# ARMY OFFICER EMPLOYMENT: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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**Introduction.**

Despite the revolutionary changes that have transformed warfare and the military profession over the last century, the fundamental principles that have guided the employment of officers have survived largely intact. Based on the "company man" model used to develop business executives during the Industrial Age, these principles have taken on the aspect of hallowed tradition. That is not to say, of course, that the Army has been blind to the need for change. Concessions, and in some cases significant concessions, have been made to specialization and "functionalization," developments that run directly counter to the "company man" paradigm. Nevertheless, the broad outlines of the officer employment patterns laid out at the beginning of the twentieth century, albeit modified and refined, are still clearly recognizable today.

This paper will sketch with very broad strokes the policies and the underlying philosophical and operational assumptions that have guided the employment of officers since the end of the First World War. In the process, it will outline the story of how personnel managers have struggled, with only limited success, to place the right officer in the right position and still satisfy the demands of the traditional career progression model. As in previous papers, this one will begin in the interwar years and end in the 1980s, when the "employing officer talent" companion piece essentially picks up the story.

**Interwar Years.**

Shortly after the conclusion of World War I, the Army articulated a career progression model that it used, to the extent that it could given the strictures under which it operated, to shape an officer corps capable of leading a vastly expanded citizen army in the event of a national emergency. Based on an industrial production paradigm, this model served as the theoretical foundation upon which officer assignments were made.

The ideal career pattern under this system entailed rotation through a variety of assignments at progressively higher levels. By following this path, the officer, it was expected, would become familiar with the full range of duties and responsibilities needed to command at high levels. One interwar War College student provided a succinct summary of the philosophy behind officer assignments:

> An officer must be thoroughly acquainted with the various activities of the Army of the United States and that this requires a variety of duties giving him first a practical knowledge of his branch, second, the regular army, and third, the other components of the Army. To have this varied experience a limit of four years on a specific duty has been generally practiced. In general, the officer should not repeat any job.[1]

Troop duty was the cornerstone of this model. Service in tactical units, it was assumed, provided officers with leadership experiences, knowledge, skills, and insights into the psychology of the individual soldier that simply could not be gained elsewhere. And if duty with troops was the cornerstone of this model, preparation for command was its ultimate purpose. This was especially true for combat arms officers upon whom the burden of command would fall in any future conflict. In addition to command slots, positions on battalion, regimental, and brigade staffs were seen as key assignments because they gave the officer many of the same insights, experiences, and knowledge that service as a commander did. Duty with the Army staff and with the civilian components, although considered important and broadening experiences,

were usually reserved for field grade officers who already had mastered the fundamentals of their branch and profession. It was a career pattern that, as historian Richard Yarger suggests, the modern officer could easily relate to.[2]

Actual assignments, although based generally on the career progression model described above, were constrained by officer availability, budgets, legislative restrictions (no officer, for example, could spend more than four years in Washington, DC on the General Staff), the need to garrison overseas posts, and various policy restrictions. Of those policy restrictions, fairness or "equity of duty" was one of the most salient for personnel managers, who wanted to distribute both the pleasure and the pain of service more or less uniformly across the Officer Corps. "Equity of duty" had two important geographic dimensions. First, it meant that officers were to spend roughly the same amount of time on foreign service as their contemporaries of the same grade and branch. Too much foreign service was seen as a hardship and injurious to the family life of an officer. Second, every officer was to receive his fair share of assignments at "good stations" within the United States. In practical terms, this meant that no officer was to receive repeated assignments on either the west or east coasts, where, by general consensus, the duty was the most pleasant. Everyone had to take their turn at posts on the borders and in the Middle West, areas that could not compete with the coasts in terms of quality of life. The concept of fairness as an assignment tenet also extended to units. Every unit or organization was supposed to receive its fair share of high quality officers, as measured by such gauges as officer efficiency reports and general reputation, as well as its share of more marginal performers.[3]

To be sure, there was a general recognition among Army leaders that certain positions required special talents, as the Great War had made painfully obvious. And personnel managers generally strove to fill those positions with officers with the desired talents. The problem was that with the various other considerations that had to be taken into account, it was often difficult to make this match.

