

Qualified, but unprepared: Training for War at the Staff College in the 1930s

EDWARD SMALLEY

University of Kent

Email: edgs2@kentforlife.net

ABSTRACT

This article aims to show the Staff College at Camberley was an elite establishment for officer training in name only; it failed to select the best candidates for entry and it failed to teach students how to undertake either routine duties or operations relevant to continental conflict. The syllabus lacked clarity of purpose whilst the learning environment was largely devoid of pressure. This compounded the institution's small output which prevented the army developing a pool of elite officers which could monopolise command within future expeditionary forces. Consequently, in 1939, both Camberley and its individual graduates were unprepared for war.

The passed Staff College qualification (PSC) was considered the pinnacle of an Army officer's education. Recipients were expected to gain sufficient skills to perform all future command and staff duties to an unparalleled level of excellence. This article explores how these same elite officers were individually ill-equipped for future first-class conflict and, collectively, were even unable to dominate command positions within the small British Expeditionary Force sent to France in 1939-40.

The Camberley Staff College was established in 1858 to address the obvious deficiencies in British Army staff work witnessed in the recent Crimean War. The institution was deliberately called the Staff College to emphasise its primary function of providing a formal staff education. The potential benefits of having qualified staff officers providing capable administration for the needs of a modern army were notably revealed by the success of the Prussian General Staff in the 1870s. Proliferation of staff colleges grew in tandem with recognition of their importance, for example in 1907 the Indian Army established a Staff College in Quetta when its needs could not be met by the six officers who annually attended Camberley. A beneficial by-product of these institutions was the resultant educated, professional officers who would be capable of senior command; at Camberley, this received increasing attention until, eventually, this dual role became embedded in the syllabus. However, the balance between the two roles remained unreconciled, shifted with each new Commandant and caused perpetual uncertainty. Sir George Barrow, who

taught at both Camberley and Quetta during the early 20th Century, strikingly concluded he did not understand 'the real purpose of a Staff College'.¹ Similarly, students on the 1909-10 course found consistent teaching elusive when the strategically-minded Camberley Commandant Henry Wilson was succeeded by his antithesis, the practically minded Commandant William Robertson.² Whilst gradually evolving, the mandate of the Staff College remained broad, so that by the 1930s its objective was to train officers for war, for staff employment and, with further experience, for command.³

When examining the revered status of Staff College, it is worth noting that officers who attended as students or instructors (known as directing staff) were naturally very loyal when commenting on the institution's integrity and relevance. Directing staff such as Colonel B. Montgomery (Camberley 1926-29 and Quetta 1934-37) envisaged 'an opportunity for three years hard study', while students, for example Major G. Richards (Camberley 1934-35), felt 'fortunate' to have access to 'first class' instruction.⁴ In 1958, Chief of the Imperial General Staff Gerald Templer (an inter-war student) described Staff College as the opportunity of a lifetime to 'learn to think – logically, hard and if possible with originality'.⁵ With favourable views of Camberley prevalent amongst the establishment, it is unsurprising the official history of British Army training in World War Two portrayed the inter-war Staff College syllabus as the ideal method for producing the 'perfectly trained staff officer well versed in tactics and organisation'.⁶

An impartial, modern-day assessment of the Staff College syllabus is awkward because, as Brian Holden Reid has pointed out, Camberley failed 'to maintain any proper archive of papers' and graduates routinely discarded their notes at the end of the course.⁷ However, most historians have associated Staff College with training excellence; for example, Brian Bond has argued the appointment of Staff College graduates to 40 out of 45 senior command and staff positions in the 1914 BEF

¹ Lieutenant Colonel F.W. Young, *The Story of the Staff College 1858-1958* (Camberley: Gale & Polden Ltd, 1958), pp. 1, 6-7, 49; Brian Bond, *The Victorian Army and the Staff College 1854-1914* (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd, 1972), pp. 45, 76-77, 202-204.

² John Connell, *Wavell: Scholar and Soldier – To June 1941* (London: Collins, 1964), pp. 64-65; Keith Jeffery, *Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson: A Political Soldier* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 80-81.

³ David French, *Military Identities: The Regimental System, the British Army and the British People c. 1870-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 163; Young, *Staff College 1858-1958*, p. 4.

⁴ Bernard Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein*, (London: Collins, 1968), p. 40; Imperial War Museum [IWM], Major General G. Richards, 02/21/1, *Memoirs*, p. 28.

⁵ Young, *Staff College 1858-1958*, p. i.

⁶ The National Archives [TNA], WO 277/36, *The Official History of Training 1939-1945* (compiled by Lieutenant Colonel J.W. Gibb), p. 6.

⁷ Brian Holden Reid, *War Studies at the Staff College 1890-1930* (London: HMSO, 1992), p. viii.

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ensured the expeditionary force was better organised, trained and led than its 1854 and 1899 predecessors.⁸ David French observed that officers attending Staff College were the best educated and most ambitious within the army and, accordingly, their dominance of divisional commands increased from 49% in the Great War to 64% in 1930 to 79% in World War Two.⁹ Only J.P. Harris has argued inter-war Camberley graduates were indistinguishable from their fellow officers, except for having PSC next to their name on the Army List.¹⁰ This article will show Staff College was an elite institution in name only, by highlighting the dubious selection process for entry, the flawed training syllabus and the inadequate skill-set of graduates.

