

A Profession Without a Distinct Science: Reflection on the Professional Requirement for Officers to Hold a University Degree

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Abstract

The study on which this article is based, explored the fundamental question: why do future officers of the armed forces need to receive a university education? In other words, which reasons justify this professional requirement to hold a university degree for candidates to this profession? This fundamental question still deserves attention, despite the broad consensus around the requirement, as this is a condition for recruitment for most Western armed forces, or an integral part of the training and education programme offered to naval and officer cadets attending military academies today. There are seven distinct but somewhat interrelated reasons in support of this professional requirement: complexity of operational theatres or warfare; a new vision of the officer; better-educated officers; the integrated career-long training path for officers; professionals reflecting on their own profession; a mechanism that reinforces the authority and the legitimacy of officers; and for a better understanding of the military-academic complex. This article focuses on generalist officers, and leaves aside the case of specialists, such as medical officers, legal officers or engineers, as these military occupations already have their own specific professional requirements in terms of university education. In addition, the article does not report on the case of officers promoted from the ranks, for whom there is usually no such qualification requirement.

Keywords: Officer Education, Military Academies, University Education, Military Science, Civil-Military Relations.

Introduction

In 1856, the British member of parliament, Sir Sydney Herbert – who would later become secretary of state for war during the Crimean War – took the floor of the House of Commons to refute a widely-held belief at the time that, if a young man was instructed in his duty as an officer, ‘he was likely to become a pedant and a bookworm, and no longer to be an active, zealous, handy officer’.³³⁶ Excellence on the battlefield was believed by many not to be something to be learned on school benches or in the library, but rather in barracks, in the field, or on the firing range, in short, in the actual practice of the art of war. The idea that a university education was not only unnecessary, but also detrimental to a

young officer's training, would remain dominant in some circles until the beginning of the twentieth century. Indeed, scepticism around this idea has not completely disappeared to this day. In 1990, in an essay dedicated to officer training, the renowned military historian Martin van Creveld wrote:

[I]t is legitimate to call the reader's attention to the existence of some scattered evidence that an early college education, with its heavy emphasis on theoretical work and written skill, can actually be harmful to junior commanders whose job, after all, is to lead men in combat.³³⁷

If one compares how other professions – such as lawyers or medical doctors – already early on placed great importance on education to train their members, one can see how the officer profession has long been reluctant to provide university studies to their candidates. Law schools existed in antiquity. The first modern medical school in Montpellier dates back to the twelfth century.³³⁸ Even if military academies existed in Europe since at least since the eighteenth century,³³⁹ it was not until only about a century ago that they began offering fully recognised and accredited university-level education to their naval and officer cadets. In addition, it is only recently that most Western armed forces have made a university degree a formal condition of admission to the officer profession.³⁴⁰

Today in the West, there is strong consensus in terms of this professional requirement for officers to hold a university degree. Paradoxically, however, the profession of officer is the only one that does not have its own “science”, i.e. a specialised and exclusive field of academic education for its future members, whereas, for example, candidates to the medical profession are required to study medicine at university, and those destined for the legal profession, to study law. There is indeed a university field of research called “military science”, but it is far from being unified, and has no vocational purpose either. Even if there is a relatively universal set of basic knowledge and skills transmitted to cadets around the world at military academies – be it military history, leadership or notions of management, etc. – the academic curriculum offered in these institutions is not standardised or unified. The Royal Military College of Canada (RMC) offers its students a variety of 20 majors from which to choose, among which, French literature and culture, Mathematics, and Space Science.³⁴¹ The United State Military Academy (USMA) at Westpoint delivers undergraduate degrees in 36 majors, including Philosophy, Cyber Science, and a foreign language (Chinese).³⁴² Other military academies limit the choice of degrees to fields aligned with the profession of arms, such as:

- The Royal Military Academy (RMA) of Brussels, which offers only two degrees to their candidates, one in engineering and the other one in military and social sciences;³⁴³
- The French *École spéciale militaire de Saint-Cyr* (i.e. Special Military School of Saint-Cyr), which offers only two majors, Engineer Science and Political and Social Sciences;³⁴⁴ yet, with a number of specialisations.³⁴⁵

This educational choice in favour of university studies for cadets thus seems paradoxical: even though this profession has no specific or vocational science of its own, it requires

that their future members hold a university degree in a wide variety of fields, some of which appear far removed from the military domain.