**Post-World War II Era.**

The advent of the Cold War moved the Army to reconsider the way it employed its officers. Before World War II, requirements for specialized or particular talents, while present, were not acutely felt. In an emergency, the Army could, as it had in both World War I and World War II, call upon civilian specialists and experts to accomplish related military tasks. Friendly nations to the North and South, the ocean barriers, and the nature of war during this period gave strength to this officer employment construct. After 1945, however, uniformed leaders quickly recognized the increasing demand for officers with deep talents in a number of fields. The Army now needed diplomats, statesmen, scientists, economists, and mathematicians as well as combat leaders.[4]

To accommodate these new demands, in 1948 the Army G-1 published a new guide for career planning. In this guide, the Army announced its intention to employ officers where "their abilities and aptitudes could best be used to accomplish the Army's assigned missions," to place the right officer in the right position. At the same time, the Army began to revise its career model to develop officers with deep talents to address a proliferating array of specialized needs. By the mid-1950s, specialist career patterns had been developed for Civil Affairs/Military Government, Army Aviation, Atomic Energy, Research and Development, the Foreign Area Officer (FAO) program, and the Army Security Agency. A number of informal career fields, such as Comptroller, also received de facto recognition.[5]

Despite the talk about placing the right officer in the right position and making an accommodation with the specialized personnel demands of the new age, personnel managers, for the most part, continued to steer officers along well-worn career paths. Branch "qualification," the planned and progressive rotation of assignments, and the avoidance of extended or repetitive tours of duty in any one area remained the cornerstones of career development. The Army's guidance to those seeking to develop or employ deep talents was rather confusing (some considered it disingenuous). One Army publication had this to say: "A specialist who has maintained qualification in his branch need not be apprehensive about his opportunities for promotion….provided his overall record compares favorably with that of his non-specialist contemporary." [6] DA Pamphlet 600-3, *Career Planning for Officers*, noted that

> The military specialist of greatest value to the Army is primarily qualified in his basic branch and secondarily qualified in one of the specialist career fields. The officer…failing to remain qualified in his basic branch is usually of limited potential as a future senior army commander.[7]

With such pronouncements, Army leaders seemed to be talking out of both sides of their mouths. *The Armed Forces Officer* was more straightforward in its guidance to officers:

> …those who get to the top have to be many sided men, with skill in the control and guidance of a multifarious variety of activities. Therefore, event the young specialist, who has his eyes on a narrow track because his talents seem to lie in that direction, is well advised to raise his sights and extend his interests to the far horizons of the profession.[8]

The Army, it seems, recognized the new realities of the post-war world but declined to take any really substantive steps to accommodate them. The career progression model predicated on the mass mobilization of a citizen army had become so deeply ingrained in the consciousness of professional officers that any steps taken to substantially alter traditional officer assignment patterns were certain to be met with stiff resistance.

One of the basic assumptions underlying the employment of officers was that a well-rounded officer was, or at least should be, capable of handling almost any job reasonably well. In fact, what by the 1950s had become military custom dictated that a truly "good man" should be adept at every job regardless of his background or the demands of the position. Accordingly, the Army G-1 assigned officers based on their Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) and their score on the OER efficiency index. Demonstrated potential, as evidenced by past performance, was considered far more important than actual experience or specialized training in the employment of officers.[9]

Commanders in the field who were responsible for the execution of certain specialized tasks or functions, however, often rejected the logic of the G-1 and demanded trained or experienced experts to fill particular positions. They did not buy into the assumption that every officer could do every job even at an acceptable level. Experience told them otherwise. Indeed, the frequency and intensity with which commanders bombarded the Pentagon with requests for specific talents greatly irritated and frustrated personnel managers.[10]

