



Lesson 1: What is an Officer?

Reference: *The Officer's Guide*, 1944 edition; *The Army Regulations*.

Study assignment: Lesson text, attached.

What is an Officer?

We use the title officer loosely in the living history community to refer to anyone who wears the insignia of a soldier with the rank of second lieutenant or above. In fact, there is a lot more to it in the real Army, and we cannot adequately interpret the army officer to the public, much less simulate the duties, responsibilities, and traditions of officership without further study.

An officer is officially defined in this way: "A person lawfully invested with military rank and authority by virtue of a commission issued him by or in the name of the sovereign or chief magistrate of a country."

We can identify four kinds of officers: *commissioned officers*, *noncommissioned officers*, *flight officers*, and *warrant officers*. These are four different categories, and we should first understand the differences.

A *commissioned officer* is one placed in a position of direct leadership over others by the authority of the head of state of a sovereign nation. Just as the Monarch serves as head of state in the United Kingdom, and issues commissions deriving from the office of King or Queen, the President is head of state of the United States, and issues commissions accordingly.

To clarify, here is the wording of a commission in the United States armed forces:

The President of the United States of America

To all who shall see these presents, greeting:

Know Ye that, reposing special trust and confidence in the patriotism, valor, fidelity and abilities of, I do appoint ["him" or "her"] a ["Second Lieutenant"] in the [Army] to rank as such from the day of This Officer will therefore carefully and diligently discharge the duties of the office to which appointed by doing and performing all manner of things thereunto belonging.

And I do strictly charge and require those Officers and other personnel of lesser rank to render such obedience as is due an officer of this grade and position. And this Officer is to observe and follow such orders and directives, from time to time, as may be given by me, or the future President of the United States of America, or other Superior Officers acting in accordance with the laws of the United States of America.

This commission is to continue in force during the pleasure of the President of the United States of America for the time being, under the provisions of those Public Laws relating to Officers of the

Armed Forces of the United States of America and the component thereof in which this appointment is made.

Done at the City of Washington, this day of in the year of our Lord and of the Independence of the United States of America the

By the President:

Now, it's not likely the President has the faintest idea who the lucky recipient of this document is, or why he deserves this special trust and confidence; but he trusts the services to take the best qualified, and it's now up to you to make him right. That should make any thinking new second lieutenant giggly and weak in the knees.

(For promotion to the highest grades, the President nominates and the Senate will advise and consent. But you're not at that level yet.)

Now it's the newly commissioned officer's turn. This is the oath he swears, and the Army and the President will hold him to it:

"I, [. . .], having been appointed a Second Lieutenant, Infantry, in the Army of the United States, do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any reservation or purpose of evasion; that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office upon which I am about to enter: SO HELP ME GOD."

This is a strictly worded statement, and if you don't mean it there may be troubles ahead.

A *noncommissioned officer* is a leader or key member of the Army of a lower rank than a commissioned officer. Their level of authority and responsibility does not derive from a formal Presidential commission or nomination, but from successive promotions for merit in the enlisted grades. The authority of an NCO derives from the authority of the commissioned officer in command.

A *warrant officer* is an intermediate step between commissioned and noncommissioned officer, but the actual case is more complicated. A warrant officer is a specialist in some technical field whose value to the Army is in his expertise; he remains in the warrant field and advances to levels of higher responsibility, but not to greater authority. For example, the regimental mess officer was a warrant officer; he served only in that specialty (mess operations). Many warrant officers served (and still serve) in technical specialties such as maintenance, information technologies, and other fields where narrow knowledge in critical skills is needed.

Warrant officers are considered as commissioned officers in terms of military courtesy; a warrant officer is addressed as "Mister" or, in the case of a chief warrant officer, as "chief."

A *flight officer* program was established in WW II to provide higher basic pay for pilots and other essential flight crewmen who were brought into service for specific technical performance rather than to advance through the commissioned ranks. A flight officer was similar in most ways to a warrant officer in other specialties; the designation was discontinued in 1946, but the requirement remained; eventually, flight officers were brought in service as warrant officers, and a great proportion of Army pilots today are in the warrant grades.

