

The Last Year at West Point

At last we 670 surviving Class of 1950 cadets (out of the 922 who started in 1946) were entering our last academic year before graduation. Having gotten through and passed all the courses shoveled at us Plebe Year, Yearling Year, and Cow Year we only had the 1st Class offerings to contend with.

It was not likely that many cadets would be dropped this last year, unless it were for medical reasons - losing just too much academic time to continue on in the same class. Perhaps turned back to the Class of 1951 at the point they had to stop. Or a few who simply could not be 'commissioned' as Army officers in their physical condition.

It was very unlikely that any more of our class would be forced out of West Point this last 10 months, unless they did something very bad - such as violate the Honor code.

So the subjects yet to be taken by all, and passed, were:

Military Engineering, Military History, Ordnance, Law, Social Sciences, English, Military Hygiene, Physical Education, Tactics, and something called "Military Psychology and Leadership."

Everything except MP&L was obvious. Engineering - with Military Application was clear. History of Wars was

obvious. Ordnance, Law, Social Sciences and English were straightforward subjects. Military Hygiene was pretty understandable, as we would, as Army officers and commanders of up to large numbers of soldiers, have to master the principles that would keep our Army - or Platoons - healthy. PE, Tactics were obvious.

But what, exactly was 'Military Psychology and Leadership about - as an academic subject? We had been DOING that as lower or upperclassmen tutored by the active duty Tac Officers the last 3 years. Using sound psychological inducements and good applied military 'leadership' which had been honed and perfected internally by West Point over the last 150 years of its existence And which we progressively were permitted to exercise, ourselves, over lower class cadets as a way of learning how to be officers later. What could West Point cadets possibly learn from classroom and laboratory scholars about military leadership?

Well, MP&L's creation was largely from the influence of the Superintendent our last three years - Maj General Maxwell Taylor, the Normandy Invasion Airborne Commander. For he was an intellectual and not just a soldier. He somehow learned about the growing 'scientific' field of Psychology. He reasoned that West Point needed to apply - or at least add the study of scientific psychology to that which was learned and applied by just doing it, from the history and traditions of

West Point itself - in order to better educate future officer-leaders of men. West Point's Tactical Department officers - most all of them wartime experienced leaders, knew military leadership extremely well. They had been carefully selected for their own record of leading military men in war and peace, and for their sound character, integrity, and absence of personal weaknesses - alcoholism, or womanizing. - as well as being graduates themselves where the intense 'system' when they were cadets passed on the most concentrated lore of military leader behavior in the nation. i.e. USMA was presumed to 'know' good (and bad) military leadership better than any other 'faculty' in the world. So what more is there to teach?

We doubted any 'Psychology Professor' in any civilian university could properly 'lead' soldiers as well as we could already.

But the design of the course was a little smarter than we at first assumed.

Some of the subjects to be taught would be taught by experienced Tactical Officers without advanced academic degrees, while others, teaching topics like Maslow's Hierarchy of "needs" theory of human motivation could be better taught by officers, including graduates, who also had master's degrees in academic Psychology. All to 'modernize' the curriculum and take advantage of

research psychology for military leaders, seemed to be Taylor's aim.

When I started taking MP&L classes as a Firstie, one VERY practical module struck me - in which every cadet had to master how to make a 5 minute speech 'to inform', or a speech to 'convince' or to 'persuade', or to 'motivate.'

For it was well known that every officer of troops repeatedly has to stand up in front of his unit - in barracks, in ranks, in classrooms, on the battlefield, and talk to them. Either effectively or not, based on his skill in communicating, and their willingness - or obligation - to listen. Better that every West Point graduate learns before he graduates - as a matter of formal training - or academic 'education' how best to deliver such 'oral communications'. And be evaluated, graded, and counseled on his performances like being graded in any other subject.

But this is a grade for the quality of 'performance' not just a grade for 'knowledge.' And unlike just a college 'speech' class, those gradings and critiquing are by experienced Army troop leaders who knew what would work on soldiers, and what would not. It was akin to Performance Acting - knowing the lines but also delivering them in the most effective way possible. Helped by instructors as 'coaches.' Like theater directors.

