

# Frontline education: The role of Ft. Leavenworth officers in the American Expeditionary Forces General Staff and the Army General Staff College during and after World War I

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This paper examines the role of US Army officers who served in both the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) General Staff and the Army General Staff College (AGSC) during World War I. A large number of these officers shared a common background as graduates from the Fort Leavenworth General Service Schools. Their positions within both the AEF General Staff and the AGSC were critical due to their extensive educational background and recent combat experiences. Leavenworth officers served in senior positions such as Chief-of-staff and sections heads. Their contributions were especially prominent within the AGSC curriculum where they trained army officers on modern military practices and applied new technologies on the battlefield. The AGSC was unique as a temporary school set up during wartime with officers assigned to a unit immediately after their graduation. An analysis of lectures and presentations from the AGSC indicated their training methods incorporated changing doctrinal policies and modern military technologies. Thus, the Leavenworth Crowd with their AEF experiences laid the organizational and doctrinal groundwork for post-World War I military operations.

*Keywords: AEF, Army General Staff College, AGSC, Leavenworth, Langres, AEF General Staff, Pershing, General Service Schools, Leavenworth Crowd, Leavenworth Men, Chief of Staff.*

## INTRODUCTION

World War I presented real-time modern military experiences for US Army officers serving with the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) in France. This global conflict applied novel military technologies such as airplanes, tanks, and poison gas, along with the development of new operational strategies consisting of large-scale trench warfare and the combined-arms approach. The US Army, despite its late entry into the conflict, directly encountered these new technological developments. General staff officers and soldiers understood both the importance of modernized military doctrine and training. However, adjusting to large-scale warfare proved difficult as the US Army encountered several obstacles including minimal officer combat experience and insufficient numbers of combat-ready staff officers and soldiers.<sup>1</sup> One intangible obstacle was the notion that the current military operational and training doctrine was outdated. US officers were neither previously exposed to the trench warfare occurring in Europe nor actively deployed in some novel military technologies. Coupled with insufficient staff training, staff officers also lacked experience in large-scale combat in comparison to previous conflicts such as the Spanish-American War.

Addressing these obstacles required comprehensive and immediate revision in order to address potential issues of understaffing and insufficient training for large troop formations, synchronization of command and control functions

on the battlefield. Because of this learning curve, General John J. Pershing and the AEF General Staff pressed for the application of new weapon systems and adjustment of army doctrine to benefit the AEF in combat.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, General Pershing and AEF staff officers authorized the creation of a temporary officer training school, the Army General Staff College (AGSC) located in Langres, France. The AGSC proved crucial in developing and implementing a modern military curriculum for staff officers. The AGSC training included modern weapons and updated existing American operational art with its logistics, intelligence, and administrative duties.

## LEAVENWORTH MEN

Many of the officers in the General Staff and AGSC operations were graduates or instructors from Fort Leavenworth General Service Schools, including the Cavalry School and School of the Line. Critical in the creation of the AGSC, Leavenworth officers served as administrators and instructors throughout its operation. Placed in senior level positions such as Chief-of-Staff and Operations and Training section heads, the Leavenworth officers also formed a significant part of the AEF General Staff. Although World War I historians have researched the prominence of the Leavenworth Men in the AEF and AGSC, additional research concerning the content of the AGSC is needed since this material reflects the changing doctrinal policies and training methods expected for successful modern military operations. An analysis of lecture notes and course curricula of doctrinal policies and operational skills

the material prepared officers for real-time application on the battlefield in a progressing conflict. The Leavenworth Men played a second critical role by educating new staff officers on modern military doctrine and administrative procedures. Given the General Service Schools' emphasis on staff education, the Leavenworth experience served urgent needs of the AEF. This intensive preparation period demonstrates a dramatic shift in military preparation, and the Leavenworth Men at the AGSC equipped newly commissioned officers with skills necessary for modern combat.