Acceptance of the idea that all officers were qualified to perform most assignments (commensurate with their grade and branch) made the life of personnel managers much easier and the officer assignment process run much more smoothly. Officers could obviously be

plugged into slots much more easily when this concept prevailed. On the other hand, this conceptual construct did not provide for operational effectiveness. It resulted in officers being assigned "willy-nilly" to personnel, intelligence, and comptroller duties--duties for which many of them were completely unprepared.[11]

Inherent in the career progression model was what one officer labeled a "paradox." The logic of the model demanded that commanders give their subordinates the opportunity to serve in a number of disparate positions to broaden their professional horizons and ensure that they would remain competitive for promotion. To meet the demands of the model, commanders had to sacrifice unit effectiveness, which some refused to do willingly. This tradeoff and its consequences were explicitly acknowledged and sanctioned by the 1948 Army planning guide referred to earlier, which expressed a determination to place the right officer in the right slot. That guide, in fact, manifested a "near complete disregard" for the impact of assignment rotation on the units or organizations affected. "We must destroy the idea," wrote the authors of the guide, "that the principal goal of any peacetime command is unit efficiency." [12]

As in the interwar period, officer assignments were subject to various restrictions and constraints. Availability was one restriction. Even if personnel managers found the right match between an officer and a position, there was no guarantee that that officer would be available for reassignment. Another constraint was "equality of treatment." This principle essentially stated that officers were to be treated equally, serve the same number of years in grade for each rank, and experience roughly the same career pattern. Assignments were thus made within this framework of uniform treatment for all, assuring, it was expected, equal opportunity of promotion through the ranks. This commitment to uniform treatment compromised the development of officers with deep talents since it effectively curtailed the career of anyone who served repetitive tours in a particular field.[13]

The "equitability" of assignments was still another restraint. For example, all officers were to serve their fair share of foreign tours and approximately the same number of short and long tours. Moreover, they were to experience roughly equal amounts of family separation. These considerations, of course, made it much more difficult for personnel managers to match talent with needs.

Some insight into the Army's ideas about officer employment can be gained by studying its reaction to the legislation for "responsibility pay" that was passed by Congress in the late fifties. This type of pay was meant to reward and incentivize officers who were serving in positions involving "unusual responsibility." In the other services, many of the slots so designated were filled by officers with special talents.[14]

The Army rejected the idea of responsibility pay (which was possible because the legislation authorizing it was permissive in nature) on three grounds. First, it would inhibit the development of an officer corps with broad backgrounds capable of handling a wide range of assignments. Many senior officers felt that specialization and leadership could not co-exist within the same individual. Second, it would necessitate additional controls on officer assignments, thus adding to the administrative problems that already plagued officer management. Third, it would not be "fair." Responsibility pay would, as one officer noted, "…benefit a few and downgrade many." Indeed, it might even result in the horrifying prospect of a captain earning more than a major.[15]

On the institutional level, the distribution of quality across the Army placed another stricture on officer employment. The rule was to distribute officer quality in such a way so as to ensure that all agencies and units would have a representative slice of officer "talent." Ideally, each organization would receive approximately equal shares of the higher quality, middle quality, and

lower quality officers — quality being defined as "demonstrated potential" as reflected in officer efficiency reports. This uniform distribution of "talent," of course, was never achieved but it was a factor in the assignment of officers.[16]

**The 1960s and early 1970s.**

The 1960s and early 1970 were crisis years for officer employment. The dramatic technological advances since 1945, the growing complexity of the military profession, the proliferation of service missions and responsibilities, and, with the advent of Robert McNamara as the Secretary of Defense, an increased demand for expert knowledge and specialized experience among senior officers suggested that a new officer employment paradigm was imperative — a paradigm that would place the right officer with the right talents in the right assignment. No longer, said some, could the Army afford to operate on the premise that effectiveness and expertise must take a back seat to the more or less planned incompetence inherent in the traditional officer development model.