In this essay paper, I explored the fundamental question: ‘Why do future officers need to receive a university education?’ To put it differently, ‘What reasons justify this professional requirement for officers to hold a university degree?’

My intention is not to discuss the choice of university discipline to offer cadets at military academies, but rather the more fundamental question of why they need a university degree to enter this profession, and especially so in the contemporary world. I think that this question still deserves attention, despite the broad consensus around this professional requirement today. It would be an error to deem it trivial, simply since almost all military academies offer university education today.

Such a reflection seems particularly relevant and useful for anyone working in a military academy, whether as a lecturer, a professor, an instructor, or a member of staff immersed in teaching, research, curriculum design, instruction or training. This reflection finds its meaning in the considerable responsibility incumbent upon those working in a military academy, which is to prepare naval and officer cadets intellectually for what awaits them as future officers of the armed forces. This reflection should however also be useful to cadets themselves, as they are required to reflect on the very meaning of the field of expertise and the professional identity of the unique profession they are about to join during their time at the military academy.

This article, which takes the form of an essay, dwells on both my personal experience as a former officer cadet and on my position as a professor at the Royal Military College Saint-Jean for nearly two decades. In addition, the article also takes into account a review of the wide literature on the subject. Finally, let us add that this article concerns future generalist officers and leaves aside the case of specialists, such as medical officers, legal officers or engineers, as these military occupations already have their own specific professional requirements in terms of university education. In addition, the case of officers promoted from the ranks, for whom there is usually no such qualification requirement, is not discussed here.

In my view, there are seven distinct but somewhat interrelated reasons that justify the professional requirement for officers to hold a university degree. This list does not claim to be exhaustive, but reflects a selection of what I consider the most important reasons. Let us tackle in turn each of these seven reasons.

Why Do Officers Need a University Degree?

Complexity of Operational Theatres or Warfare

In recent decades, military theatres of operations have become more and more complex, so that the exercise of command or the discharge of duties in staff positions for officers appears increasingly demanding.³⁴⁶ In an article dedicated to the education of officers, Professor Emeritus Jim Barrett wrote:

The daily reports of suicide bombers, pilotless drone attacks, and cyber warfare viruses all remind us of the new complexity of the old business of warfare. Less visible than combat operations, the work of generating, managing, and sustaining armed forces has become more complicated as well. Governments demand greater financial accountability. Weapons acquisition, logistics, and financial oversight all demand modern business skills. Whole-of-government initiatives and the comprehensive approach are a growing part of the operational fabric, calling for a whole new set of knowledge and skills.³⁴⁷

War and large-scale military operations have a certain universal or permanent character, i.e. regardless of time, context or people, the use of collective violence by a community of people to achieve its ends is a social practice unfortunately as old as humanity itself. It is also worth pointing out a relatively strong tendency among researchers or thinkers in all fields of social science – and military science is no exception – to emphasise:

- The apparent discontinuity between our era and the past;
- The tendency to qualify a phenomenon with a new label, sometimes peremptorily;
- The radically new character of our times; and thus
- Attracting attention in today's highly competitive academic publishing environment.

War is however something that is relatively permanent in time. Its fundamental nature has not changed, and it has remained relatively stable throughout history. The profession of arms is therefore characterised by a certain permanence in its ultimate aims.

Nevertheless, military technologies, tactics, and strategies change over time. The military domain is an evolving one. Mastering today's military technologies is becoming increasingly complex. This is due to a few factors. This complexity derives from the technical sophistication of modern weaponry, but also the dissemination of and access to increasingly sophisticated military technologies, both by state and non-state actors. It follows from a kind of de-compartmentalisation of military operations, which today presents an increasingly elusive aspect. Many conflicts are now taking place in what is known as "grey zones" where the boundaries between war and peace are becoming increasingly blurred, and the distinction between the enemy and the civilian population appears foggy.³⁴⁸ Above all, the complexity of the modern military domain derives from the nature and variety of the operations entrusted to the armed forces by civilian governments, particularly in the West. Armed forces are increasingly being entrusted with new and unprecedented missions with regard to their traditional functions, often in support of civilian authorities, as part of peacebuilding, national reconstruction, response to natural disasters, and other initiatives. This extension of the field of activities entrusted to the armed forces necessarily implies close collaboration with a growing number of non-military organisations, whether private (e.g. with private military firms) or public (e.g. environmental agencies, public safety agencies or social services agencies). These new collaborations inevitably undermine the very expertise of the armed forces, which in the past enjoyed a quasi-monopoly in many of these domains of activities.³⁴⁹