The foundational role of the Leavenworth Men began prior to the entry of American military forces into World War I. General Pershing was concerned that many officers were inexperienced. Many officers of the Spanish-American War generation were either too old or they lacked combat experience. Without prior battlefield experience, those officers needed additional training in order to make the decisions that could influence the outcome of the AEF operations. Coupled with a generally inexperienced command staff, the war effort needed innovative change to hasten a rapid improvement. Prior to World War I, the US Army was severely reduced in size with a limited command staff. Lieutenant Colonel James Harbord, Pershing's first Chief of Staff, shared Pershing reservations about inexperienced officers. Another graduate from Leavenworth, Harbord understood the significance of an inexperienced staff preparing troops for combat. Harbord also understood the necessity of recruiting officers to fulfill specific staff billets.<sup>3</sup> In response to this need, recruitment efforts relied on General Pershing and Harbord's professional networks of familiar officer names. Many of the AEF officer recruits had served in previous conflicts such as the Philippine Insurrection and the Pancho Villa Expedition. Thus, they had recent combat experience essential for combat in France, and their organizational and operations training background made them prime candidates to create a general staff.<sup>4</sup>

#### CREATION OF AEF GENERAL STAFF

General Pershing's officer selection typically depended on his prior knowledge of and acquaintance with those available for officer billets. A majority of officers were affiliated with the Ft. Leavenworth system and included: Brig. Gen. James McAndrew, Lt. Col. Hugh Drum, Lt. Col. Alfred Bjornstad, Lt. Col. Fox Conner, Lt. Col. HB Fiske, Lt. Col. Paul Malone, and Lt. Col. Leroy Eltinge. Eventually, these officers formed an integral component of the AEF recognized by General Pershing.<sup>5</sup> Officers selected by Pershing from the Leavenworth Men developed connections with each other based on their placements and their Leavenworth backgrounds. These officers maintained professional working relationships, but their interpersonal connectedness was also significant. The shared personal experiences among Leavenworth officers were reflected by their colloquial nickname, the *Leavenworth*

*Crowd*.<sup>6</sup> Because they performed similarly to a social clique, non-Leavenworth officers recognized the cohesiveness among the Leavenworth Men based on their shared experiences and a common language gained during training. Some historians indicated the significant number of Leavenworth officers in the AEF General Staff as a "domination of the AEF staff by Leavenworth graduates."<sup>7</sup> Simply put, this trend reflected both the disproportionate number of Leavenworth officers as well as the types of positions they commanded. The number of Leavenworth Men selected by Pershing denotes his reliance on the education and training background these officers had received.

During the war twelve officers served at general headquarters as chief of staff, deputy chief of staff, and heads of the G-1 through G-5 sections. ...Seven of these officers had graduated from both the School of the Line and the Staff College... The chief of staff, McAndrew, and deputy chief of staff, Leroy Eltinge, during the period of most active operations (May to November 1918) were Leavenworth Men.<sup>8</sup>

Leavenworth officers who held AEF General Staff positions included Drum and Conner in G-3 Operations and Fiske and Malone in G-5 Training. Their influence in decision-making, connections in AEF operations and placement in the General Staff reflects the value derived from their Leavenworth education.

As the war progressed, the AEF General Staff reconfigured its command structure and staff assignments. The novelty of the chief-of-staff position during wartime provided an opportunity for Leavenworth officers such as Harbord and Brig. Gen. McAndrew, a previous commandant of Fort Leavenworth, to establish new officer billets, protocols, and duties.<sup>9</sup> By the time Pershing finalized the AEF staff roster, he had created the most capable and competent general staff he believed possibly available at the time. Both Pershing and Harbord envisioned an officer corps with a high-level of work ethic and professionalism. These officers shared common attributes based on the familiarity of their Leavenworth background, "a happy composite of what was best in the traditions."<sup>10</sup> The Leavenworth officer tradition cemented a close working relationship between the commanding general and his staff.

Leavenworth officers were crucial to the AEF General Staff; however, their contributions were most notable in the formation of the Army General Staff College (AGSC). This temporary training school had significant implications in terms of modernized military education, and it exposed green officers to a new, evolving type of warfare. Leavenworth graduates such as McAndrew and Bjornstad were responsible to train and educate hundreds of American officers on advances in modern warfare and staff duties. The AGSC provided lectures

on staff procedures as well as the complexities of the Western Front. The Leavenworth Men supported the objectives of the AGSC, and these officers functioned on all levels of instruction with innovative approaches on frontline procedures. The staff cross-training enlisted men to confront the evolving style of warfare in the line. Officers learned about the implementation of new weapon-systems as well as the deployment of aircraft and armor. The AGSC training emphasized logistics to support the offensive doctrine proposed by Pershing and his staff.

