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STUDENT ESSAY

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OPMS MINI-REVIEW

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL JOHN F. CONNOLLY
INFANTRY

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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM

OPMS MINI-REVIEW

INDIVIDUAL ESSAY

by

Lieutenant Colonel John F. Connolly
Infantry

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US Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013
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ABSTRACT

AUTHOR(S): J. F. Connolly, LTC, IN

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The Officer Personnel Management System (OPMS) has been with us for about ten years. From the beginning, OPMS has been more a patchwork quilt than a single piece of cloth. It was designed only to fix those aspects of the then current system (circa 1970) that were perceived to be broken. With a decade of living with the system it seems appropriate to pause and examine its worth. Specifically, does OPMS do what it was designed to and will it meet the needs of the Army of the future? This is the seminal question confronting the Department of Army, OPMS Study Group. My purpose is to submit ideas in the essay format to the Study Group for their consideration. I plan to explore within the historical context the way we manage, promote and select for command officers of the Regular Army. My overall goal is to see the present system fine-tuned to better serve our Army and our nation.

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OPMS REVIEW

In March 1974, then Chief of Staff, General Creighton W. Abrams, officially acknowledged the Officer Personnel Management System (OPMS) as the new method of developing the Army's officer corps.¹ It seems appropriate that ten years after the fact, that we pause to examine the talley sheet on OPMS. Specifically, does OPMS do what it was designed to and will it meet the needs of the Army of the future? This is the seminal question confronting the Department of Army, OPMS Study Group. My aim is, of necessity, narrower in scope than that of the Study Group. I plan to explore particular aspects of the current system of managing Army officers. First, I will identify two preliminary considerations which set the scene for any review of OPMS. Later, I intend to discuss, within the historical context, the way we branch manage, promote, and select for command. My overall goal is to see the present system fine tuned to better serve the Army and our Nation.

CONSIDERATIONS

OPMS is more a framework than a coherent system. OPMS began as a partial remedy to the critical findings of the 1970 Army War College Professionalism Study and the 1972 Emerson Leadership Board² which was taken as a whole, identified flaws and weaknesses in the moral fiber of the officer corps. From the beginning in 1974, OPMS was designed to fix only those aspects of the then current system which were perceived to be broken. It was meant to be an evolutionary patch work quilt rather than a revolutionary single piece of cloth.³ Under the heading "OPMS,"

changes were made in the way we promote, select for command, track and distribute officers. OPMS did not address pay, accessions, schooling, separation, retirement, DOPMA, or a host of other issues which impact on army officers. These issues were patched into the system as directed by appropriate authority. Most of these issues would be with us, whether we adopted OPMS or not.

OPMS means different things to different ranks. Some of our most senior leaders approach OPMS as a "devil term," like communism. They tend to use OPMS as a whipping boy for the ills of the officer corps as they perceive them. These influential gentlemen reached their positions under an essentially different system. A goodly number of Brigadiers and Major Generals may be well versed in command selection at brigade level and in the promotion system, but only a few understand specialization, proponency and distribution. These aspects of OPMS had no real impact on their career development. The lower field grade ranks have wider experience with OPMS. In general, their perceptions of OPMS reflect their sense of personal success or failure under the system. Company grade officers know no other system, but their expectations are influenced "pro or con" by the counsel of their field grade superiors.

These considerations, if valid, should caution those who seek consensus on constructive change, not to expect much. Right reason will not necessarily prevail given the range of knowledge, myth, and opinion, about the current version of OPMS that exists in today's officer corps. The ethical roots of the original system are smothered in the bureaucratic verbiage of policy statements and managerial statistics. In short, nothing will change unless the officer corps, led by the Chief of Staff, understands its ethical intent, believes in it and gives it their full support.

BRANCH SYSTEM

Between World War I and II, the Branch Chiefs ran their respective branches like imperial potentates. The National Defense Act of 1920 gave the Chiefs of Infantry, Cavalry, Coast Artillery and Field Artillery, broad responsibility for tactical doctrine and personnel management of their arms. The "gang of four" were TRADOC and MILPERCEN in a single office. General Bruce Palmer, commenting on the power of the Chiefs during the 1930s, said, "Chiefs, . . . were the Mama, Papa, Mecca, . . . your whole future depended on those Chiefs. They ran everything!"⁴

Various "ad hoc" staff reorganizations during World War II swept aside the Chief's training functions. In the post war period, the Officer Personnel Act of 1947, authorized the Branch Chiefs to function in the personnel arena under a semi-centrally controlled distribution system. The same Act separated the Office of Personnel Operations (OPO) from Headquarters, Department of Army, G1, and established MILPERCEN. Ace Collins played a major role in this process.

