Creating Orthodoxy and Predictability

*Professional Military Education in the Army, 1919–1939*

Education was easily the most important professional activity carried out by the army in the interwar period, engaging a major commitment of time from most officers. In any given year, 2,300 officers, or one-fifth of the entire officer force, was engaged in some form of professional military instruction either in the Regular Army or with the civilian components. In addition, many officers who were assigned to other duties were involved during the summer with instruction of civilians in camps. Finally, all officers assigned duty with troops were also involved with the training of their men. Professional education was recognized as being virtually the only means by which officers could gain the experience needed to function in a wartime situation. Moreover, the skeletonizing of the army meant that very few officers had the opportunity to train with units anywhere close to combat strength. Hence, even before 1939, army leaders had already made the creation of professional schooling one of the military’s highest priorities.

Efforts to reestablish the prewar professional-education structure began almost as soon as the war came to an end. Initiated with a mild sense of enthusiasm emerging from the experience of a war, which seemed to vindicate the army’s professional training, most of the planning was completed by the fall of 1919. The system as it emerged had three main aspects. The first and most obvious one was structural. As before the war, the system was shaped around the educational needs of the officer as he advanced through his career, intended as something analogous to the systematic and progressive education seen as the educational basis of other professions. Therefore, it was built on the four tiers of formal training composing the prewar system, namely, West Point, unit schools, special service schools run by the branches, and general service schools controlled by the General Staff.
Of these four tiers, army leadership was chiefly concerned with the last two: the branch-level special service schools and the army-level general service schools. They did little to change West Point after the war. Jorg Muth, in his highly critical analysis of military education in the United States in the interwar period, gives Douglas MacArthur, who was superintendent of the Military Academy from 1919 to 1922, credit for initiating far-reaching changes in the curriculum. But Muth also notes that many of these reforms did not survive his departure. Unit schools were based on the garrison schools of the prewar army and conducted as part of the on-the-job training that new officers received.

The special service schools were originally designed to educate an officer newly assigned to his branch and to train him to be proficient in all duties associated with the branch up to the battalion level. These schools generally had two levels, a basic course for new officers and an advanced course, taken a few years later, aimed at acquainting officers with all the duties of their branch. Later, the advanced course also took responsibility for preparing officers for the general service schools. The special service schools were under the control of the chiefs of branches and would obviously emerge as the centers for inculcating branch identity. The educational program offered by the individual special service schools will be treated at greater length in the chapters devoted to the development of the four combat branches.

Prior to the war, there had been two principal general service schools, one for majors and lieutenant colonels at Fort Leavenworth, which aimed at training for staff and command assignments within multibranch divisional structures, and the Army War College in Washington, which was to prepare officers for duty with the General Staff and for command at the highest levels. After the war, it was anticipated that there would be two schools at Fort Leavenworth: the School of the Line, which would train officers in the use of all arms and services at the divisional level, and the General Staff School, which would train officers to function as staff members at the divisional level and for higher command. Both were a year in length. The entering class of the School of the Line was limited to two hundred, while the General Staff School was made up of the top one hundred graduates of the School of the Line. Under this arrangement, it was assumed that an officer headed for senior command would spend two years at the two Fort Leavenworth schools, followed by a year with troops in a unit outside his branch, and finally a year’s education at the Army War College. This four-year cycle would, presumably, break an officer’s primary identity with his original branch and focus it on the entire army instead.

The second aspect of the system as reinstituted was that its goal was to inculcate in the students “a uniform tactical doctrine approved by the War
Department.” Indeed, officer-students were also expected to learn the means of instruction so they could teach the same tactical doctrine to others. This need to ensure the unity of doctrine was considered to be extremely important and shaped much of the organization of the system. School administration was re-organized, giving the commandants complete control over the curriculum. At the same time, all schools were expected to follow General Staff directives and to submit annual reports and curriculum to the staff, which would monitor adherence to tactical doctrine. On the other hand, the content of that doctrine was to be worked out in the schools. All senior officers were convinced that the experience of the war would be primary in shaping all new doctrine. As a result, instructors from the army schools set up in France during the war were used as the core of the new educational system in the United States. These instructors, in turn, were encouraged to throw out old texts and to develop new ones themselves based on the doctrines developed by the AEF in France.

Finally, there were efforts made to accommodate the citizen-soldier provisions of the National Defense Act of 1920. The new mission of the educational system included the need to provide for “a reserve of trained officers qualified for organizing and developing to its maximum capacity the potential military power of the nation in accordance with approved war plans.” At the same time, mission statements for special service schools included references to the need to instruct officers for service connected with training National Guard and Organized Reserves.