With 60 places at Camberley available each year, prospective Army candidates had to pass a highly competitive, broad-ranging, ten-day academic examination. Increasingly seen as a way of bypassing a promotion system based on seniority, in 1904 there were four candidates for each Staff College vacancy, but by 1928 the ratio was nine to one.¹¹ However, the credibility of Staff College as an elite institution is diminished by the number of retakes by successful applicants. Captain E. Thornhill failed the 1929 and 1930 exams before eventually passing in 1931, whilst Captain J. Faviell's previous failure meant he retained an 'inferiority complex' even after entering Staff College in 1935.¹² These officers were eventually adjudged to have reached the required standard, but their identification as elite officers must be questioned considering their selection came at the expense of officers who passed first time. Prior to application, Captain E. Brush boosted his academic capability with a specialist correspondence course and enhanced his service record with a voluntary, month-long staff attachment; despite passing the 1933 exam, Brush was not allocated a place and never reapplied.¹³ Given enough tuition and attempts, most competent officers could eventually achieve the relatively low pass-mark but, inevitably, perpetual applicants could demonstrate greater determination and longer service records than first-time applicants; this should not have made them the Army's elite.

The German General Staff, its Staff College and associated entrance exams were abolished after the Great War under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. However,

⁸ Bond, *The Victorian Army*, pp. 306, 328.

⁹ David French, 'Colonel Blimp and the British Army: British Divisional Commanders in the War against Germany 1939-1945', *English Historical Review*, vol. 111, no. 444, (November 1996), pp. 1187-1188; French, *Military Identities*, p. 169.

¹⁰ J.P. Harris, 'The British General Staff and the Coming of War 1933-1939' in David French and Brian Holden Reid (eds), *The British General Staff: Reform and Innovation c. 1890-1939* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), p. 176.

¹¹ French, *Military Identities*, pp. 160-161.

¹² IWM, Lieutenant Colonel E. Thornhill, 99/36/1, *Memoirs*, p. 53; IWM, Brigadier J. Faviell, 82/24/1, *Memoirs*, ch. 4, pp. 10-12.

¹³ IWM, Lieutenant Colonel E. Brush, 85/8/1, *Memoirs*, pp. 56-58.

such was the perceived importance of retaining intellectual competitiveness with materially superior foreign powers that in 1920 the German Army reintroduced military examination to preserve supplementary staff training for those considered elite officers. Chief of Staff Hans von Seeckt insisted on comprehensive examinations encompassing military sciences, languages, logistics and communications; this ensured prospective candidates displayed not just suitability of character but also a good general education, together with a most thorough professional training. The small number of vacancies available through the examination system made for a ruthless process of selection. In spring 1922, 164 officers sat for examination in 4th Military District, of whom only 20 excelled sufficiently to receive additional staff training; by 1925, only one officer had reached Germany's inter-war equivalent of the General Staff, based in Berlin.¹⁴ Although there are parallels with the British system, this article will show German officers endured sustained pressure before completing their advanced staff training and, therefore, were more worthy of their elite status.

In Britain, Camberley's elite status was also undermined by an alternative method of entry. The process of nomination annually reserved a proportion of places for successful applicants with exceptional service records. After the Great War, the nomination process was considered an ideal method for enabling distinguished field officers to supplement their battlefield experience with formal, theoretical training in staff matters, without forcing proven combat veterans of high rank to participate in a demeaning entrance exam. Reopened after 4½ years in 1919, the first two years of Camberley courses were exclusively for nominated officers in an effort to clear the Great War backlog; included amongst the soldiers were 20 Brigadier Generals, three Brevet Colonels, 77 Brevet Lieutenant Colonels, five holders of the Victoria Cross and 170 holders of the Distinguished Service Order.¹⁵ By 1921 the need for these extraordinary measures had diminished, an entrance exam was re-established and an increasing number of places were opened up to competition. Inevitably the quality of nominated candidates declined with each passing year and, by 1930, most nominated officers had never seen combat; selection was instead based on subjective assessment of routine duties. However, the army remained convinced nominated officers were comparable with, and possibly superior to, those officers who gained competitive vacancies through their test scores; as a result, nominated personnel remained a significant minority of each year's intake. In 1927, only 31 out of 60 places at Camberley were competitive vacancies; of the remaining 29 places, 19 were allocated to nominated British Army officers, whilst the remainder went to personnel from overseas dominions and other services. The contradiction at the

¹⁴ Karl Demeter, *The German Officer-Corps in Society and State 1650-1945* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1965), pp. 104-105; Walter Gortitz, *The German General Staff: Its History and Structure 1657-1945* (London: Hollis & Carter Ltd, 1953), pp. 218, 227.

¹⁵ F. Young, *Staff College 1858-1958*, (1958), p. 4.

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centre of this process was that selection through academic competition was viewed with perpetual suspicion, whereas the nomination process and, more specifically, the judgement of senior officers who selected nominees was sufficiently trusted that academically inferior, pre-selected officers who scraped a pass-mark were still considered worthy of a Staff College education. In 1927, Camberley Commandant Major General C. Gwynn informed colleagues undeserving officers could gain entry via the entrance exam but were unable to deceive the discerning eye of experienced area commanders.¹⁶ The academic credentials of Staff College were further diminished when, in 1928, nominated personnel were excused from the annual requirement of achieving the entrance exam pass-mark. The Director of Staff Duties vehemently opposed this policy, stating a previously qualified officer might 'do no more work for 2 or 3 years' in the hope his day-to-day activities might earn him a nomination, also that an officer poorly versed in army regulations would fail to fully benefit from Staff College. The Army Council dismissed these objections and voted through the rule change, thereby allowing officers to reach the army's elite educational establishment without having academically proven themselves for several years.¹⁷ The initially sound use of nominations to utilise Great War talent reduced in value over time, until it reached the point of undermining the credibility of the Staff College graduates. In fairness to the British staff system, it is worth acknowledging that no system is perfect in its selection process. Despite the ruthless nature of the German selection system, Walter Gorlitz has demonstrated how some individuals with debatable qualities were still able to access additional staff training (with all its career benefits) on condition they were well connected.¹⁸