LTG Arthur (ACE) Collins⁵ was assigned for duty with the G1 in the basement of the Pentagon at the end of World War II. Shortly after reporting in, he was given three boxes of officer's files to review in detail. The G1 wanted to know why these officers who had been judged the best before the war, had failed to reach high responsibility during the war.

According to General Collins, there were about 75 files on officers who were senior captains or majors at the outbreak of World War II. The files separated into three categories, aides, adjutants and specialists. Their efficiency reports were uniformly splendid with highly valued

comments on potential for promotion. But in fact, less than half of the group received a single promotion during the war.

The aides remained with their generals who were often too old for combat service. The few aides who broke loose were not successful in adjusting to battalion or regimental duties. The majority spent the war on high level staffs in civil affairs or protocol positions.

The adjutants were the installation commanders in the pre-war years. Post commanders came and went, but the adjutants stayed on. Their repetitive housekeeping duties precluded tactical expertise. They were older on average and not physically fit for the rigors of combat. Those who rotated overseas were needed to run the rear area establishments.

The specialists referred to by General Collins should not be confused with today's specialists. In the pre-war army these men were the competitors, athletes, swordsmen, marksmen and equestrians. As a group they fared better than either aides or adjutants in terms of promotion. When compared to their line officer contemporaries, their skills acquired before the war were not easily transferred to combat leadership.

In summary, General Collins said:

We (the army) had between the wars lost sight of the preparation for war aspect of officer development and evaluation. After the war we tried to correct this deficiency by selecting the best available combat leaders as Branch Chiefs to guide their respective branches. TM 20-605 Career Management for Army Officers was published and OPO was organized separate from the Army Staff.⁶

After World War II, Branch Chiefs emerged as the honest brokers in the system of managing officers. Times were tough! The Army was shrinking in size and resources. Branch Chiefs were hard pressed to balance career development against vanishing requirements. The surge

for the Korean War and the need for a larger standing Army during the "Cold War" years ended the bare bones years. Army involvement in various hotspots leading to Vietnam seemed to justify the preparation for war theme in developing officers. During peacetime, branches were constantly fighting an impersonal distribution system which generated requirements without regard for career development considerations. Chiefs viewed the officer corps from the narrow perspective of their branch. Vietnam changed the system.

The officer corps was rapidly increased for the Korean War by recalling officers who served during and after World War II. Vietnam expansion did not involve a mandatory call up. Instead, the standing Army was increased through accessions. The one-year tour policy forged a new relationship between distribution division and the branches. Vietnam was number one priority for all of OPO. Distribution division automated their information system to meet the surge in requirements. Branches complied with every requirement for Vietnam. Chiefs measured success by how well they met their Vietnam requirements. In the process, the special relationship between the officer in the field army and his branch suffered. The distinction between developing and using officers was blurred.

OPMS came into existence shortly after our ground forces were withdrawn from Vietnam. According to numerous surveys on officer attitudes MILPERCEN (read branches) had reached a new low in credibility. Across the board officers did not trust their branch. They viewed their branch as the procurement arm of the "Green Machine." When the branch system was abolished in the mid seventies, with few exceptions, the officer corps remained silent.

Under OPMS, the traditional branch organization was consolidated into Combat Arms, Combat Support and Combat Service Support Divisions. Within each division, assignment officers were organized by rank structure, i.e., Majors Branch, Combat Arms Division. Under this structure an Armor officer might counsel and assign an Artillery or Infantry officer.⁸

The new structure accomplished two organizational goals. It disciplined the system to continue to meet requirements by eliminating the narrow perspective of branch. Secondly, it established parity for all specialties, even those new specialties which were not affiliated with a traditional branch. By centralizing power at the Division Chief level, MILPERCEN could shape the officer corps according to skills rather than according to branch. Assignment officers were charged with making the dual track system work within the context of rank rather than branch. Serious thought was given to eliminating all reference to branch by designating all officers by double digit specialty codes. Fortunately cooler heads prevailed and the idea was dropped.