## AGSC

World War I historians Timothy Nenninger and James Cooke reported how Leavenworth officers and the AEF General Staff defended the need to establish the AGSC. Leavenworth graduates acknowledged the value of AGSC training as a model throughout the AEF. The initial rationale for establishing an officer training school was to fill vacant officer positions within the rapidly expanding command organization. Harbord and Drum understood the need to train officers for staff positions in order to increase efficiency and ensure direct lines of communication and responsibility. Rapid training within the officer corps could ensure this objective. Harbord described the necessity for such a school:

To supply this staff the number of trained officers was inadequate. To meet the deficiency a General Staff College was formed at Langres in November 1917. Student officers were carefully chosen for their suitability and the short course of study was most intensive.<sup>11</sup>

These remarks underscored the urgency to form such a school. British and French officers taught the first AGSC courses because Leavenworth officer responsibilities were stretched between oversight of the college and service as divisional officers. Harbord reported pressure from the French to control the AEF command and the entire college curriculum. However, General Pershing was adamant that the French serve in an advisory capacity. Therefore, American officers instructed the classes.<sup>12</sup> As the war progressed, foreign instructors and advisors rotated out of the AGSC until an all-American staff serviced the college. By early 1918, the AGSC had provided specialized military training for more than two hundred officers. With the expansion of the general staff and an overall reorganization of the command structure, the college also prepared officers in administrative duties considered essential for officers in a modern army. Although the administrative training for officers functioned as a specialized element, it retained some familiar Leavenworth elements. Nenninger noted:

The course at Langres [AGSC] provided officers information on changing regulations and organization of the AEF staffs. Whereas Leavenworth gave its graduates

a broad foundation, sound tactical principles, and a basic understanding of staff work, Langres provided more specific information geared towards the tasks the officers would perform immediately after graduation.<sup>13</sup>

Because officers moved directly from the AGSC to their field commands, the rotation with immediate application of training permitted more officers to experience the Leavenworth model. As commandant of the AGSC tactical and operations education, Bjornstad observed the similarity between the AGSC and Leavenworth training and realized the significance of the AGSC to the AEF:

[Bjornstad] began to see the AEF General Staff College as equal to the school at Leavenworth or the Army War College in Washington. For the army, and in Bjornstad's mind that meant the AEF, the General Staff College not only taught, it became a source of doctrine and organizations concepts.<sup>14</sup>

Cooke analyzed immediate application of officer education through the AGSC within the context of combat proximity. Bjornstad believed the phenomenon of instant application was crucial to the college's success. After officers completed their courses, they quickly received either a command staff or front-line duty. His experience with the AGSC was essential in aligning practices with General Pershing's doctrinal belief that open warfare and the combined arms approach—as opposed to trench warfare practiced by European armies—provided the most successful approach to conducting large-scale maneuvers. The prominence and influence of Leavenworth-trained officers within the AEF General Staff and the AGSC was crucial to the success of the AEF during the war.

## AGSC LECTURES

The body of AGSC lecture material is the key to understanding how officers were trained on new military doctrine and provides insight into its evolution and application. New technologies and altering warfare principles also resulted in re-examining staff duties. AGSC lectures were divided into specific sections covering disciplines such as military intelligence, administration, logistics, operations, and combined arms training. Within each of these lectures, the purposes behind each concept and their necessities were explained. Initial AGSC lectures analyzed the new military doctrines and combat. In Lecture #17 of the 2<sup>nd</sup> AGSC course (the second class of officers enrolled in the college), the instructor discussed that despite advancements in military technologies, such as tanks, machine guns, and airplanes, the basic principles of warfare remained essentially unchanged. Modern weapons, which were evolving, still sustained the general principles of war despite the mounting casualties seen on the battlefield. The increasing

number of troops, artillery, and the deployment of aircraft, coupled with the combined-arms doctrine, augmented the basic American principles of warfare:

I do not mean to say, however, that the present war has not modified the technique of warfare. It would be far from my intention. I only say that whilst the processes have been altered, the principles are still unchanged. It is the modifications of the process which we have to now study.<sup>15</sup>

The lecture also stressed the importance of the advances in technology and the correlation to modern warfare. The recognition of such advances, including what the AGSC described as increased range of weapons, offensive with limited objectives, and importance of objectives, served their purposes in connecting new military doctrine with new technologies, an important tenant of military practice. Open warfare, or the fire-and-movement concept, evolved with increasing weaponry and communication ranges, which included military applications of airplanes and radio. The AGSC advocated these technologies and recognized their usage in both combat and non-combat roles. The AGSC lecture discussed the core principles of warfare, stating that while war has always been concerned with defeating the enemy, modern changes have altered the context of defeating the enemy on the battlefield to one of crippling the military capacity of an 'armed nation.'<sup>16</sup> An armed nation was the entire support body for a country's military. Disabling an army's logistical support network became as crucial as defeating the opposing army itself. Officers who enrolled in these courses implemented modernized military doctrines and such were implemented into real-time combat.