In the inter-war period, an education at the Camberley Staff College involved a two-year course theoretically featuring one year's tuition on divisional staff and command duties and a further year's study devoted to corps and army operations as well as the political and strategic issues faced by imperial defence planners. The methods of teaching included individual written work, group work in student syndicates during map-based exercises and war games, lectures and battlefield tours; even recreational activities such as the twice-weekly drag (horse-riding and fox-hunting) were used by staff to assess student capabilities.¹⁹ With uncertainties surrounding the inter-war Army's future role, its traditional function of imperial policing successfully competed for recognition within the syllabus and, on occasion, under-cut preparations for first-

¹⁶ TNA, WO 32/3091, *Staff College Allotment of Vacancies by Competition – Letter from Staff College to DSD (15/06/1927)*, pp. 1-2, *Letter from DSD to CIGS (15/07/1927)*, pp. 1-2, *Conclusions of Report on Competitive Vacancies (15/08/1927)*, pp. 1-3.

¹⁷ TNA WO 32/3103, *Entrance and Selection of Officers for Staff College – Meeting No. 529 of Army Council Military Members (28/04/1927)*, pp. 1-5.

¹⁸ Gorlitz, *The German General Staff*, pp. 227-228.

¹⁹ French, *Military Identities*, p. 163; Young, *Staff College 1858-1958*, pp. 42-44.

class war. This affected teaching content and format; for example, in 1933 students at Camberley studied the army's responsibilities in relation to imperial communications through the preparation of a mock paper for the disarmament sub-committee of the Cabinet.²⁰ The absence of a clear vision of future conflict created a sterile environment in which many staff fell back on previous teaching; this left Camberley vulnerable to accusations of preparing for a repeat of the Great War. Consequently, in 1932, during his lecture to students on the training for war of an infantry brigade, Brigadier Archibald Wavell (6th Brigade) despaired 'I believe that most of our training since the war has been dulled and stultified by training for "a" war – the last war'.²¹ Topics at Staff College ranged from battlefield practicalities to grand strategic theory; for officers yet to command a battalion, some material was of debatable value and, occasionally, indefensible. Whilst expensive tours of foreign battlefields could descend into heated debate about the positioning of individual machine guns, the subject of British imperial strategy in the Great War took five weeks and required students to familiarise themselves with 36 books.²² The backbone of the inter-war course was syndicate work in which several officers collectively investigated a problem before presenting their answer. Different syndicates, and even individual officers within syndicates, could be assigned particular roles to ensure a topic was covered broadly and in depth. These roles usually ranged from a staff captain to an army commander, but the 1935/36 syllabus included week-long student assignments as diverse as the British Board of Trade or a liaison officer at Austrian GHQ in 1915. The content of these exercises was of dubious benefit to future postings; the primary aim, however, was to compel officers to listen attentively, work as part of a team and to inculcate how to formulate a balanced viewpoint. Whilst these are valuable skills, whether they prepared the Army's elite for a continental conflict is questionable.²³

In comparison, the inter-war German Staff College also used a two year course to educate officers. The first year focused on the employment of a reinforced regiment (the equivalent of a British infantry brigade with attached support units) and a division; the second year studied the employment of higher formations. Each year was roughly divided into 'six months theoretical instruction', three months staff exercises, including visits to the frontiers and factories, and finally, 'three months' attachment to the Staffs of Formations and Commands for practical work'.²⁴ Matthias Strohn has revealed teaching techniques included one-sided planning games, two-

²⁰ Reid, *Staff College 1890-1930*, p. 17; Sir John Slessor, *The Central Blue* (London: Cassell, 1956), p. 89.

²¹ Connell, *Wavell*, p. 162.

²² Slessor, *The Central Blue*, pp. 90-93.

²³ 'Four Generations of Staff College Students', *Army Quarterly*, October 1952, pp. 19-30, in Lieutenant Colonel F.W. Young, *The Story of the Staff College 1858-1958*, (1958), p. 26; IWM, Major General J. Haydon, 93/28/1, JCH 3/1, *Strategy Discussion (07/02/36)*, pp. 1-3.

²⁴ TNA WO 190/585, *Notes on the German Staff College (13/12/1937)*, p. 2.

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sided war games, terrain discussions (war games in open country) and staff rides (exercises designed to help train senior staff officers and commanders). Although most exercises involved scenarios relevant to the military realities faced by the German Army, they were not intended to create genuine war plans; rather their aim was to 'test tactical and operational doctrine and principles'. One advantage of the German Staff College over its British equivalent was a clarity of purpose. Stripped of its Empire and much of its military capability by the Great War and subsequent armistice, the German Army's mind-set was heavily focused on self-defence until 1933; after 1933, Hitler's territorial ambitions and support for rearmament sustained an increasingly offensive outlook.²⁵ Part of this military expansion was the formal reopening of an official German Staff College in October 1935; before this point advanced staff training occurred surreptitiously and in violation of the Treaty of Versailles.²⁶

Regardless of whether a military institution of further education interacted with the world or had a clarity of purpose, predicting the characteristics of a future war was an extremely difficult process. In 1938, the German Army's customary annual staff ride was replaced by a written enquiry into whether Czechoslovakia could be defeated with a lightning campaign before France and England could intervene; the military consensus was that a multi-front war inevitably spelled German defeat.²⁷ Similarly, an equivalent British exercise in 1938 predicted six weeks effective Czechoslovakian resistance after which international intervention would escalate or end the conflict. When the real thing coincidentally occurred soon after, the political compromise reached in Munich was totally unanticipated. Commandant A. Longmore of the tri-service Imperial Defence College complained 'We could not foresee, in our setting, the virtual hamstringing of Czechoslovakia by the unopposed German occupation of Sudeten territory'.²⁸

In Britain, to preserve the elite status of Staff College, Territorial Army candidates were excluded from Camberley until 1937, regardless of their age, rank or experience. Furthermore, once the rules were relaxed, the absence of any positive discrimination to theoretically hasten Territorial development meant the majority of places continued to go to the regulars from regiments with historic links to Staff College, or those with overseas records. Consequently, in September 1939, over 99% of the 18,900 Territorial officers and 7,750 Territorial Reserve officers on

²⁵ Matthias Strohn, *The German Army and the Defence of the Reich: Military Doctrine and the Conduct of the Defensive Battle, 1918-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 7-9.