The new MILPERCEN structure lasted about five years, 1975-1980. Periodic surveys consistently reflected new lows in credibility for MILPERCEN. Repeated classes in counselling techniques for assignment officers could not overcome the sense of mistrust prevalent in the officer corps. Officers want to be counselled and assigned by someone who shares the burdens and benefits of their branch. They want a home plate where their individual efforts and dedication to service are respected. The leadership of MILPERCEN, in recognition of these facts, reintroduced the branch system in late 1980.⁹

FIXING THE BRANCH SYSTEM

At present we have an opportunity to shape the way we manage officers by fixing the branch system. We should institutionalize the primacy of preparation for war in the development of officers. Our goal should be to foster trust in the relationship between an officer and his/her branch. Trust that engenders commitment of a person and family to the army way of life. Strengthening the branch system while avoiding the abuses of the past can be accomplished without amending public law or DOD policy.

Our starting point should focus on army requirements. We must scrutinize both the TDA and TOE armies and question every existing requirement by grade and specialty. This is the most difficult task facing the DA Study Group. To my knowledge no one familiar with our current documentation system believes it to be an accurate register of valid requirements. We should be especially wary of those positions which require skills that are nontransferrable to combat. In addition, contract civilian and grade substitution to warrant officer should be considered as part of the proposal. In short, we need to attack the demand side before fixing the supply side. Assuming that requirements are susceptible to reason, we can turn our attention to developing the corps.

All officers should be accessed, schooled and assigned through company command or its equivalent, by their proponent. For example, an infantry officer would be directed and guided by officers working for the CG of Fort Benning. A junior officer assignment and accessions cell would be provided from MILPERCEN spaces to Fort Benning. All new officers

would be in probationary status until selected for advanced course attendance regardless of their service obligation or source of commission. Retention on active service and selection for promotion to Captain would be by branch under the proponent. This system promotes face to face contact between the officer and his branch representatives. The foundations of a relationship built on openness and trust are better served in a schoolhouse environment. In the age of telecommunications, we can surely establish a linkage between the various proponents and MILPERCEN.

Officer management passes to the branch at MILPERCEN after company command or its equivalent. The MILPERCEN branch chief is the representative of the proponent and the DCSPER. He answers on matters of professional development of officers to the proponent. On the flip side, army requirements, he answers to the CG of MILPERCEN. To assist the branch chief in serving two masters, whose interests may differ significantly, we should adjust the current system of specialization.

When the file is passed from the proponent to MILPERCEN it should include a recommendation for further leadership development or further staff development. This recommendation assumes that under achievers have been eliminated during the probationary period, selection to captain, or through failure in command or its equivalent. Leader development would include assignments to USMA, ROTC, Reserve Components and Recruiting. Staff development would include civilian and or military education in a specialty related to his or her basic branch. Each branch would have a cluster of five to eight specialties which directly apply to the war fighting capability of that branch. The focus is still on professional development through learning, teaching, recruiting and application of skills acquired thus far in one's career. Advanced

degrees should be absolutely curtailed to those positions where such degrees are warranted. The emphasis on professional development shifts at selection to major.

The major's selection board's function is key to the leader/staff tracking. Officers selected for promotion would be according to three groupings, leaders, staff and general staff. Leaders would be selected and assigned an alternate specialty in their branch cluster. Staff would be selected and assigned an additional specialty or a new branch designation. General Staff would be selected and assigned additional specialties not related to a branch cluster. Acceptance of promotion by an officer would constitute acceptance of the specialty designations. Obviously, the present board system would require increases to accomplish these additional duties. This system also is contingent on accurate identification of valid requirements by skill and grade.

My point is that significant shifts in officer specialization should be linked to a positive event like promotion. The present system is keyed to not so positive events and needs to be changed. The grade of major is the transition period between professional development and utilization. Selection to Lieutenant Colonel marks the end of the development process. At selection to LTC, the same process is repeated by the selection board. Both boards would also eliminate substandard performers according to present public law and regulations.