Once the schools in the overall system were established, they rather quickly began to become competitive, with each expanding the scope of its coverage into the domains of others. By the beginning of 1921, there were complaints that the unit schools being created by corps-area commanders were moving into the educational realms claimed by the special service schools by offering specialized courses of up to four months in length. At the same time, the special service schools seized on the mission to prepare graduates for the general service schools to expand their curricula into areas claimed by the Fort Leavenworth schools.

Chief of Staff Pershing heard of this growing overlap and competition at the same time that he was becoming aware that Congress had no intention of supporting the army at the level of the 280,000 men promised in the National Defense Act. The increasingly apparent duplication created by this competition therefore attracted his attention both because it seemed to be leading to increased chaos and because it seemed to be a wasteful extravagance at a time when economy was needed. Hence, in February 1922, looking for ways to reduce costs, Pershing created a politically high-powered board chaired by Major General Edward F. McGlachlin, then the commandant of the Army War College.
He directed McGlachlin and his board to study the entire military-education system, “with a view to its simplification by such consolidation and concentration of schools,” and to end the competition among schools by “delineating the exact role to be played by each school in the complete system.”

After some internal scuffling, the board produced a report with a number of recommendations. The two most important suggestions were, first, that the two one-year courses offered at Fort Leavenworth be condensed into a single year and, second, replacing the basic course for new officers at the branch special service schools with a course for company officers, attended several years into an officer’s career. Overall, this meant reducing the years an officer spent in formal schools from five years (two in special service schools, two at the Fort Leavenworth schools, and one at the Army War College) to four. Finally, the board was successful in bringing an end to the competition between schools and the unrest this caused in military education within the army. The lines of demarcation it established were accepted, and the schools began to act, as Pershing had hoped, as integrated parts of a single system.

Although no one spoke of the special service schools and the general service schools as competitors, the board’s recommendations indicate that the former had already gained greater support in the army than had the latter. This may have been due, in part, to the idea that the special service schools were designed for all officers, while the general service schools were only for those selected as having the potential to become generals. But in the comments by officers on the schools, it is clear that they valued the special service schools for socializing the new officer into the culture of the branch, which was, itself, increasingly becoming recognized as the primary means by which one established his professional identity within the army. As Brigadier General William D. Connor, assistant chief of staff for supply, argued, “One of the great functions of the special service schools is to set the tone and fix the esprit of officers in their own arm.” The members of the McGlachlin Board agreed that the special service schools were central to the creation of a branch culture, indicating that one of the major factors in their considerations was the “recognized necessity for one master school where policies can be enunciated and standardized methods of training and proficiency can be maintained.”

The settlement created by the board was generally accepted, becoming a kind of constitutional foundation for the army’s military-educational system and stabilizing it for the remainder of the interwar period. As a result, except for working out a few of the problems within the system created by the report, the focus of attention in military education shifted to developments within the schools themselves.
Three issues continued to trouble the system, although they caused no significant controversies. The first of these was that many leaders felt that the reduction of the program at the Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth from two years to one was wrong. This feeling persisted so that the program at Fort Leavenworth would shift back and forth between one-and two-year courses during the entire interwar period.

The second problem was what to do with newly minted second lieutenants now that the basic course at the special service schools had been changed into a company officers’ course offered several years into an officer’s career. The board report recommended that the burden of providing these officers with their basic orientation to the army and their branch would fall on the unit or “troop schools” operated by post and tactical commanders. This decision was met with some reservations in the General Staff, as the troop schools were seen as ad-hoc organizations upon which one could place little confidence. The army responded by having the staff organize the educational program to be followed by the troop schools to ensure that attending officers graduated with the proficiencies sought in the special service schools’ basic course. The program was generally accepted as satisfactory, and the troop-school basic course became the new second lieutenant’s introduction to the army for the rest of the interwar period.

The third problem involved ensuring that officers attended the courses at the special service schools at the appropriate time in their careers. The ideal set by the board was that one be sent to the company-officer course by his fourth year in service and to the appropriate advanced course by his twelfth year. Yet almost none of the branches were able to come even close to meeting that goal, as desirable as it seemed. A major cause of the problem was the high officer-turnover rate during and immediately after the war. In terms of officers, there was very little continuity between the prewar army and the army of 1920. Moreover, many of the new men had little formal military training, having come in during the war or immediately thereafter. Many had not been to West Point, and a surprising number even lacked a college degree.

Army leadership was anxious that this large mass of new officers be acculturated and socialized by means of attending the special service schools. Yet facilities and appropriations limited average entering classes at these schools to a number not significantly greater than the annual incoming class of new officers into the army. Hence, huge backlogs quickly built up. By 1923, the General Staff began to keep track of the backlog by branch, but it could not find any solution. By 1929, however, one began to appear by possibly merging the company officers course with the advanced course into a single one-year offering.
As the combined course would be available for a far larger number of officers, it offered a way of reducing the backlog. Moreover, many argued that the original two-year course was originally intended to deal with the mass of untrained officers in the immediate postwar period, a problem that, by 1929, had largely disappeared. Even so, nothing was done until 1932. At this time, the economic pressures generated by the Depression finally forced the army to cut the annual school quotas by 50 percent. This reduction meant that the backlogs would now last for decades, with many officers facing the prospect of never getting to a service school during their entire career. With this, the General Staff finally consolidated the two courses into one.