²⁶ Gorlitz, *The German General Staff*, p. 294.

²⁷ Walter Gorlitz, *The German General Staff*, p. 328.

²⁸ Brigadier T. Gray, *The Imperial Defence College and the Royal College of Defence Studies 1927-1977* (Edinburgh: HMSO, 1977), pp. 12-13.

British Army strength were deficient in skills necessary to assume higher command, solve unexpected problems and deal with combined arms operations.²⁹ Denial of the existence of Territorials equally disadvantaged regular graduates of the Staff College. In his two terms at Camberley (1935-36), Major J. Haydon had no Territorial colleagues to interact with during syndicate work, nor did any of his exercises or essay assignments comprehend command of infantry formations consisting of both regulars and Territorials. Most exercises were historical recreations where Territorials were not present, such as the 1917 defence of Palestine by Turkish forces, or fictional confrontations involving unspecific, uniform formations, for example, brigades in Southland/Northland.³⁰ Devoid of theoretical interaction with Territorials, Staff College graduates found themselves unprepared when posted to the real thing. In 1939, Major K. Chavasse was convinced his Camberley course had comprehensively taught him how to command a brigade and be a good staff officer. His appointment in January 1940 as Brigade Major to 150th Brigade left Chavasse struggling to relate to Territorial colleagues and shocked at the training deficiencies of all formations' personnel for which he (the Brigade's Camberley graduate) rather than a syndicate was responsible. Inevitably, long-term discrimination against Territorials prevented any British officer being fully prepared for war.

Upon entry to Staff College, successful applicants discovered an environment devoid of time and pressure-based performance. This was a deliberate policy; for example, in 1923, Director of Studies Colonel J. Fuller informed the latest Camberley intake: 'During your course here no one is going to compel you to work, for the simple reason that a man who requires to be driven is not worth the driving'.³¹ This policy made Staff College a pleasant posting for all concerned, but it is debatable whether a two-year absence of purpose was beneficial to the development of the Army's elite officers. Deadlines were over-generous, for example, up to three days were allocated for brief tactical appreciations which were necessarily accomplished in hours on the battlefield; even second-year students received 24 hours. Summarising the time pressures he worked under, Captain J. Faviell commented students were provided with up to a week to produce detailed answers to written papers, which 'presented no great difficulty' due to the 'first-class' College library full of references.³² Performance-based pressure was virtually absent because directing staff felt talented students were still learning even when failing. In March 1935, supervisor Lieutenant Colonel Hawkesworth criticised a student's written work for failing to

²⁹ I.F.W. Beckett, *The Amateur Military Tradition 1558-1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), p. 255; David French, *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War against Germany 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 63-64.

³⁰ IWM, Major General J. Haydon, 93/28/1, JCH 3/1, *Paper V (20/03/35)*, *Paper Z (02/06/35)*, p. 1.

³¹ Reid, *Staff College 1890-1930*, p. 17.

³² IWM, Brigadier J. Faviell, 82/24/1, *Memoirs*, ch. 4, p. 12.

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identify the correct objectives and missing the 'whole point' of a brigade exercise; Hawkesworth concluded: 'This appreciation is on the right lines...in spite of all the red ink'.³³ The consequence of this lenient marking was a near 100% pass rate. In 1931, three out of 60 officers failed to graduate and only one for being 'below standard professionally'.³⁴ Even more unrealistically, on 7 September 1939, Commandant B. Paget eulogised '[You] are just as good fish in the Staff College pool as ever came out of it', after all 120 officers on the inaugural twelve-month course graduated three months prematurely to meet mobilisation demands.³⁵ With no incentive to excel, students adopted a lackadaisical work ethic. During exercises with specific roles, Captain J. Faviell always felt 'great relief [when] mine was a minor administrative task with little responsibility', however, this was not always achievable as so many officers 'looked for some simple job'.³⁶ Captain C. Barclay recalled wanting to repeat his 1930-31 course, such was the plentiful leisure time, organised recreation and release from regimental life afforded by Camberley.³⁷ This viewpoint was even echoed by directing staff, for example, RAF instructor John Slessor described life at Camberley as 'an easy, regular existence with fixed holidays so one could plan well ahead, and with no harrowing responsibilities'.³⁸ In contrast, the German Staff College ruthlessly applied pressure to ensure students were kept motivated, for example, a number of mandatory dismissals occurred at 12 and 24 months thereby preventing a 100% pass rate. To ensure performance did not dip after graduation, all surviving students entered a twelve-month probationary staff position after which their qualification could still be denied for unsatisfactory performance.³⁹

The Staff College syllabus was concerned with preparing officers for their future careers no matter how high up the pyramid they rose; consequently, formation staff duties were overshadowed by guidance on dealing with government. The Camberley syllabus was able to focus on long-term strategic issues because of the limited number of theatres where divisional skills would be in immediate demand. John Slessor characterised his time as a Camberley instructor (1932-34) by stating 'I don't think any of us really thought in our heart of hearts that we were fitting ourselves to take leading parts in another life or death struggle'.⁴⁰ This approach heavily influenced

³³ IWM, Major General J. Haydon, 93/28/1, JCH 3/1, *Paper V (20/03/35)*, pp. 1-3.