#### **SINGLE-MIND THEORY**

The AGSC realized that commanding large divisions in combat required streamlining and centralizing the chain of command. This critical practice contributed to a new development with the general staff command structure, along with other commands. Rather than rely on the command, control, communication, and information of one commanding general, such as General Pershing, evolving military doctrine reinforced the significance of broad command authority within a larger command staff. When the staff replicated the thoughts and strategies of the commanding officer, miscommunications and other mistakes were drastically reduced. This newly adopted practice, labeled as single-mind theory, summarized the ideas and strategies of the commanding officer and was emulated amongst the entire command staff. Under single-mind theory, the commander and his staff develop a cohesion that maximizes workplace efficiency amongst administrative duties, logistical work, and issuing battlefield commands, all based on the premise that every officer operates on the same operational level. The theory was an important component of the AGSC

curriculum. Because of the AGSC's emphasis on staff officer training, the single-mind theory was essential in operating in the various sections of the AEF General staff. In Article I of Staff Organization, the lecture outlines the merits of the single-mind theory:

A military mind must be controlled by a single mind capable of coordinating all the different forms of the unit and of employing the unit at its maximum efficiency...The commander and his staff combined constitute the theoretical single mind which controls and influences the unit.<sup>17</sup>

Competent and trained staff officers were required for fulfilling the single-mind theory of a commander in order to expedite the work with limited interference or weakness. A cohesive command staff could successfully carry out orders, thus resulting in an effective staff. Cohesion created an effective command staff with direct lines of communication, which was applied to other command staffs. AGSC staff principles explain that only a highly trained staff could prove such a theory. This single-mind theory can also be attributed to the Leavenworth clique with the AEF staff. Their common background and training increased their workplace efficiency because they understood each other. Familiarity combined with single-mind theory fostered cohesiveness which was a vital requirement in WWI military strategy.

#### **BATTLEFIELD INTELLIGENCE**

Emphasis on military intelligence and information was crucial to all staff officers during the war, given that with radio and telephone, battlefield communication was transmitted faster and farther than in previous conflicts. Well-informed officers made sound decisions regarding current situations and information accuracy was the responsibility of the commander's staff. The AGSC instilled these new communication principles into their students. Another Leavenworth officer, Lt. Col. Fiske, served as an instructor at the AGSC where he lectured on the importance of military intelligence. In Lecture #9, Fiske made clear that military intelligence, in terms of both trench and open warfare, needs to be presented in a methodical manner that requires estimating the situation. Despite what local intelligence may yield, Fiske found all ranks of soldiers important to methodically approach the situation and process information obtained by various collection efforts. Obtaining 100% accuracy was nearly impossible, but it was important to consider all the available facts before taking action according to Fiske. By adopting this approach it is possible to reduce casualties and achieve the desired objective, resulting from accurate intelligence.<sup>18</sup> In differentiating between trench and open warfare, trench actions required real-time and in-action decisions regarding the significance of intelligence reports. The same applied during maneuver operations when the time

came. Front-line information had to be refined and processed to give commanders at various echelons the critical information for the success of the operation itself.

#### COMBINED-ARMS WARFARE

General Pershing was a tireless advocate for combined-arms warfare and understood how its effectiveness could result in victory. If each side possesses similar weaponry, then the advantage exists with one who utilizes the technologies most efficiently. The AGSC presented lectures on the combined-arms approach and argued that infantry exercised three principles: expertise, extensive training, and the combination of armaments. Acting in combination allows the soldier to utilize superior firepower to hamper the enemy and this occurs with extensive training and expert usage of weapons. Despite an increasing reliance upon mechanical warfare later in the twentieth century, the AGSC argued that men and soldiers were still integral to army functions. The combined-arms doctrine also stated that man and machine must remain balanced in its combination, leading to what is referred to as the *economy of infantry*—later known as the economy of force.