The Army's sense of crisis during this period was heightened by an officer attrition problem, which ravaged the ranks of lieutenants, captains, and senior field grade officers. This problem resulted in the exodus of the most intellectually talented officers out of the Army, a shortage of officers in several critical fields, and leakage of talent that the Army desperately needed to address its expanded range of responsibilities. According to many observers, this attrition problem could have been ameliorated by assignment practices that placed more emphasis on aligning skills, education, and experience with positions. [17]

Despite the recognition that the Army needed to revise the way it approached officer assignments, little was done in the way of adaptation. The traditional career path toward developing generalists remained very much alive. Demonstrated leadership potential, substantive experience, and special training continue to regulate the employment of officers.

This reliance on the supposedly tried and true manner of developing and employing officers prevented the Army from adequately addressing many of the complex tasks that it was increasing being asked to shoulder. There were, one War College student noted, "…seemingly conflicting requirements" for senior military specialists. On the one hand, the Army sought officers adept at managing complex problems arising from technological advancements and the demands of international military statesmanship, yet on the other it desired "heroic leaders" trained to function effectively as cogs in the Army's vast mobilization machine. One of the shortcomings of the extant system, this officer continued, was that it did not ensure that the full range of officer skills necessary to run a modern defense enterprise were on hand.[18]

The Officer Corps was particularly deficient, some observers noted, in those skills necessary to accomplish the myriad of non-operational tasks and functions that had fallen under the Army's purview. This was a matter of some concern because since World War II, the number of officers occupied with non-operational tasks had grown substantially while the percentage employed in branch material duties or assigned to troop units had declined. By the 1960s, for example, only one-third of lieutenant colonels could expect to command a battalion of any kind.[19]

The dearth of non-operational talent was particularly evident in the Pentagon, where officers were regularly called upon to work and interact with members of Congress, the administration, and various federal agencies on a wide variety of complicated issues. Nevertheless, assignments to the Pentagon, like officer assignments throughout the Army, were based on the general background of the officer concerned and on his score on the OER efficiency index. Often, little

or no consideration was given to the specialized nature of the duties and responsibilities involved.[20]

The Undersecretary of the Army, Thaddeus Holt, commented on the bewilderment and frustration that many general officers felt when working at the Department of the Army. Accustomed to having their opinions and decisions uncritically accepted by subordinates and sympathetically considered by their military superiors, they were shocked when their judgments or pronouncements were questioned by high-ranking civilian officials. These generals could not fathom how the thoroughly staffed products generated by their staffs could fail to stand up to the scrutiny of highly educated but militarily inexperienced civilians. After all, the senior members of their staff, like they themselves, had successfully navigated through the military career system and had demonstrated potential for high-level responsibility. The fact that they were now operating in a world where specialized knowledge and a mastery of abstract theory counted for more than a broad background appropriate for overseeing large operational formations apparently did not fully register on them.[21]

One officer told of the challenges faced by senior military officers in the DCSPER in the early 1960s. He told of the situation he encountered what he was assigned to that office. "Of the twenty-odd division chiefs in the office of the DCSPER," he wrote,

> …only five or six had prior experience in personnel work. Yet, these officers occupied positions where they were required to review and defend a wide variety of complicated personnel directives and legislation. While of outstanding general background and intelligence, they were no match for the expert questioners in the Department of Defense, Bureau of the Budget and Congress. This is where the Army loses its shirt. In short, when one is faced with an expert, intuition and general background are not substitutes for knowledge.[22]

The Army's ability to match qualifications with positions was inhibited by a number of factors. One, of course, was that the Army remained wedded to the career progression model that focused on molding "a highly competent Officer Corps to serve in positions of progressively higher responsibility." Another impediment was the branch organizational structure. The most qualified officer for a particular position might be found in a career branch other than the one that received the requisition. Nevertheless, there was no simple way of determining that because of the constraints imposed by branch compartmentalization. Thus, organizational stovepipes greatly reduced both assignment flexibility and talent visibility.[23]