Expectations of commissioned officers: Commissioned officers enter the service with the expectation of rising in rank and responsibility based upon performance. Warrant officers, by contrast, will generally rise in grade based upon their performance of specific tasks.

Backgrounds of commissioned officers: The vast majority of commissioned officers begin their service holding a college degree—either through the United States Military Academy, the essential military colleges, or the ROTC programs. The officer corps is drawn from all parts of the United States in “representative numbers.”¹

Note that members of the Army Medical Corps (who are qualified MD’s) enter the officer corps at the rank and grade of captain; members of the Army Nurse Corps enter at the grade of second lieutenant, as do officers of the Women’s Army Corps.

For purposes of military courtesy, all commissioned, warrant, and flight officers are considered “officers.”

The common bond of officers is enshrined in the wording of the oath.

Appointments from civilian life: During the war, a very small proportion of commissioned officers entered the Army directly from civilian life, in all cases because of a special talent or skill essential to the war effort and judged worthy of a rather honorary commission. This was also done for special technical and administrative specialties for which it was not practical to train soldiers under mobilization priorities and schedules.

What is given may be taken away: By statute, a new officer commissioned directly from civilian life or from Officer Candidate School may find his commission forfeit for cause during the first six months of service; after that a commission may be forfeit by verdict of a general court-martial. (See Lesson 4 for a discussion of officer “crash and burn” behaviors.)

Battlefield promotions and OCS: The urgent requirement for officers during mobilization requires extraordinary measures. West Point at the time had only about 1800 cadets in the corps (and classes were regularly graduating early to fill urgent needs of the service), and the ROTC output shrank as college students were drafted; large OCS output helped stabilize the supply, and direct (battlefield) commissions based on combat performance helped. OCS and battlefield commissions were well suited to wartime conditions; after the war, many successful non-degreed officers worked hard on their own time (and the GI Bill’s dime) to catch up.

Officer career path: Unlike warrant and flight officers, commissioned officers are on an “up or out” pathway. Failure to make selection for promotion on schedule could result in being forced out. During the war, however, this had no real influence—officers were always needed, and the war only lasted four years. After that, you were reduced to luck or Darwin’s Law.

Glenn Miller received such a commission, and his band was continuously employed for the morale of US soldiers overseas. James Stewart entered the hard way and flew bombers.



¹ I highlight this qualification because it bears comparison to current (2018) practice. Appointments to West Point are almost entirely by nomination from every Congressional district or by US Senators (with a few reserved for Presidential appointment to sons and daughters of Medal of Honor winners). This assures geographical distribution. With the end of the draft and reestablishment in the 1970’s of a volunteer Army, the geographical and economic distribution of the enlisted ranks tends to vary greatly, with a few regions overrepresented.

Relations between officers

This is a matter of historical interest to reenactors, since reenactors all have the same rank—“reenactor”—and those holding nominal officer rank in the hobby almost invariably began as privates. The interpretation of what a nominal officer’s rank (that is, the kind of symbol he pins on) means in the hobby varies between “costume jewelry” and “increased responsibility.” However, our task is to represent the Army of WW II, not our own social habits.

In this together: In peacetime, officers form a unique subset of the Army, individuals united by common backgrounds, motivations, and expectations. During the sixteen years I spent as a professor at West Point, my colleagues were all active duty officers, at least captains, a smaller number as high as colonel. Almost all of us were combat veterans (at first—years of relative peace thinned out that crowd a bit). Everybody had at least a master’s degree; many of us had doctorates. We spoke the same language, had the same ambitions, by and large. Our kids were out of control and our wives were often rebellious (in part because they did not share the same level of common experience with other wives as the husbands did with each other). In wartime, officers all shared what one prominent Civil War veteran called “the uncommunicable experience of war.”

They stood by each other while competing strenuously, with no hard feelings (usually). They knew each other well. West Pointers always had classmates around, but the ROTC component from The Citadel, Norwich, VMI and the huge input from such land grant universities as Texas A&M and Virginia Polytechnic Institute (now Virginia Tech) or the Ivy League and the wartime victory programs became indistinguishable when everyone was exhausted, overworked, under fire, and covered with dirt.

