years, the mission of the Military Academy to graduate trained second lieutenants as laid down in our regulations is impossible of accomplishment... (40)

This provides one possible answer for understanding the slowness to shift instruction towards mechanized training and away from horses. McCunniff's belief that postgraduate training was needed to become a second lieutenant helps explain why summer training

(39) U.S Army Military History Institute, Document 118-68/A, p. 2.

(40) U.S Army Military History Institute, Document 118-68/B.

was not expanded. Reed's report recommended that graduates attend service schools after graduation. He felt that they were overburdened already, and increases in military training at West Point would take up too much of the cadets' time.⁽⁴¹⁾

THE 1940s AND WORLD WAR II

By 1940, most of the world was at war for a second time. Mechanized training for the Corps of Cadets was still very limited, but for the first time, instruction in equitation and horse drawn artillery were reduced at the Academy.⁽⁴²⁾ These changes are the first of many that would reshape cadet training to be almost entirely military as the Academy rushed to provide officers to a rapidly expanding Army.

During his short tenure as superintendent, Brigadier General Robert L. Eichelberger did much to prepare cadets for the type of war that was being waged in Europe. It was easy to see the demands of what MacArthur called the "next possible future war," so Eichelberger reinstated the first class trip to Fort Benning in the summer of 1941. He reduced further still instruction in equitation and close order drill and procured a detachment of scout cars for the 10th Cavalry at West Point. All academics, except Military Law, were cut on 14 May 1941 in order to make room for additional military instruction.⁽⁴³⁾

(41) Ibid.

(42) USMA, Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1941, p. 4-6.

(43) USMA, Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1941, p. 3.

Reinforcing the shift away from horses and towards mechanization was the development of the Armor Branch in 1940. Armor units were constructed with great speed as the U.S. Army prepared for a role in World War II. Mechanization in the Army and at West Point had finally replaced the horse as the primary engine of war; in 1942 cadets received 45.5 hours armor training at Fort Knox, 94.5 hours combined arms training at Fort Benning, and seven days training with the 4th Armored Division at Camp Pine. (44)

Some of the most important reasons for the slow shift towards mechanization were attempts to maintain the status quo. General Bruce Palmer, Jr. recalled that the Branch Chiefs were largely to blame. In his opinion, the chiefs of cavalry and artillery tried to keep horses longer than they should and the chief of infantry was recalcitrant. Palmer was particularly critical of Major General Johnny Herr, the last chief of cavalry, when he said:

Johnny Herr set the Cavalry back, so when World War II broke upon us on Pearl Harbor day, eleven of the thirteen regular cavalry regiments were still horse. (45)

(44) USMA Archives, "Correspondence and Documents-Branch Instruction Course for Graduates USMA 1942-1944. Tables showing complete military training for the class of 1943. These figures compare to less than thirty hours of equestrian training for the class.

(45) Bradshaw, "Oral History Interview of GEN Bruce Palmer, Jr." May 29, 1975. Page 3 of the transcripts.

Palmer also pointed out that Herr was hostile towards any officers who openly praised the value of mechanization over horses. According to Palmer, when Herr became chief of cavalry:

he made every cavalryman sign in blood a statement: 'which did he prefer?'... If he [the cavalryman] said 'I prefer mechanized cavalry or armor,' Herr cut his throat. (46)

Although these views may have been extreme, they no doubt had an effect on the trend to modernize and mechanize the Army.

In many ways the development of mechanized training at West Point was simply a reflection of trends within the Army at large. The complimentary view of horse and armor in the 1930s allowed a compromise between horse and armor advocates, and slowed the shift towards total modernization. The lack of mechanized training for the Corps of Cadets prior to World War II was also the result of conflict within the Academy.

Time for training was often seen as a threat to academic endeavors or relaxation from academics. Horses were available in adequate numbers at West Point, and were used by the cavalry, artillery, and many other branches of the service before World War II. Therefore, training with horses made sense when the general view of military training at West Point was considered.

How branch specific should training at West Point be was another debate that influenced the amount and type of military training too. Benedict's fear, that cadets might become too involved in technical things at the risk of their leadership skills, matched Patton's view of men and victory. The final

(46) Ibid p. 4.

shift towards greater mechanized training for cadets happened only after a major shift in the Army perspective and the Academy's realization that it had to provide greater branch specific training to cadets before going off to war.

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