In this context, the tasks and the field of responsibilities of officers appear greater than ever, and certainly more demanding than in the past. In addition, by being trained in the art of warfare in the specific field of the weapon in which they serve, candidates to this unique profession must today receive training and education in a great diversity of other non-military fields, such as communication, psychology, humanitarian aid, and environmental interventions. For future officers, a better understanding of the many issues involved in civil–military relations, at a time when armed forces are increasingly required to work in collaboration with non-military organisations, is becoming increasingly essential. Certainly, the training of cadets today must include a robust educational programme to develop certain essential intellectual skills, such as analytical skills, or technical knowledge, a sense of judgment sharpened by ethics, or the knowledge of advanced intellectual tools. These skills are acquired at the university. Frankly, it is difficult to see how an officer could be expected to fulfil the scope of his or her responsibilities in the complex operational environment of today, which increasingly requires collaborative work with non-military organisations, without the mastering of these advanced, yet not strictly military in nature, intellectual skills.

A New Vision of the Officer: “Strategic Lieutenant”

The increasing complexity of military theatres of operation also comes with certain changes in the role of the officer, of which the concept “strategic lieutenant” (or the similar “strategic corporal”) is the clearest expression.³⁵⁰ While we have already stated that war has a certain permanence, the fact remains that, in the current operational environment, certain actions, decisions and gestures taken in the field – particularly by officers – tend to have an effect that they did not have in the past. In the media environment today, every officer must realise that, in the field, their decisions, and actions – however limited these may seem at the tactical level within which they operate – can nevertheless have a major effect on the entire mission or, in other words, on a strategic scale. For French sociologist Bernard Boëne, there is no doubt that –

[T]he young officer cannot be satisfied with considering only the tactical aspects of their mission: without risking or questioning its legitimacy even at the slightest incident likely to capture the attention of the world’s media, he or she must simultaneously take into consideration all these other factors. The responsibility that weighs on their shoulders is notably heavier than in the past and includes aspects that previously concerned only the operational and strategic levels.³⁵¹

The training and education offered at the military academy must therefore consider this new reality of the potentially strategic effect of any decision taken in military theatres of operation. Military academies must ensure that they provide cadets with a high level of education, so that they are able to grasp the strategic dimension of their future decisions and actions. We can even say that this new situation has an influence on the very mission of the military academy. The core learning objective of military academies should not simply be to train *future lieutenants*, capable of exercising the role at the tactical level of platoon commander, for example, but also *future officers*, namely professionals capable

of grasping the full scope of military thinking, from the tactical to the strategic level, through the operational level.³⁵² Obviously, it is only much later in their careers – as they will climb the ranks of the military hierarchy – that officers will be able to act and make actual decisions at the strategic level. Still, very early in their careers, young officers must nevertheless be able to grasp the potentially strategic significance of their decisions and actions in theatres of operation, something that requires intellectual skills to be acquired through university education, in academic fields, such as political science, international law, and sociology.

Better-Educated Officers: A Requirement of Our Democratic Societies

For a long time, armed forces in the West have evolved on the edge of society, with exceptions of countries where we find the tradition of armies comprising citizen-soldiers or where conscription existed. Armed forces tend to form separate “societies” each with its relatively distinct culture, social norms, values, and strong traditions – some of which date back generations.³⁵³ This is particularly apparent in the wearing of uniforms in a society where this practice has largely been abandoned; in symbolic markers of authority, such as ranks, in an increasingly egalitarian society; in an organisational culture in which individual members’ autonomy is very limited, which runs counter to personal independence valued in civil society, and so on. The existence of a “culture gap” between the military and civil society has given rise to an abundance of scholarly literature and is one of the major subjects of studies on civil–military issues.³⁵⁴