Machines could not replace men, according to the AGSC lectures. One example of new military technologies described in the AGSC curriculum is the tank. A recent invention seen as an advantage in trench warfare, AEF officers and AGSC instructors saw the numerous applications and scenarios where a tank could secure an advantage. Lt. Col. Covinghouse discussed in his tank lecture that the novelty of tanks immediately changed infantry operations, particularly concerning speed and concentration of force. A tank, if used effectively, could determine the outcome of a battle:

If tanks could have been used to cover the advance of the infantry, without the simultaneous protection of a covering barrage, it would have greatly assisted much of the forces, and would particularly have resulted in a more rapid advance, whereby the initial advantages secured by surprise attacks could have been maintained.<sup>19</sup>

Such modern military practices taught at the AGSC were applied in the field, where platoon and company commanders received updated procedures. The importance of objectives was stressed and commanders made such their priorities when receiving orders. One example is found with the commander of the 137<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, Maj. Joseph Koch, where special bulletins were issued for officers on the importance of objectives. These ‘Questions a Platoon Commander Should Ask Himself’ reflected doctrine focused on the combined-arms approach, economy of force, and the importance of objectives. Every stage of attack was questioned and analyzed by officers in order to ensure full completion of missions, maximizing an

effective use of force. The listed question highlights how officers focused their attention on limited objectives:

Do I know exactly what objectives have been allotted (a) to my platoon, (b) to my company, (c) to my battalion? Have I a map showing them?<sup>20</sup>

Each section received a set of objectives that contributed to achieving the overall objective. The AGSC educated officers on principles of limited objectives, which became established with the General Staff, and who then applied it to their new command structure. Field officers who did not attend the AGSC were indirectly educating themselves with these novel concepts by implementing them on the battlefield.

#### POST-WWI IMPACT OF AGSC

The AGSC continued training officers after the war ended, with the final class graduating in early 1919, but the lessons and experiences from the school had long-lasting implications for future staff operations and training. After the war, several AEF officers returned to Ft. Leavenworth to serve as instructors in the service schools, and officers such as Hugh Drum and Leroy Eltridge incorporated their wartime experiences, formulating a modern military curriculum with the re-opening of the General Service School (the Ft. Leavenworth schools were closed for the duration of the war). The war and AGSC curricula educated these officers extensively on the evolution of warfare and re-organization of the command structure, which resulted in restructuring numerous Leavenworth curricula. The 1920 Annual Report of the General Services School contained statements from AGSC instructors who referred to their wartime experiences in assessing their courses. Drum referenced the war as the catalyst for adopting a modern curriculum:

The experiences of the World War, especially our own, demonstrated the necessity for some changes in the course and methods of instruction heretofore employed. These changes related primarily to a broadening of professional views and scope of instruction, and resulted naturally from our experiences with a large army. However, the new weapons and methods developed in the world war were not neglected; rather, their employment under the open warfare conditions were studied and in such situations, sound solutions reached.<sup>21</sup>

Drum understood that new, professional training methods yielded more professionally trained officers in modern military tactics and doctrine. Drum credited many of the modern military practices to the war and believed they could influence the future.<sup>22</sup> These changes included not just an adoption of new military doctrines, but the application of new technologies as

well that affected the emergence of new types of warfare. This expansion of interpretation of and approaches to warfare were critical to modernizing the AEF, and Drum believed that such innovations could be applied to the current Leavenworth school curricula.

## CONCLUSION

The Leavenworth officers were prominent during WWI, and their qualities established their credibility with the AEF and AGSC. These officers shared similar backgrounds and education, which were solidified by their wartime experiences. Prior combat experience was important for US officers. Combat experiences from the Philippines, Mexico, and South America were the initial training ground for future AEF officers. The Leavenworth system and reputation was another factor. The General Service Schools at Ft. Leavenworth were focused primarily on the education of field grade officer education. An officer's education consisted of administrative and staff duties and these officers were in short supply prior to the war. General Pershing understood the school's function, and it made Leavenworth officers prime candidates for the AEF General Staff. The Leavenworth methods and course structure were considered suitable for training officers and developing a disciplined training structure that educated students on modern warfare tactics and strategies. Given the exclusivity of the Leavenworth schools and training programs, many of these officers had a personal connection to some degree and the small cadre of officers in each graduating class understood not only the work ethic of one another, but also the general level of camaraderie that the Leavenworth system engendered. Each of these factors contributed to why the Leavenworth schools were essential in educating the Leavenworth Men in administrative assignments, which carried over into their roles with the AEF General Staff and the AGSC.

The Leavenworth officers' role in World War I stretched well beyond their official duties in the General Staff. Their combined roles as both commanders and instructors helped them to indoctrinate other officers, who were primarily civilians in uniform, on the evolving patterns of warfare. The AGSC was crucial in enhancing the training of officers for staff responsibilities that their basic military education did not provide, making them more effective during the period of active American involvement in the war. The value of the AGSC was best seen from the results achieved on the success of the AEF later in the war, which had their origins with the initial lessons given by the AGSC. The Leavenworth crowd laid the organizational and doctrinal groundwork not just for the AEF, but for the future US Army in wars yet to come.

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