“Promotion’s very slow”: Most officers and their families lived on the officer’s pay and allowances. As we will see in Lesson 4, meeting the social requirements of a commissioned officer was sometimes tricky. Some officers were lucky (or calculating) enough to marry money; George Washington set the example there.

Many officers attained rank rapidly in 1917-18, only to have it evaporate on demobilization. This is a common problem in the Army as wars come and go. An old West Point song dating probably from the 1830’s has this verse:

*In the army there’s sobriety,
Promotion’s very slow,
So we’ll sing our reminiscences
Of Benny Havens, oh!²*

The military is too full of blind chances
to be worthy of a first rank among
callings.

—W. T. Sherman, to
U. S., Grant, 1858

² Benny Havens was the proprietor of a tavern that served ardent spirits below the village of Buttermilk Falls, New York (now Highland Falls), convenient to West Point; the establishment bore his name. It was officially off limits to cadets, who were banned from drinking in any case; this prohibition was honored more in the breach than the observance, and cadets were forever slipping out of barracks after tattoo to enjoy a sip. Benny Havens has been gone for well over a century, and its original location was forgotten until Brigadier General Roy Flynt, Dean of the Academic Board and former Professor and Head of West Point’s Department of History, decided to do some research and locate the landmark. He scoured memoirs and old maps and ordnance surveys, county plat books, and rumors. He finally settled on the likeliest location, at the end of an old one-lane road down the slope from Highland Falls and nearly to the Hudson River. On returning, he noticed the old, faded road sign, which indicated “Havens Road.”

In the years between the Civil War and World War I it was not unusual for officers to spend a full Army career living in deplorable conditions at far flung Army posts, dealing with hostile Apache or Comanche for years at a time on campaign, drinking themselves insensible and going in debt to the post sutler (Congress was often late with the military appropriation), only to retire at the rank of captain. John J. Pershing spent over twenty years as a lieutenant with only a sort brevet in Cuba. After that, of course, he moved out smartly, but the Army was not a career for the ambitious.

Once an Eagle, Anton Myrer's great novel of Army life and ethics, includes in its narrative a long and harrowing description of the promotion and funding famine between the wars. Temporary ranks attained by guts and grit in Flanders were voided in 1919 when officers reverted to their permanent ranks. Pay was cut again and again in the Depression, and many promising officers finally threw in the towel and found other careers—since high-paying jobs were hard to find, the ones to leave were often those with particular promise.

But many stayed in, and these men formed the nucleus of senior officers who guided the Army to victory—not just a crowd of mediocrities who could find nothing else to do, but men of real intelligence, fortitude, character, and vision like George C. Marshall, Omar Bradley, George Patton, and Mark Clark. The list is too long to replicate here. Why did such men stay in?

Once I had a debate with the head of my department at West Point. There was a discussion going on in the Army (it was one of those periods when we all had too much time on our hands) about whether the officer corps could be best described as a profession (like medicine) or an

“It makes no difference what men think of war, said the judge. War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner.”

—Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*

occupation (like retail sales). He argued for “occupation.” I’ve never been certain if he took that position just for the sake of argument, or just because he was a dick. I would like to believe it was the former. I argued that being an officer was neither a profession nor an occupation, but a *calling* (like the ministry). My reason for this position was simple: who in his right mind

would work for at best moderate pay, move every 2-3 years, drag a family from Fort Hood, Texas to Fort Stewart, Georgia, bear year-long separations to patrol the Fulda or the Imjin (this was during the cold war, and lifers spent a lot of time in Germany and Korea), run miles every week, take responsibility for millions of dollars in accountable gear and lives of more and more soldiers if he didn’t think there was a higher purpose?

The occasional officer welcomes war—for advancement, for adventure, for medals, for an adrenalin rush. But not many, and they tend to flame out early. But all accept that somebody has to do it, maybe die in the doing. If that isn’t a calling, I don’t know what is.

Relations between officers and noncommissioned officers

Major General David C. Shanks offered this opinion about officers and their relations with the enlisted soldier:

Even with sound sense as a foundation there is the greatest difference among officers in respect to their ability to manage men. There are some officers who will never make good with troops, no

matter how hard they must try. They lack a certain indefinable, intangible something that spells the difference between success and failure. Just as there are men who may study music a lifetime and never learn music, so there are officers who may study hard and never learn the mastery of the infinitely more more difficult chords that control human nature. (*The Officer's Guide*, 1944, p. 504)

This may seem a question remote from reenactor world, but it is helpful to understand the challenge that faces officers in defining their roles in a larger Army.