I have purposely avoided any attempt at identifying the specialty cluster for each branch. I would suggest that war fighting be the key in forming the cluster. Combat arms officers designated leaders should not hold specialties which do not exist at Corps or below. There are other provisos which proponents and their branch representatives may apply in formulating the cluster. My aim would be to improve

our capacity to meet mobilization targets while simultaneously manning a peacetime structure. And as importantly, to accomplish the shaping of the officer corps within the context of a branch system which makes sense to the members.

The system of specialization contracts that I have briefly described may be accommodated to some degree by volunteers. Each branch should require their officers to submit a letter to the selection board outlining their interests and aptitudes. Ultimately the board, based on skill requirements presented by DCSPER, would make the final decision. This system can be applied today without cost or changes in public law.

Instituting a general staff branch is deemed necessary simply to correct the existing condition. We have significant numbers of field grade officers who wear a branch insignia but are not members of a branch except in name only. These lost souls have no homebase under the current system. In the long run, the general staff branch could be developed along the German model. We should approach the German experience slowly to avoid creating an arrogant monster out of touch with the field Army.

In summary the branch systems is our best hope for rekindling trust and confidence in the officer corps. All officers need a home base where their efforts are respected and rewarded. Preparation for war should be the guiding principle in branch management.

PROMOTION SYSTEM

Historically the promotion system for officers is a mixed bag of laws and regulations. It serves no useful purpose to review the system over the past fifty years. Every aspect of the system has changed at

least three or four times. Instead, we will focus on what we are doing now and suggested improvements.

Officer promotions have their basis in Title 10, USC. Department of Defense regulations with congressional approval (DOPMA) establishes by law limitations by grade on certain officer ranks. The "how many" of the promotion system is beyond the scope of my inquiry. OPMS in its original form dealt only with the "who" and the way we make the system work.

The selection board system is designed to select the best qualified officers who have demonstrated potential for service at the next higher grade. Board members are selected from the total army with major commands and minority groupings represented. The Letter of Instruction (LOI) presented to each board contains the guidance from the army's leadership. This guidance is further elaborated by various briefings by the DCSPER or his representative. I would suggest that every officer read the LOI appropriate for his/her grade as part of their professional education.

MILPERCEN simply provides a place for the board to convene. Branches provide only a photo, officer's record brief and appropriate fiches, both performance and administrative, to the DA Secretariat who assist the board members. All contact between board members and branch personnel is prohibited by regulation unless the board member requests through the recorder information concerning an officer. Typically, this information concerns height and weight or some other ORB data which is required by members. Order of merit lists, screening by branch, notes to board members are all relics of the past, and rightly so. There are, however, some aspects of the current system which are cause for concern.

Board members in spite of all the guidance received, tend to vote in their own image, I for one see this as a positive aspect as long as we select good role models to board membership and the membership rotates from board to board in terms of constituencies represented. We should avoid permanent membership by narrow constituencies. For example, USMA has a member on every O4, O5, and C&GSC selection board. In my view, USMA should be represented on a fair share basis not on a permanent member basis. "Spread the wealth" should be the guideline in board membership selection across the total army.

We (the officer corps) tend to define successful career in terms of rank achieved. While some officers dream of stars, most officers perceive attaining their colonelcy as a benchmark of a successful career. Under DOPMA grade limitations a successful career in terms of rank is Lieutenant Colonel. We need to do a better job of explaining this fact to the officer corps. With longer terms of service available to Majors and Lieutenant Colonels, promotion opportunity is bound to lessen over time. As promotions become scarce, we must make every effort to preserve the notion of best qualified in our selection criteria.

OPMS represents a subtle attack on the best qualified criteria by establishing floors for each specialty as a minimum goal for board members. Flooring has good and bad aspects inherent to it. The model that produces the floor includes a "health of the specialty" aspect. For example, when requirements for certain specialties at a particular grade are less than one, an artificial factoring overrides, to produce a minimum floor of say, two or three. This is done to give hope and promotion potential to officers holding that specialty. In my view, this aspect of flooring ought to be eliminated. As mentioned earlier, we need to scrub our documentation to identify clearly our needs by

grade and specialty. Selection for promotion should carry with it the acceptance of designation in a particular specialty area to meet a valid army requirement. Smaller promotion possibilities should be designed to favor skills directly applicable to combat. Nonsense statistics about continuation patterns for non commander, combat arms officers, included in the last 06 LOI are just that, nonsense. The tendency to tinker with the best qualified notion in the name of making OPMS work must be avoided. Affirmative action falls in the same category.

