

As was the usual case for new English Department instructors, I was assigned to teach Fourth Class - or Plebe (freshmen) - English.

Such classes were held every school day, at either 1PM or 2PM depending on which half the Corps was scheduled at each time.

Of course that was the first hour after the noon meal - lunch. The question was whether the cadets in class would doze off.

Now the reader should understand something not obvious, but rather significant, in the way West Point selects and puts instructors before cadets. As I detailed in my relating how I reacted and to officer-instructors when I was a cadet, this time I was the teacher.

West Point's Unique Educational Philosophy

The goal which underlies the whole philosophy of West Point as a 'Military Academy- is to endeavor to graduate soldier-scholars. Not just Soldiers OR Scholars. And that is one of the primary reasons - which held true for the majority of the 200 year tradition of West Point until recent years - that in the vast majority of cases the Instructors in all academic subjects, have been

commissioned military officers, and preferably graduates who held at least a Masters degree in the subject, and were competent teachers of that discipline whatever their military rank or length of service. The principle exception was in Foreign Languages, which had some civilian instructors.

That philosophy has changed - as much by the urging of the Board of Visitors as by internal reflection since the 1980s - that civilians should be West Point instructors too.

But there was a good reason for relying on very well educated (and most often talented in-their-field graduates as instructors), turning over every 3-5 years. Not the least of which was the fact that most instructors were not just lifetime-appointment older scholars, but backed up by a cadre of younger and energetic officer 'soldier-scholars'.

By selecting officers/graduates in their first 10 years or so of commissioned service - meaning they had served 'in the Army' in the field (whatever their branch of service), and thus knew and were experienced in the hierarchy of military service - including if the timing was right - having served in the Army during time of war, they would bring a perspective to the academic topic, a civilian could not. For after all, West Point is there to provide officers to lead American soldiers and other officers in time of war. So instructors become role models for cadets, even if they

are teaching a Liberal Arts discipline.

I do not care for that recent change - permitting civilians with no military experience to instruct cadets - for it dilutes the 'example' and model for cadets being taught by graduates who themselves are 'scholar- SOLDIERS' and not just academics. So when I taught cadets for 3 years 1955-1959 I provided, in my person, that model of Soldier-Scholar.

For a number of reasons, that Soldier-Scholar model in my person had an interesting effect on impressionable cadets I taught that did not end when their 'English Courses' were done. In fact for many of them it lingered and came back 50 years later.

Sonnets and Silver Stars

The first emphasis for the Plebe English classes is in writing. The target was to teach how to write good Expository prose - with many graded and marked up writing assignments right from the beginning. The plebes dove in. And the reading assignments, as one would imagine, were on Style. I dimly remember that 'Strunk's classic 'Elements of Style' was a primary book to be read and consulted by cadets struggling to master written English.

And of course one learns how to write by rewriting. So for many a class I collected their papers, marked them up,

awarding grades that ranged from below passing 2.0 to excellent 3.0. And then made them do it over again if they dropped lower than 2.3 or so.

Additionally, all we officer-instructors, as a matter of policy, wore our uniforms to class. That fact did not particularly make an impression on plebes so long as the class was just on the mechanics of good writing.

But it was the minute when the English Course was in reading and then writing and writing about English literature that the soldier-scholar point got driven home to impressionable plebes.

I seemed to have made a strong impression on cadets in my class that stayed with many of them for a long time. When I entered my first plebe cadet classroom, there were those cadets who thought of West Point as just the place where they were getting - besides a free military education - i.e. to become a scholar, or generally educated looking forward - after their obligatory military service - to success in a civilian job or profession. And war, except for a handful of very senior officers, is a young man's job.

While there were yet other plebes, some of whom were excellent athletes or ones with a motive to be a career soldier, sometimes from a military family, that thought they were there to make them only into an 'officer-

soldier.'

It was when I, just a few years older - 27 - than the new cadets (who could enter West Point until they were 24) , came into the classroom, wearing my uniform with an Infantry Captain's bars, with a brace of very impressive combat ribbons - including a Distinguished Service Cross, 2 Silver Stars and 2 Purple Hearts beneath a Combat Infantry Badge above my left breast from just one war - presenting me as a model 'soldier whose business had been in winning wars, specifically in my case the Korean War.

So when I commenced to teach them, quote to them, and probe the depths and meaning of Shakespearean Plays and Sonnets - that the REAL synthesis of 'Soldier-Scholar' at West Point - and thus the Academy's central focus, became apparent to all of them.

In essence I seemed to embody the cadet conclusion that "If Captain Hughes with such a recent and real combat record actually knows, enjoys, and understands Shakespeare, I guess being a West Point graduate is more than being just a soldier. Or just a scholar.

So West Point aims to produce a commissioned Soldier-Scholar. I was one such product. And since I had shown, while I was a cadet, 10 years earlier an inborn (perhaps

from my Welsh bard DNA) skill at writing and composition, even poetry, I was selected to go to graduate school to earn an academic Master of Arts degree, and then teach for at least 3 years at West Point.

Ever since the end of World War II, where graduates had to understand, lead, and command, an 8 million man Army which had to be guided - and commanded by high rank West Point graduates in the broadest array of 'non-combat' skills and fields - management, economics, science, nuclear fission, industrial policy, politics, law, medicine, international relations, mass psychology, world religions, press, journalism, and media, the Army realized why it was in its interest to produce officers who were academically versed in one or more of those fields.

The series of modern custodians of West Point's pedagogical philosophy - Superintendents, Deans, and Commandants knew that officers expected to rise in rank to the highest US Military office, needed to be very 'broadly' educated. Within which the Liberal Arts was as important as Math, Science, Law, Government or Military History.

I am not sure what lasting contribution I made to the Class of '59 in English studies, but I sure got cadets to appreciate the importance of being a well read scholar as

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well as a good soldier-leader, as a West Point graduate.