The Army's unwavering commitment to "fairness" in assignments remained a major obstacle to matching qualifications with positions. This was especially evident in the employment of officers identified for service in Military Assistance Advisory Groups (MAAGS). Out of a sense of assignment equity, the Army, as it had done for decades, did not assign officers to repetitive "hardship" tours. No officer was to "suffer" more than another. Moreover, by retaining this commitment to fairness, the Army hoped to prevent advisors from "going native," a condition that sometimes resulted when officers were left too long in a particular environment. Some thought that this particular restriction on the employment of officers was extremely short-sighted. After all, the MAAG community needed officers with deep talents. By prohibiting repetitive tours to the same country of the same linguistic region, the Army was forfeiting many operational advantages. [24]

Availability was another inhibitor of matching officer skills with positions. Again, this problem was particularly evident in the case of MAAG assignments, where continuity of effort

was considered absolutely essential. In the MAAG community, personnel "underlap" was to be avoided at all costs. To have an advisor on station by his predecessor's departure date, it was often necessary for the Army to waive the special qualifications for the position in question and for the selected officer to forego the extensive training that was supposed to precede such an assignment. Despite the fact that scores of officers might possess the background and skills necessary to excel in a particular position, considerations of availability dictated that marginally qualified officers would fill the slot.[25]

Assigning the best officer to a particular job was often thwarted by local commanders, who, by exercising their broad assignment prerogatives, looked after their own staffing needs first and placed incoming officers where they were most needed. All too often, the skills and qualifications of the officer affected were only a secondary consideration. Many officers found themselves performing roles for which they were neither requisitioned nor trained.

The Army's ability to align officer qualifications with particular jobs was further reduced by the relatively primitive methods used to categorize both officers and duty positions. Officer skills were vaguely defined. Only branch, grade and MOS were normally used in officer requisitions. Descriptions of duty positions were equally as ambiguous. They were, as a general rule, not crafted in terms of experience or skills but in the broad and imprecise language used to categorize officer qualifications. Consequently, officers with unclear skills were assigned to duties with vague or incomplete job descriptions. Thus, when the right officer was employed in the right position, it often occurred by accident.[26]

The Army's senior leaders contemplated taking action that would permit personnel managers to find better matches between skills and positions. Some saw the problem in terms of restricted avenues for promotion success for officers with specialized knowledge or talents. Only by widening the pathways to the ranks of senior leadership, they believed, could the Army hope to retain those individuals with deep talents. To remedy what it saw as an officer employment crisis, the Haines Board in 1966 recommended that those officers who had developed "expertise in depth" be allowed to advance to the highest ranks of the Army without commanding at the battalion level and above. [27]

The recommendation of the Haines Board was not, as one can imagine, received with universal acclaim by the Officer Corps. Many senior officers, while conceding that it was necessary to nurture special talent, were not prepared to so far as to reward experts with high rank. Experts were to be given a separate and less prestigious career track than the "more successful" generalists who bore greater responsibilities, possessed greater potential and had endured the tough assignments. Officers with deep talents were, to paraphrase a popular slogan of the day, to be kept on tap and not on top.[28]

**The 1970s and Early 1980s.**

In the 1970s, the Army introduced a new officer career management model after recognizing that it was developing too many "jacks of all trades" and far too few experts. The Officer Personnel Management System (OPMS), the name given to the new career progression paradigm, was designed, among other things, to rectify this and produce officers with the deep talents necessary to address the many tasks that the Army was being asked to perform.

The idea behind OPMS was to match the skills, aptitudes, and experience of officers with appropriate duty positions — placing the right people in the right jobs. The system operated under the dual track concept, which entailed the requirement for every officer to acquire

proficiency in a primary and secondary skill area. Officers had to identify their primary and secondary skill areas prior to promotion to major and achieve proficiency in these areas prior to their promotion to lieutenant colonel. Normally, an officer's primary skill was his basic branch while his secondary skill was in either a functional area of in one of the special career programs.[29]