³⁴ 'Four Generations of Staff College Students', *Army Quarterly*, October 1952, pp. 19-30, in Young, *Staff College 1858-1958*, p. 27.

³⁵ IWM, Colonel K. Chavasse, 98/23/1, *Memoirs*, p. 52.

³⁶ IWM, Brigadier J. Faviell, 82/24/1, *Memoirs*, ch. 4, p. 12.

³⁷ 'Four Generations of Staff College Students', *Army Quarterly*, October 1952, pp. 19-30, in Young, *Staff College 1858-1958*, p. 28.

³⁸ Slessor, *The Central Blue*, p. 85.

³⁹ TNA WO 190/585, *Notes on the German Staff College (13/12/1937)*, pp. 1-2.

⁴⁰ Slessor, *The Central Blue*, p. 84.

the education of students; for example, Major J. Haydon was barely reprimanded for planning a 1935 divisional exercise requiring hundreds of unobtainable vehicles. In contrast, his subsequent Cabinet paper on the army's role in imperial defence, carefully prepared over five days, was severely criticised for being vague on budgetary considerations and for suggesting the army's role had diminished with the expansion of air-power. Most strikingly, Haydon's supervisors felt it was unacceptable that a Major in the Irish Guards with 16 months' Staff College training had written a paper which the Secretary of State for War 'would not learn much from'.⁴¹ Captain C. Barclay felt his year group wasted time on non-military visits, such as to Morris Motor Works in Cowley or listening to political lectures, for example, by Lord Hankey, Secretary to the Cabinet. In 1931, Barclay anticipated it would be 12 years before such information became relevant, however, his retirement ranked Brigadier meant it never did.⁴² Arguably, the superficially elite officers were the most likely to reach the highest military echelons and they were unlikely to repeat such an intensive period of self-development. Nevertheless, these issues should have been secondary to preparing sufficient officers to effectively staff an expeditionary force, never mind a large conscript army.

Both tactically and strategically, Staff College teaching concentrated on what was theoretically sound rather than what was achievable in war. Nikolas Gardner has already identified a degree of detachment from the practicalities of warfare prior to the Great War; for example, a Camberley instructor attached to 4th Division was incapable of formulating a practical operational order, unable to perform routine staff duties and under time pressure 'was a hindrance rather than a help'.⁴³ Assuming Great War experiences would have eliminated any realism deficiency, in 1932, Director of Military Training A. McNamara informed colleagues: 'It may be safely stated that the army is better trained (academically, at any rate) than ever before'.⁴⁴ However, Staff College directing staff unintentionally failed to teach students how to manage risk, only how to remove it through cautious responses and replicated plans; this policy suppressed boldness and, ultimately, the originality necessary to be successful in combat. After being comprehensively briefed on the parameters of a divisional exercise, in 1935, the cautious atmosphere allowed acting divisional commander (Captain) J. Faviell to simply state 'I would go forward and talk to my

⁴¹ IWM, Major General J. Haydon, 93/28/1, JCH 3/1, *Student Exercise No. 3 (20/03/36)*, pp. 1-3, *Paper No. 3 British Strategy (10/04/36)*, pp. 1-3.

⁴² 'Four Generations of Staff College Students', *Army Quarterly*, October 1952, pp. 19-30, in Young, *Staff College 1858-1958*, p. 26.

⁴³ Nikolas Gardner, *Trial by Fire: Command and the British Expeditionary Force in 1914*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), p. 37.

⁴⁴ Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives [LHCMA], KIRKE 4/4, *May 1932 Notes by Major General A. McNamara (DMT) on Training in Peacetime and War*, p. 1.

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brigade commanders'; judged a 'very sensible' answer by directing staff.⁴⁵ Asked to formulate proposals for alleviating Turkish military pressure on Russia in 1915, a 1936 Camberley syndicate of one major and seven captains recommended: Six divisions 'landing on GALLIPOLLI Peninsula, gaining control of STRAITS and seizing CONSTANTINOPLE – The whole to be a combined operation with the Navy'. Superficially bold to propose a campaign which ended in catastrophic failure and 138,000 Allied casualties (including 73,000 British), the syndicate actually eliminated risk of criticism by replicating plans judged theoretically sound in 1915; this detachment from reality was assessed 'a very good bit of work' by Lieutenant Colonel McConnell.⁴⁶ Had the France 1940 manoeuvres of 3rd Division, in particular 27 May, been proposed to Major General B. Montgomery during his spells as Staff College directing staff, he freely admitted they 'would have been considered mad' and unachievable, including by him.⁴⁷ This highlights the challenge of replicating wartime conditions within a peacetime training syllabus; a difficulty Staff College failed to overcome.

As the nature of war evolved, the inter-war Staff College was slow to adapt; for example, only infrequent and ineffectual interaction with the RAF occurred. Pre-war, Army students were not guaranteed direct interaction with RAF equivalents, as only two RAF officers attended Camberley each year. With each member of directing staff knowledgeable in a specialist subject, such as artillery or logistics, the role of air-power was left to the sole RAF instructor. Unfortunately this fostered a belief that air-power was unique to certain battlefields rather than an increasingly vital and ever-present form of modern warfare. Too often air-power was side-lined or ignored by directing staff unwilling to broadcast their unfamiliarity with this crucial subject; for example, in January 1936, supervisors of a simulated major conflict between fictional countries warned senior students 'the opposing air forces are small and of approximately equal strength' and would have negligible impact on the conflict.⁴⁸ Syllabus content in the 1930s evolved from a narrow explanation of 'Army Co-operation' since the creation of the Royal Flying Corps into a general examination of the future role of air-power, including the importance of air superiority and interdiction missions.⁴⁹ Despite this, ubiquitous understanding of army/air co-operation and its future potential remained elusive; even existing capability was, on occasion, underplayed. In 1935, students from the 1935/36 year group were

⁴⁵ IWM, Brigadier J. Faviell, 82/24/1, *Memoirs*, ch. 4, p. 12.