I frankly found that module of MP&L one of the BEST courses in all four years at West Point. For it went to the visible and audible heart of military 'leadership.'

Effectively communicating with soldiers. And because I already, with my Welsh-derived 'bards tongue' was a pretty good speaker anyway, this course honed my skills until - over the years - I have been praised for being such a great 'informational,' and 'motivational' speaker - whether in front of soldiers before combat - or before civilians on other matters.

I'm not only still a damn good writer in my old age, but I am still a damn good speaker, with only a little quavering in my 83 year old voice. I credit that MP&L course in polishing my verbal skills.

From the time I took that course, the skill that I had learned, was justified when I was put in front of the entire Corps of Cadets when I came back to instruct at the Academy four years later, after Korea.

Privileges and Cars

As 1st Classmen, we were granted evermore greater privileges. Firsties could go off post when they had no cadet duties to perform, and they were not scheduled for anything. That included driving their own car - if they had it registered on the post and it was in the cadet parking areas.

It was time for me to seriously consider getting a car.

Automobile dealers from the big companies were authorized to come on post and 'brief' Firstclassmen in groups, what they could offer, and under what terms. This was tied to being briefed by representatives of Auto Insurance companies. We would have to buy car insurance. The one company that had the inside edge, because it had been insuring officers for decades, was United Service Automobile Association, largely directed by retired or ex- military officers, who pretty much knew what the newly-commissioned 2d lieutenants needed and could afford.

Since most all of us would need a bank loan to finance our car, choosing a bank was part of what we needed information on. Many classmates, whose families were in cities large and small across the country already had good advice what bank, local to them would be best. Those of us - like me - whose family did not have 'good banks' that would give cadets favorable loans, readily chose the Bank in Highland Falls, New York, right next to West Point. So a handful of banks also came on post to 'advise' our class.

All this would be a bonanza for those car and insurance companies and some banks. Over 600 new cars at one swoop, just before or after graduation!

After endless debates with other Firsties at the dinner table on what make or model to get, I settled on a new plain 2 door 1950 Model Chevrolet. Beige colored. Nothing fancy - just functional for me to be able to drive away from West Point, drive home to Colorado on the 60 day leave I would be entitled to after Graduation, and to my first Duty Station.

While many cadets - and other military officers I have known - are very picky in their cars I always saw a car as just a way to get from Point A to Point B. I never - all my life - went for the stylish, or sporty, thus more costly or elegant, automobiles. All I wanted, new or used - was a good, reliable, decent looking, functional, with a radio, and safe car. Thats all.

I can't remember now what I had to pay down for my bank loan for my Chevy. But I remember that new car cost me \$1,200. I probably had to put up perhaps \$400 of my own money for a three year loan at perhaps 5% interest. Cars were pretty cheap then! And Highland Falls bank terms reasonable. With Insurance maybe costing me \$50 a month out of my future Army pay.

So I got my Chevy sometime in March, and enjoyed tooling around Highland Falls, down to and across the Bear Mountain Bridge and back during the few periods and weekends I had free. I had no place to drive to and back in New England. And I drove to the small town of

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Cornwall, over the narrow, high, twisty, Storm King Mountain road just north of West Point - largely to see old George Moore, the publisher of our Cadet Pointer Magazine, and his wife. For many a cadet Pointer staff member, their cosy house was a sort of 'home' which we could drop in on weekends as the end of our cadet days neared.

Cornwall was also one of the close by towns where Cadet girl friends or family members stayed, especially during times - Christmas, spring break, and Graduation - 'June Week' when accommodations were overflowing. There simply were not many nice 'motels' in the closest town - Highland Falls - just out of the South Gate of West Point.

So driving over Storm King Mountain - to get to Cornwall, or Newburgh as the next larger town - was required. As I neared Graduation, that Mountain became a big part of my life.

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