Even before OPMS was put into effect, many officers expressed deep reservations about OPMS. General Creighton Abrams, the Army Chief of Staff at the time, had several concerns, including: that OPMS, by emphasizing specialization, would compartmentalize, fragment, and undermine the unity of the Officer Corps; that it would become so rigid and so inflexible that it would force each officer into a narrow mold, thereby making it more difficult to develop officers who were willing to perform the tough, unstructured jobs in operational units; that the system would be so complex that it would be unmanageable; and that OPMS would subordinate the broad interests of the Army to narrow special interests.[30]

The upshot was that, despite recognition that the Army had to do a better job matching up officer skills with duty positions, there was very little change in the way the Army employed its officers. Once again, the Army found that the generalist proclivities of the vast majority of combat arms officers were so ingrained that they could not be dislodged. Competitive officers knew that specialization was to be avoided at all costs and the quickest and surest route to the top remained the frequent rotation through a variety of assignments.

The assignment process during this period was constrained by the same type of considerations that had constrained it in the past. These considerations worked against both the implementation of OPMS and the broader goal of assigning the right officer to the right position. Just as there had been in the past, there was a concerted push throughout the seventies and early eighties to ensure that each organization received its "fair share" of "high quality" officers. The DCSPER attempted to distribute the top, middle, and bottom third of the Officer Corps evenly among units. All organizations and all commanders should, the idea was, operate from roughly the same quality baseline. Moreover, personnel managers were instructed to distribute former battalion commanders as well as graduates of the Command and General Staff College and the War College evenly across the Army. Many of these top performers were placed in jobs for which they had no background, of course, but that did not matter to the receiving organizations, whose leaders were more focused on attitude and general background that on skills. The prevailing assumption about the employment of officers remained that all good officers should be able to handle almost any job.[31]

Throughout most of the seventies and in to the early eighties, budget cuts and stabilization constraints made the task of matching duty positions with expertise more difficult. To maintain continuity, improve unit performance and save money, officers were frozen in certain assignments for extended periods of time. This, of course, affected their availability. Prescribed command tour lengths, lieutenant colonel and colonel command selection and programming and, as always, assignment "equity" (i.e., the idea that everyone should share equally in short tours, hardship tours, family separations, etc.) further constricted assignment windows. These factors and others made it extremely difficult for personnel managers to place the right officer in the right spot.[32]

**Conclusions.**

Throughout the 20th Century, the U.S. Army embraced a career progression model originally intended to develop broadly experienced generalists capable of leading a vast citizen army in the event of a national emergency. The employment formula intrinsic to this model entailed a frequent rotation of duty among a wide variety of assignments at progressively higher levels. The model rested on the assumptions that: a good officer could do almost any job well; specialization or repetitive assignments in one field was antithetical to leader development; and only those officers who had endured the "tough" and "unstructured" jobs in operational units should be rewarded with high rank.

While the officer employment practices inherent in this career progression model made a great deal of sense in the interwar period, they became increasingly misaligned with actual Army needs as the century progressed. Technological progress, the changing nature of war, the increasing complexity of the military profession, the expanding list of Army missions and the gradual economic and social transformation of the nation created a greater demand for officers with deep talents and specialized knowledge. This was evidenced by the steeply and continuously rising percentage of officers who were assigned to non-operational slots after World War II. Despite these developments, the career progression paradigm articulated to produce generalists capable of leading an industrial age army demonstrated a remarkable resilience and maintained a powerful hold on the collective conscience of the Officer Corps.

This is not to say that the Army was oblivious to the need to create highly skilled specialists to meet the demands of an increasingly sophisticated defense establishment. In fact, even during the interwar period, attention was given to aligning officer skills with duty positions. But recognition of this need did not translate into effective action.

There were a number of long-standing policies, practices and considerations, some of which were outgrowths of the career progression model itself, which inhibited changes in employment practices. Considerations involving "fairness" of assignment or "equity of duty," budgetary restrictions, officer availability, and legislative requirements often worked against matching officer skills with Army needs. So, too, did the Army's very general and vague methods of categorizing officer qualifications. These methods worked fine in a system designed to produce broadly experienced generalists but were unequal to the task of identifying and employing specialized talent.

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