In the last decades, we have been witnessing the development of increasing pressure from civil society everywhere to reduce the civil–military culture gap, i.e. by bringing the culture of the armed forces in alignment with the dominant values in civil society – or, at the very least – to make it less *incompatible* with those values prevailing in society at large. This impression seems even truer today. Nowadays, the military is held to a high standard of professionalism, dictated by the democratic requirements of our societies.³⁵⁵ More recently, there has also been a new demand for respect by armed forces for the principles of diversity, inclusion and equality, values that have come to occupy a prominent place in the political imagination of liberal democracies.³⁵⁶ This new set of values is not without clashing with the traditional principles of uniformity, division, and hierarchy that lie at the heart of traditional military organisational ideology. In a democratic society, maintaining the bond of trust between the population and its armed forces, or between the civilian power and the senior military leadership is crucial. As the dominant values of society change, it is only natural that the demands placed on the armed forces should evolve accordingly. In this context, officers must be able to act as agents of “cultural change” within the armed forces.³⁵⁷ If the armed forces are to adapt to the new demands of our democratic societies, officers need to have a good grasp of certain social dynamics that run through our societies. The university-level education offered to cadets must also pursue such an objective in order to keep them connected to civilian life, notably through university debates.³⁵⁸ In this sense, the legitimacy that the public places in the officer corps rests largely on the ability of its members to fully appreciate the role, function or place of the armed forces in society, and also to understand the meaning of the demands society makes of this unique institution.

Nowadays, members of the officer profession must acquire a new set of “soft” skills and abilities – unknown to past generations of officers – a majority of which are acquired precisely in a university educational environment.

The Integrated Career-Long Training Path for Officers

Throughout their career, officers may spend between one fifth and one quarter of their time in training and education, including attending professional programmes at different military schools.³⁵⁹ To our knowledge, no other profession spends as much time as the armed forces do with their members in continuous learning throughout their careers.³⁶⁰ Officer professional development, i.e. the training programme for officers as they move up the military chain of command, appears relatively standardised for members of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries, for example, to enable interoperability. The training offered at the military academy is thus part of a “continuum”, while throughout their careers, officers have to complete additional training courses in their **branch schools** for their trade, in addition to attending the **staff school**, few years after receiving their commission, and some years later, for those selected to climb the upper echelons of the military hierarchy, the **war school**.³⁶¹ As far as education is concerned, although military academies are responsible for offering their candidates a university education – most often at undergraduate level; sometimes at postgraduate level – the educational pathway appears a little less consistent throughout the officers’ career progression. Apart from the requirement to hold a bachelor’s degree to enter the officer profession, the pursuit of university studies later in an officer’s career does not appear to be a universal requirement. In some countries, successful completion of training at the staff college or war college leads to a graduate diploma, but this practice is not universal. That said, there is a widespread tendency everywhere to streamline officer education, by linking the initial university training received at the military academy with the professional training offered later in the career. The advanced level of training offered in these professional schools today requires that students attending these establishments, gain mastery of knowledge and intellectual skills or abilities that are usually only acquired in a university setting.

Professionals Reflect on Their Own Profession

Since the founding work of sociologist Talcott Parsons, one of the distinguishing features of any profession, as opposed to a trade for example, is the ability of its members to reflect on the very meaning of their field of expertise and their professional identity.³⁶² The profession of officer is no exception, as the classical conceptualisations of the military profession by Samuel Huntington and Morris Janowitz have shown.³⁶³ Being an officer requires the ability to reflect on what it means to be a member of this unique profession. This implies the ability to reflect on:

- The scope of responsibility of their decisions and actions;
- The nature of the contract that binds their profession to the rest of society;
- The ethical guidelines they must set for themselves to maintain the bond of trust with society in general.

The above abilities imply the capacity to “think like an officer”. Following the analysis of the US historian Reed Bonadonna –

[T]hinking like an officer is the most defining aspect of military professionalism, more than values, character, or knowledge, and that it has been neglected in officer education. There are many books on military tactics, strategy, and leadership, but few if any treat these subjects as matters of thinking, as cognitive challenges that are distinct but also related in that they place in the officer’s mind and within the context of the military culture and profession.³⁶⁴

In the past, the acquisition of this form of thinking for cadets attending military academy was mainly through a process of informal socialisation with peers and staff. This involved acquiring the codes of military culture and those specific to the officer’s profession, as well as integrating military values and certain social practices, through emulation. Nowadays, although military academies are still places where learning takes place through socialisation, training now relies more heavily on a richer and more formal pedagogical approach, with greater emphasis on critical analysis, self-reflection, mentorship and self-awareness. Learning to think like an officer now involves a comprehensive reflexive process. To take up Bonadonna’s reflection:

[T]o make an analogy, the service academies used to assume that cadets were absorbing leadership abilities and ethical awareness through the example of the commissioned officers with whom they came into contact, but over the past few decades leadership and ethics have become subjects for formal instruction, discussion, and critique.³⁶⁵

Here again, the university environment seems the best place to undertake this fundamental reflection for any cadet, which requires the mobilisation of intellectual resources developed by academic disciplines, such as social sciences, literature, history or philosophy, but also military sciences.