⁴⁶ IWM, Major General J. Haydon, 93/28/1, JCH 3/1, *Strategy Discussion (07/02/36)*, pp. 1, 4.

⁴⁷ Montgomery, *Memoirs*, p. 61.

⁴⁸ Slessor, *The Central Blue*, pp. 89, 94-95; IWM, Major General J. Haydon, 93/28/1, JCH 3/1, *Paper 1 (23/01/36)*, p. 1.

⁴⁹ J.C. Slessor, *Air Power and Armies* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), pp. 10, 202-215; Slessor, *The Central Blue*, pp. 94-98.

informed army co-operation squadrons were restricted to photographic, reconnaissance and communication roles only. However, in 1936, Waziristan army co-operation squadrons provided continuous close air support to assist hard-pressed British brigades, for example, between 5 and 24 December offensive air action was taken on 45 separate occasions, despite highly restrictive rules of engagement; similar cooperation was lacking in France 1940.⁵⁰ Post-1945, RAF student numbers at Staff College were increased, which combined with syndicate rotation, guaranteed each Army officer at least a whole term of syndicate work with a serving RAF officer. By 1958, inter-arm exercises on transport and supply, amphibious operations and nuclear warfare had all been added to the syllabus.⁵¹

The relevance of the Staff College syllabus and the preparedness of its graduates for war against Germany were further undermined by a lack of Anglo-French cooperation. Despite France being considered an inevitable ally in any future European war, no French officer actively participated in a 1935 one-day, first-year exercise effectively simulating conflict between Germany and an Anglo-French alliance, nor a more substantive 1937 continental war exercise with competing syndicates representing French and German forces.⁵² In both instances, French Army involvement would have added realism by illuminating similarities and differences in both procedure and mentality. This lack of foresight was not exclusively the fault of Camberley, or even the British Army. The French staff training system was undermined by an arrogant, insular attitude that discounted the possibility of alternative, possibly superior, doctrines being developed beyond French borders; John Connell has shown this view was perpetually indoctrinated amongst new officers and became increasingly damaging with each passing year. Consequently, a British delegation who attended the *Écoles des Marcheux* staff course in December 1934 were frustrated by the lack of interest in British Army methods and equipment, but even more by the lack of cooperation; the delegation reported 'if they had asked our opinion at times it would have been of value from their point of view'.⁵³ Martin Alexander's analysis of uncooperative French behaviour has deduced political unwillingness to acknowledge Britain's importance because it possessed only a 'parade ground' army. In addition, French political and military preference was for closer links with Italy's superficially imposing army and an aspiration existed to

⁵⁰ IWM, Major General J. Haydon, 93/28/1, JCH 3/1, *Winchester Appreciation (05/07/35) – Role of Air Cooperation Appendix*, p. 1; British Library [BL], *Official History of N.W. Frontier of India 1936-1937* (New Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1943), pp. 15, 18, 25-27.

⁵¹ F. Young, *Staff College 1858-1958*, (1958), pp. 10, 13, 28-29.

⁵² IWM, Major General J. Haydon, 93/28/1, JCH 3/1, *Winchester Appreciation (05/07/35)*, p. 1; TNA, WO 33/1474, *Continental War Exercise for German and French Syndicates 1937*, p. 1.

⁵³ Connell, *Wavell*, pp. 171-172; Victoria Schofield, *Wavell: Soldier & Statesman* (London: John Murray Publishers, 2006), pp. 104-105.

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transfer 16 French North African divisions to the Franco-German border, thereby eradicating the need for unpredictable allies. The 1935 Italian-Abyssinian War may have shifted French foreign policy to an increasingly pro-British stance, but it did not transform military doctrine, nor did the transfer of power from General Weygand to General Gamelin in the same year. Belief in the traditional French policies of a conscript army, maximum detente and an outwardly unified High Command remained ubiquitous; Gamelin's aspirations for modernisation, mechanisation and experimentation were largely nullified by an officer corps content with strategic and tactical concepts of 1914-18.⁵⁴ With France culturally different and militarily inflexible, it is unsurprising Britain and its Staff College failed to fully understand or benefit from French pre-war thought processes. Subsequently, a post-war realisation of the need to avoid conflict without pre-established military links led to the internationalisation of Staff College's students and directing staff from 1945 onwards. By 1958 students came from Britain along with 19 other Commonwealth and Allied nations (including France), whilst directing staff expanded to include permanent positions for Canadian, Australian, American and French Lieutenant Colonels. Furthermore, 'the Organisation and Methods of French and US Armies' became a specific module of the syllabus, taught to all students by officers from the relevant nations.⁵⁵

Although Staff College graduates were not guaranteed to have benefited from their opportunity for self-development, they were undoubtedly idolised as elite officers equipped with the latest military thinking which pre-war units and headquarters could utilise. In 1935, on his first regimental assignment, post-Camberley, Captain E. Thornhill was quickly detached from his tranquil hill station to join month-long discussions on Ceylon rearmament programmes and later, primarily because of his Staff College credentials, became the most senior staff officer in Ceylon. Captain Thornhill recalled: 'It was felt that as an officer who had recently passed out of the Staff College I could be of some use'. His next posting, in April 1937, as Staff Captain Southern Command was less prestigious, because of the higher domestic prevalence of Camberley graduates. Strikingly, not only was this posting responsible for mundane activities such as dealing with traffic accidents, postings and courts-martial, but Thornhill had to become a self-taught officer; his duties were 'not something of which I had had experience in the past, either at Staff College or in Ceylon'.⁵⁶ Other graduates were equally unprepared for the breadth of their duties, for example, in February 1940 Deputy Adjutant and Quartermaster J. Faviell was asked to take the

⁵⁴ Martin Alexander, *The Republic in Danger: General Maurice Gamelin and the Politics of French Defence 1933-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 31-36, 45-46, 242, 381-383.