Overall, in looking at the general developments within the army’s professional-education system, one is struck with how stable it became after the implementation of the McGlachlin reforms. Indeed, the term “stagnant” seems more appropriate, as the system changed far less than perhaps it should have. Indeed, one of the main problems or weaknesses of the military-education system in the interwar period may have been that it lacked any machinery to ensure change when appropriate. Like all institutions, the schools had an inherent inertia that was, perhaps, aggravated by the constant turnover in administration and staff. Yet they faced no competition nor other stimulus to change. Finally, there was no other force within the army that could promote change.

One reason for this was that, despite the importance of the program for both the army and its officers, neither the army’s leadership nor its officers took much interest in it once it was in place except as it concerned them personally. Commandants of the various schools continued to be concerned with their own institutions, but there was little interest in the system as a whole after 1926. In short, the army entered the postwar era with full confidence in its traditional system of military education and with the approach to instruction taken by the officers who taught in it. Hence, even though it was criticized by some of the officers it served, the system underwent little change during the interwar period. This was due largely to the fact that the educational approach produced not only the orthodoxy and consistency desired but also a professional self-image that consistently conformed to the culture and cosmology of the army itself, leading to few internal tensions to foment any major demand for change.

In regard to what actually went on in the classrooms themselves, the foundation of the army’s approach to instruction in the interwar period was referred to as the “applicatory method.” Not all of the courses taught in the professional schools used this method, but most did, including the all-important courses in tactics. It had been developed before the war and was well established and well
understood by the 1920s. The approach was designed to teach tactics but was quickly adopted to teach most other subjects as well.

The applicatory method was based on the belief, dominant in the U.S. military in the early twentieth century, that military activity should be treated as a science. This meant that, as in the case of other sciences, all military knowledge could be structured around a few basic principles considered universally applicable throughout all time. Success in war, therefore, depended on the correct application of these principles. While it was repeatedly claimed that the principles adopted by the U.S. Army were derived from a long and careful study of military history, they had actually been developed recently by I.F.C. Fuller, a British major general. Fuller’s set of eight principles had been adopted by the British Army after the war and were then adopted by the U.S. Army, with the addition of a ninth principle, in 1921 and published in *Training Regulations* 10-5.

Throughout the entire interwar period, education in the army schools was permeated by a faith that the secret to success in all military activity was based on the correct application of these principles. As General Drum, who served as first commandant of the general service schools during their reestablishment after the Great War, said, a sound course of professional military education consisted of “teaching the basic principles and illustrating their applications.” In addition, basing an officer’s professional education on principles and applications seemed to provide the answer to the problem of teaching him the army’s doctrine while providing him with the intellectual ability to respond to situations by the exercise of individual initiative. Theoretically, at least, an officer who understood how to apply the appropriate principles correctly to any situation could be counted on to do the right and expected thing.

The concept of principles and their application was the heart of the applicatory method. Yet, it tended to be used differently at the special service schools than at the Command and General Staff School. At the special service schools, a course was divided into units that were centered on learning a specific thing, such as a maneuver, or the use of a specific weapon. The unit would be introduced by linking it to what the students had already learned. The new thing would then be introduced by a demonstration, if possible. This might be live, if dealing with a weapon or an uncomplicated maneuver. Otherwise, it might be depicted on a chalkboard. This introduction would be followed by instruction in the principle involved and its appropriate application to the issue under discussion. There would then be another demonstration, after which students would attempt to perform the action themselves. Then, at the conclusion of the unit, the instructor would, again, point out the principle involved.
But at the Command and General Staff School, the focal point of the applicatory method was the “map problem,” which concluded each unit dealing with tactics or associated subjects. As one observer noted, “The entire scheme of military education as we have evolved rests on the map problem.” Most of a student’s grade in a course and standing in the school—and by extension, career—rested on performance in the map problems. Each was a four-hour test involving a tactical problem linked to several of the issues covered earlier. A student was given the problem at 8:00 in the morning and was expected to have worked out on a map a suitable tactical solution and to have written the appropriate orders in the appropriate manner by noon. The student’s performance on the map problem would then be evaluated on the basis of whether or not his solution violated any fundamental principles. This meant, in fact, that responses were scored on the basis of whether or not they conformed to a specific “school solution,” which, in the words of one commandant, “properly apply the principles and doctrines upon which the art of war is founded.”