Is there an established end in sight to affirmative action? Ethnic minorities and women should continue as board members because they represent the total army. The notion, either real or imagined, that each selection board's results will be evaluated in terms of minority selection does a disservice to the minority officers who earn promotion through outstanding duty performance and demonstrated potential. We need to clear the air on the issue of affirmative action in regard to promotion. I fully realize the sensitivity surrounding the affirmative action issue. I am asking only that our leadership explain where we are and where we are going in meeting our goals. I'm confident that most minority officers and female officers would welcome the days when best qualified reigned supreme.

In summary, the present promotion system needs minor adjustments. We need to avoid tinkering with the best qualified notion to produce a statistical victory for OPMS. Board membership should continue to reflect the total army with permanent membership limited to major commands. Special interests should be denied permanent membership. Distractors to the best qualified selection criteria should be brought out in the open for scrutiny by the rank and file.

COMMAND SELECTION

Centralized command selection began in FY 74 as a cornerstone aspect of OPMS. The previous system allowed commanders in cohort with the branches to obtain their favorite sons for command within their units. Centralized selection was designed to bring an element of fairness into the system and to deny to branches their ability to place officers in units where command opportunities were present. As in promotion, the best qualified for command criteria is applied to the selection process. Command opportunity is limited to number of commands by type available in a given fiscal year. For many officers, failure in selection for command is a very significant event. This fact was recognized as early as 1977 by the Chief of Staff in his annual review of OPMS.⁷ My suggested improvements take heed of the fact that many fine officers will not have the opportunity to command.

As mentioned earlier, the selection for command starts with the identification of leaders versus staffers early in one's career. Even under this system we will have more leaders than we have commands available. Preparation for war and rapid mobilization inherent in the preparation, requires an inventory in excess of requirements. Our aim should be to broaden command opportunities while upholding the cohesion aspects of the present system.

We can start by only considering officers who are serving at the appropriate rank for command. All promotables would not be considered. This system recognizes an officer corps whose health and physical fitness has improved significantly in the past decade. It also difuses the secondary zone promotion aspect of command selection. Too many officers

conclude that a secondary zone selection is a prerequisite to command selection. Most importantly, this system keeps alive the possibility of command selection for officers designated as leaders for a longer period of highly productive service.

We should look next at designating additional commands. We must look closely at the Ranger Department (06) and its three camps (05), Fort Sherman JOTC (05), Ft Irwin, Operations Group (06) with the two battalions as a brigade minus, Community Commands overseas when configured as headquarters commands. There are many more which imaginative minds might uncover without prostituting the system. Our aim should be to lengthen the time in the selection window and broaden the opportunity for command where feasible.

CONCLUSION

OPMS is a lot like common sense. Every officer thinks they know all about it. In fact, much of what we attribute to the system was patched into the system after the fact. Changing the way we manage officers is never an easy business. Recognition of this fact suggests small steps rather than energetic leaps.

Our goal should be to identify officers in broad categories early in their career. Identification should be linked to promotion or some other positive event. Branches must guide officers and serve as a homebase. Preparation for war should dominate our management system. Promotion and command selection should be fine tuned to ensure fairness and opportunity for those who have earned it.

When General Abrams approved OPMS as a blueprint for officer development he added a caution that individual effort and dedication to

Service should remain the criteria for advancement. All of us who propose changes to the present system would do well to remember this warning.

ENDNOTES

1. US Department of the Army, Pamphlet 600-3, March 1974, preface.
2. DAPE-MPC, Fact Sheet, subject: The Officer Personnel Management System (OPMS); LTC Buckley, 18 February 1971, pp. 1-3.
3. DAPE-MPO, Memo for Record of OPMS Discussion with CSA, 2 March 1973, p. 1.
4. R. F. Weigley, History of the United States Army, p. 197.
5. J. F. Connolly, Interview with LTC (Ret) Arthur Collins, 11 April 1983.
6. Ibid.
7. HQ USA MILPERCEN, DAPE-ZA, Memo for the DCSPER Discussion with CSA, 2 March 1973, p. 1.
8. HQ USA MILPERCEN, MANNING CHART, 1 June 1976.