Mechanism to Reinforce the Authority and Legitimacy of the Officer

Among the reasons for offering future officers a university education, is the fact that one must recognise that, in any society, education is an effective mechanism to reinforce its authority and legitimacy. In practice, officers derive part of their actual authority over their troops from their credentials earned on school benches. Historically, or rather at the time of the emergence of the profession of officer somewhere in Europe in the seventeenth century, this issue did not arise, as officers were naturally recruited from the noble classes. Their authority thus naturally derived from their social status, in an already highly hierarchical social structure, whereas soldiers were recruited from the lower social classes. With the democratisation of society and the abolition of the requirement of noble rank for entry into the officer corps – abolition which can be traced back to the Scharnhorst Reform of 1808 at the *Kriegsakademie* in Berlin³⁶⁶ – the question has arisen: What authority can officers claim over their troops, compared to non-commissioned officers (NCOs) for example? NCOs often have more military experience than the young officers under whom they serve. In practice, the authority and the legitimacy of officers not only derive from their position in the hierarchical structure of the armed forces, or their holding of an “officer

commission”. Their authority and the legitimacy also derive, in part, from a certain “social status”, which is intimately linked to the fact that, in our societies, despite wider access to higher education, university studies are still limited to certain groups or individuals. Members of the officer corps distinguish themselves and derive part of their authority and legitimacy – if we compare them with their troops – from the greater knowledge, intellectual and analytical skills and tools they possess, all of which were acquired at the university. Of course, there are an increasing number of soldiers and NCOs in all Western armed forces who are educated, and sometimes even hold university degrees. Some senior NCOs in Canada even hold master’s degrees. This however remains the exception. Officers everywhere have a higher level of education than the troops, and part of the authority and legitimacy they have over their troops derives from this professional attribute.

A Better Understanding of the “Military–Academic Complex”

The university research community today occupies an increasingly important place in knowledge society. Public and non-state organisations and institutions are increasingly relying on the research produced by universities, research centres, and think-tanks in their decision-making processes. The armed forces are no exception. If, what the outgoing US president Dwight Eisenhower in the 1950s called the “military–industrial complex” became dominant throughout the West, we are now witnessing the emergence of the “military–academic complex”, so to speak. The military organisation is increasingly making use of studies produced by military research centres or work produced by civilian researchers working in universities and other research agencies. In this context, it appears increasingly essential for officers, especially senior officers, to be able to understand the complex interface between the military and defence research organisations, to mobilise this scientific knowledge better for the benefit of the organisation they serve. Such knowledge – by the level of theoretical complexity on which it is based and the intellectual tools it mobilises to be produced – is indeed only accessible to those who already possess advanced theoretical knowledge and intellectual skills, precisely those which are acquired through university studies. In this sense, in the new knowledge economy of today, it is important that officers be able to make use of scholarly research. And this is the final reason for offering university-level education to cadets at military academies.

Conclusion

Today, more than ever before, in the performance of their duties, officers of the armed forces must deploy theoretical knowledge, analytical tools, and intellectual skills that can only be acquired through tertiary education. The training and education of officers increasingly require the successful completion of university studies, either at a military academy or before donning the uniform. In this reflection, we have reviewed what we consider the seven main reasons why candidates for the profession of officers should receive a university-level education. Even more fundamentally, this professional requirement stems from the fact that, to use the words Professor David Last, the primary goal of university studies should never be to obtain a degree, but always, more fundamentally, to engage in a transformational experience, in that by educating oneself, one becomes a fundamentally different person.³⁶⁷ Education is a process that

involves more than the simple transmission of knowledge or the acquisition of new skills, since it always has the profound effect of transforming the student. And that is why the military academy, along with its comprehensive training programme, must always put its educational programme first, as becoming an officer can only be achieved through a genuine education process. One simply cannot be *trained* to become an officer, one needs to be *educated*.

ENDNOTES

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