⁵⁵ Young, *Staff College 1858-1958*, pp. 10, 13, 17.

⁵⁶ IWM, Lieutenant Colonel E. Thornhill, 99/36/1, *Memoirs*, pp. 57-59, 62

lead role in 9th (Scottish) Division's battlefield training because 'as PSC I was regarded as an expert on tactics'. Since his Staff College graduation five years before, Faviell's only combat experience was a brief deployment to Palestine in 1936, where he was promptly shot and invalided home. Even with skills atrophied by two years of work at the War Office, Faviell's experience and knowledge was still considered equal to anyone in the entire division, demonstrating both the revered status of Staff College and the desperate state of Territorial staff training.⁵⁷

The first real test for the inter-war Staff College and its graduates was the deployment of the BEF to France in 1939. In an Army short of significant field experience, theoretically qualified officers were the logical choice for senior appointments. With the Army's Senior Selection Board overseeing command and staff appointments between the ranks of Lieutenant Colonel and Major General since 1937, there were no accidents or surprises amongst officers selected for the BEF.⁵⁸ Down to corps commanders, Camberley graduates were ubiquitous, but below this level the impact of inadequate inter-war output could not be concealed. Between 1919 and 1939, approximately 1370 officers attended Camberley of whom 1170 were British Army officers; eliminating those who were too old or too young for BEF commands, along with those who failed the course, the available talent pool is dramatically reduced. Factor in imperial commitments around the world and expansion of army strength to over a million men by September 1939 and it becomes apparent command vacancies dwarfed the number of theoretically-qualified officers. Just 16 officers commanded BEF infantry divisions in France 1940, but still one officer without Staff College experience was required. Major General D. Johnson VC had commanded 4th Division since January 1938 and, despite his advancing years and lack of qualifications, was seen as a useful counterbalance within II Corps to the newly appointed Major General B. Montgomery (3rd Division); I Corps had a similar balance with 1st Division's H. Alexander (since February 1938) and 2nd Division's H. Loyd (since June 1939). This illustrates the dearth of high-quality divisional commanders within an inter-war army unprepared for and unable to respond to large-scale operations.⁵⁹

The idea of the BEF being commanded by elite, specially-chosen officers completely disappears at brigade level. Of the 37 officers in command of infantry brigades within the BEF on 10 May, only 17 (46%) had passed Staff College. Four combat replacements occurred and an additional five brigadiers arrived with belatedly deployed units (20th Guards Brigade at Boulogne, 30th Brigade at Calais, and 52nd

⁵⁷ IWM, Brigadier J. Faviell, 82/24/1, *Memoirs*, ch. 6, p. 3.

⁵⁸ French, 'Colonel Blimp and the British Army', p. 1192.

⁵⁹ Young, *Staff College 1858-1958*, p. 4; TNA 355.3.WOM, *Army List December 1939*, pp. 91-95, *Army List April 1940*, pp. 1-3582.

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Division) meaning, in total, 46 officers commanded infantry brigades in combat during the France campaign; of these 20 officers (44%) had passed Staff College, whilst 26 had not. It should be noted these figures do not include officers suddenly given temporary command as their units were wound down and their superiors evacuated. The appointment of four officers, including Brigadier E. Warren of 4th Brigade, who had neither staff qualifications, military decorations nor significant Great War records, shows officers without distinguishing features were needed to command in the BEF. The impression that command positions were filled by any available officer is supported by the selection of five officers for BEF brigades who in August 1939 were either unemployed or fully retired. Even amongst the Camberley graduates there were officers whose selection was determined by their long service records and Great War experience rather than the modern thinking implied by their qualifications; Brigadier R. Chichester-Constable's PSC qualification actually referred to his August 1921 graduation. Having retired from the Royal Tank Regiment to work for the York (East Riding) TA and Air Forces Association, officer shortages led to his re-commissioning on 14 September 1939, and later his appointment to command 139th Brigade. Regardless of an officer's activities at Camberley, the value of a Staff College course must inevitably diminish over time, particularly if the skills learnt are not updated and continually used, leaving many of the BEF's theoretically-qualified officers unprepared for modern, mobile warfare.⁶⁰

Conscious of the forthcoming challenges, the BEF High Command sought to ensure the highest standards amongst its subordinate brigadiers. In November 1939, Commander-in-Chief Gort asked the Army Council to ensure no officer over 45 was appointed as a brigadier in the BEF. David French has suggested the Army Council only refused on the grounds that every brigadier in the next five divisions due to go to France would be ineligible.⁶¹ French failed to highlight that amongst the individuals rejected by Gort were four officers with PSC qualifications, including Brigadier E. Miles (126th Brigade); Miles was an experienced serving officer who had attended Camberley, completed a supplementary, year-long course at the Imperial Defence College and had previously received the Distinguished Service Order and the Military Cross for bravery.⁶² The Army Council's decision to deploy brigadiers aged over 45, despite the Commander-in-Chief's opposition, was based on the principle that officers who had met the pre-war requirements for brigade command deserved to be tested in wartime positions before being summarily removed. Age alone was an inadequate tool for defining capability, but equally, the prestige of staff qualifications,

⁶⁰ TNA 355.3.WOM, *Army List September 1939*, pp. 1-1860, *Army List April 1940*, pp. 1-3582.

⁶¹ French, 'Colonel Blimp and the British Army', p. 1185.