There were several ramifications of this approach. First, the applicatory method, especially as it was practiced by less experienced instructors, and the emphasis placed on the map problem produced some confusion in the minds of students. While Drum may have seen the purpose of the approach as teaching the principles underlying the successful conduct of war, many students saw the focus of instruction instead in the approved solutions to the map problems. Hence, they spent their time studying back files of map problems, trying to learn the approved solutions, and often emerged from the school experience feeling that the doctrine they learned resided in those official solutions. In addition, the applicatory method, with the emphasis on the school solution and the need to avoid violation of principles, promoted orthodoxy in all thinking. Indeed, the primary focus in teaching and learning was to avoid errors. Instructor comments centered on pointing out errors, while class critiques of student performance were also expected to focus on such fault finding. Overall, students were told that success in school was to be gained as much by a high grade point as by uniform and consistent marks, so that their chief goal became to avoid making mistakes.

One recent historian, Jorg Muth, has been highly critical of the army’s educational system and, especially, the Command and General Staff School. He criticizes the school’s program on a host of issues, including not being transparent or even consistent in its selection system; its faculty being dominated by AEF veterans, who remained committed to the doctrines of the war and almost indifferent to modernizing trends, were often poorly informed about their subject matter, and were boring instructors to boot; and focusing on map problems
rather than on outdoor tactical-command exercises using virtual units. But most of all, Muth condemns the focus on using student adherence to school solutions as the measure of ability.\textsuperscript{38} He concludes: “The U.S. Army’s professional education system produced for World War II an average officer who knew the basics of his trade in theory because he had run through a number of schools that had taught him that. He generally longed for doctrine and prepared solutions and tried to ‘manage’ rather than command.”\textsuperscript{39}

Indeed, in regard to the Fort Leavenworth school, this “average officer” may have actually been the desired product. As Brigadier General E. L. King, speaking as commandant to the Command and General Staff School, told incoming students in September 1926, “The purpose of the school is not to develop Alexanders, Napoleons, and Fochs, but to raise the general average of ability to produce a team that a Foch, a Napoleon or a Pershing may be able to use.”\textsuperscript{40} Such teamwork would be possible only if students were taught to set aside their own ideas and accept totally the doctrines taught by the schools. The principal role of military history as taught was to convince students that the military doctrine taught by the school was not just valid but the only possible valid doctrine.

Finally, instruction at the Army War College was quite different from that of the special service schools and the Command and General Staff School in several critical ways. The mission of the War College after 1918 was essentially twofold: to prepare officers for duty with the General Staff and to prepare them for military command at the highest level. To carry out this mission, the college’s educational approach differed from that practiced in the lower schools in three major ways. First, students worked in small groups or committees rather than as individuals. These committees were given major problems related to either the planning or the conduct of a war for which they developed group solutions. The group solutions were then reported to other student groups and the faculty. Second, while the faculty provided some lectures, they acted chiefly as mentors to the groups rather than as instructors. Third, each group’s solutions were discussed with faculty members and other student groups but not given formal evaluations. Nor were they critiqued on the basis of conformity to an accepted application of the principles of war—there was, in short, no school solution.\textsuperscript{41} In addition, even though some officers finished the college’s program without gaining the desired designation of “General Staff Eligible,” almost no one actually failed. The distinctiveness of this program was based, apparently, on the belief that both staff work and high command were matters of teamwork rather than the exercise of genius. Also, the sense of certainty in military activity promoted by a belief in eternal principles of war and approved school solutions
was significantly replaced at the War College by an acceptance of the ambiguity and contingency involved in actual warfare. Thus, as an historian of the War College noted, like the Command and General Staff College, the goal of the War College was not to produce a genius or original military thought, but “to produce competent, if not necessarily brilliant, leadership that could prepare the Army for war and fight a war successfully if it came.”

Overall, outside of dissatisfaction with the marking system associated with the map problems, officers in the army were generally satisfied with its system of professional military education. If the experience was more comfortable than challenging, officers still left thinking they had learned a lot. The fact that the schools had produced uniformity and standardization of thinking and approaches to problem solving within the officer class was considered positive. In speaking about the army’s educational system, General Hines, as deputy chief of staff, was proud to be able to point to “a growing homogeneity in the instruction methods, in the subject matter taught, and in the principles and doctrines laid down,” which, he noted, was leading to a “consequent standardization of methods and ideas.” Even critics of the education system applauded the fact that the officers it graduated were reliably consistent in performance of their duties. Finally, the vision instilled in officers that they operated in a physical and military universe governed by a few fundamental principles that remained immutable in character and promised success when followed correctly provided them not only with assurance but also a cosmology focused on authority, which was congenial with the military mindset. The fact that the applicatory method was also the approach used by the officers themselves to train their soldiers reinforced its legitimacy and made their own education part of the overall army culture.