First, American practice in handling soldiers has always differed sharply from that in traditional European armies, and even more so with philosophies outside Western culture. It is not as simple as a tolerance for laxity, since that is not true in any sense. Part of the difference lies in history. The United States has been populated by people who came here because they had no love for the place they came from. There are philosophical differences in the definition of authority and the individual's response to it that are unique.

In essence, the Prussian system reduced soldiers to the status of dumb parts in a machine, controlled by inflexible discipline that presumed the soldier is, in his natural state, a lazy, simpleminded fool who must be driven by constant drill in order to perform.

The American soldier, by contrast, has been treated as a man with fundamental capabilities who must be trained to focus his energy and attention to acquiring the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of a soldier. Even von Steuben, Washington's Prussian training czar at Valley Forge, reluctantly recognized this basic difference in attitudes.

Major General John Schofield, while Superintendent at West Point in 1879, maintained these human-centered principles and enforced them in his cadets. Some key points:

"The discipline which makes the soldiers of a free country reliable in battle is not to be gained by harsh or tyrannical treatment.

"On the contrary, such treatment is far more likely to destroy than to make an army.

"It is possible to impart instruction and give commands in such a manner and in such a tone of voice as to inspire in the soldier no feeling but an intense desire to obey.

"While the opposite manner and tone of voice cannot fail to excite strong resentment and a desire to disobey.

"The one mode or the other of dealing with subordinates springs from a corresponding spirit in the breast of the commander.

"He who feels the respect which is due to others cannot fail to inspire in them regard for himself.

"While he who feels and hence manifests disrespect toward others, especially his inferiors, cannot fail to inspire hatred against himself."

It is interesting to note that the Germans were impressed by American leadership practice in WW I, and adapted their system to emphasize individual initiative and dispersion of authority.

The simple truth: Long years ago, I stressed in my dealings with cadets at West Point a basic principle of human behavior: "we are what we are reinforced for." *Reinforcement* is a behavioral term similar to *reward*, in essence, and result that causes a behavior to be repeated. We are born with some individual traits, but most are acquired over years of experience. Over time, we tend to do things in a certain way. If what we do works, we tend to keep keep doing it.

Translating this into reenactorspeak, we have four things the reenacted soldiers can hope to expect from their reenactor officers:

—**Put them first.** You won't need to put on a big show; just do it and they will notice.

—**Mentor them** (which is why it's important for the officer to first acquire knowledge and skills)

—**Reinforce the good stuff, discourage the bad stuff.** Which means you have to know the difference, which takes a little thought.

—Most important, **always set the example in all things.**

The noncommissioned officer: The distinction between the commissioned and the noncommissioned officer is much more important in the Army than in a hobby. There is no real distinction between a reenactor officer and a reenactor NCO other than costume.

The most important principle, even in our simulated Army, is respect. Micromanaging, emphasizing differences that do not exist, or setting a bad example will always result in failure to perform—and it will also make it hard for us to have a good time.



LESSON SUMMARY

1. In the Army, a commissioned officer is one placed in a position of leadership by the authority of a head of state.
2. Types of officers include warrant officers, flight officers, and noncommissioned officers.
3. Commissioned officers enter their service with the expectation of rising rank and responsibility based upon demonstrated performance.
4. A vast majority of commissioned officers enter service with a college degree, whether from West Point or ROTC or victory programs. Other sources are direct commission or officer candidate schools.
5. The officer corps is a professional brotherhood with a firmly embraced code of conduct.
6. The officer's relationship to enlisted soldiers must be one of respect, humane interaction, and mutual goals.
7. The American Soldier is not a machine or a mindless tool; he is to be treated as part of a mutually supporting system.
8. In the reenacting hobby as well as in the Army, the single most important role played by the officers is to set the example in judgment, courage, skill, and personal behavior for all soldiers to follow.

Take the self-assessment quiz for Lesson 1.

LESSON 2 will introduce you to the organization of the United States Army in World War II.