⁶² TNA 355.3.WOM, *Army List September 1939*, pp. 1-1860, *Army List April 1940*, pp. 1-3582.

no matter how impressive, was considered insufficient evidence of the subordinate's competency by some field commanders.

The performance of BEF staff officers and their system of operation during the France campaign proved a disappointment for the British Army and resulted in considerable post-campaign upheaval. The volume of staff work in the Phoney War was multiplied by continual expansion, dispersal and duplication; in December 1939, the BEF Adjutant General received 5,360 letters and issued 6,666 letters, whilst GHQ 2nd Echelon received 1,288 official envelopes in the post on 11 December alone.⁶³ The occasional error in any large organisation is inevitable, but perpetual inaccuracy undermined trust, caused operational chaos and disrupted the supply chain. In December, a disillusioned 2nd Division informed GHQ its information was 'almost entirely at variance with the facts; there have been many instances of this so far since arrival in France'.⁶⁴ Inadequate staff work also affected fighting troops; for example, during a 5th Division exercise in March 1940, participating brigade and battalion commanders took seven and a half hours to complete their plans and issue orders, leaving company commanders only 30 minutes to find, brief and position their platoons before operations began; observers noted 'sections had no idea of what they were supposed to be doing'.⁶⁵ When combat operations commenced, the command and control structure developed by GHQ proved 'not very satisfactory' and left subordinate formations sufficiently isolated that Major General N. Irwin (2nd Division) complained 'Divisional commanders were fighting their battles by the light of God'.⁶⁶ As the military situation deteriorated, the staff system and its orthodox military procedures was overwhelmed. In a desperate effort to alleviate its staff burden, GHQ created a series of independent, improvised formations; explaining GHQ's abdication of responsibility for part of its front, BEF Chief of the General Staff Henry Pownall recorded 'We cannot deal here with so many units'.⁶⁷ Post-Dunkirk, the July 1940 Bartholomew Committee identified that slow tempo of operations and poor staff work was a contributing factor to the BEF's underperformance. Its solution was a dramatic reorganization from traditional corps- and division-based operations (now perceived as cumbersome) to brigade-based operations.⁶⁸ In reality, only through bitter experience was a rapid tempo of operations and an acceptable

⁶³ TNA WO 167/11, *BEF GHQ Adjutant General War Diary, September 1939 – May 1940, (December)*, p. 11; TNA WO 167/1, *GHQ 2nd Echelon, War Diary, September 1939 – June 1940, (December)*, p. 1.

⁶⁴ TNA WO 167/203, *2nd Division War Diary, September 1939 – June 1940, (December)*, p. 2.

⁶⁵ TNA WO 167/21, *GHQ Staff Duties and Training War Diary, September 1939 – May 1940, Appendix Y – Report on talk by 5th Division GOC on Divisional Exercise 24-28 March 1940*, pp. 2-3.

⁶⁶ TNA WO 106/1775, *July 1940 Bartholomew Committee Report on the Operations in Flanders 1940, (Evidence from 12/06/40)*, pp. 17-18.

⁶⁷ Brian Bond (ed.), *Chief of Staff: The Diaries of Lieutenant General Sir Henry Pownall, Volume 1, 1933-1940* (London: Leo Cooper, 1972), p. 337.

⁶⁸ TNA WO 106/1775, *Bartholomew Committee Report*, p. 4.

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balance between mobility and controllable firepower eventually achieved within the British Army; however, the willingness to abruptly overhaul the Army's long-standing organisational framework indicates the level of disappointment in its staff performance, dominated at the highest echelons by the contribution of its Camberley graduates.

The approach and commencement of hostilities demonstrated the impracticality of the Staff College's protracted and broad-ranging course. The official history of training acknowledged how the introduction of conscription was incompatible with the maintenance of pre-war standards because of the Army's radically increased numerical requirements. Consequently, in January 1940, the Staff College syllabus was redesigned as a 17-week course dedicated to the essentials of divisional staff work; without demonstrably affecting short-term capability, this allowed the production of 4,000 Staff College graduates during the war. Until 1945, this truncated syllabus, supplemented by additional staff experience and regimental duty, was considered sufficient for unlocking a graduate's full potential.⁶⁹ The reforms proved popular among students; for example, Adjutant A. Walsh believed the 'hard work' and absence of 'time off' in the January 1940 course better equipped him and his colleagues for their imminent postings.⁷⁰ The war may have focused students' minds, but the intensive workload, transparent course objectives and immediate staff postings could all have been introduced pre-war had the army been inclined; the BEF would have been better prepared if they had.

The inter-war Staff College graduate was not perfectly trained, nor was he properly prepared for first-class war. By attempting to train personnel for staff and command positions, for divisional duties and political interactions, and for both imperial policing and major conflict, clarity of purpose was lost and skill-sets became uncertain. Despite its competitive nature, the entrance exam was insufficiently sophisticated to weed out the unworthy, yet the alternative system of nominations was equally flawed, in that it relied upon snapshot and impartial decision-making by senior officers. Staff College created a barrier to understanding between regulars and Territorials, yet overwhelmed students with information of use only in the longer term to the highest achievers. Camberley never replicated the pressures of the combat environment, either in its exercises, or its unwillingness to reject underperformance; this influenced both student work ethic and the directing staff's approach to risk-taking. Despite the cumulative effect of inter-war output, when war came, Staff College graduates could not monopolise divisional commands or dominate brigade commands. This culminated in BEF command appointments being

⁶⁹ TNA WO 277/36, *Training 1939-1945 (Gibb)*, p. 6.

⁷⁰ IWM, Brigadier A. Walsh, 01/11/2, *Memoirs*, p. 40.

filled by a panicky sweep for any available officer, rather than by cherry-picking elite officers. Regardless of their credentials, in 1939 neither the Staff College, nor its graduates were prepared for war.