



The "Engineering" training of trainees at the Higher School of War in the inter-war period

Earth Thought Notebooks

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The author presents here the modalities of the competitive entrance examination to the Ecole Supérieure de Guerre in the 1930s, as well as the course of study and its various internships. Far from being obsolete, this article allows us, on the contrary, to notice some invariants, still valid today, in the training and in the general aptitudes acquired by the commissioned officer during this teaching. The example taken by Lieutenant-Colonel Petitjean, that of the engineer, is only indicative, since officers from other services followed a course of study that was comparable in all respects.

In the inter-war period, the profile of schooling at the École supérieure de guerre (ESG) was consistent with that established since the establishment of the School in 1876. A colloquium organised on the occasion of the School's centenary clearly highlighted the mysteries of this training, the contours of which have today naturally been transformed. 1] The trainees then had four years of schooling: a year of preliminary internships, two years of schooling and then a year of application. It is especially during the first year that those admitted benefit from a deeper knowledge of the other weapons.

This situation is very well summed up in the words of General Duffour, commander of the École supérieure de guerre from 1928 to 1931. "The War College subjects officers to two years of training, which it selects by means of a severe competitive examination, and whose ages range from twenty-eight to thirty-eight years on average. The main object of its instruction is, on the one hand, the technique and tactics of the various arms (infantry, tanks, artillery, cavalry, engineering, signals, aeronautics), and on the other hand, general tactics, staff technique and the functioning of the services within the framework of the division and the corps. It also covers military history, war industry, national mobilisation, foreign armies, naval tactics, diplomatic history, general politics and geography, and languages (mainly German and English). Its instruments are lectures, homework or room work, exercises and practical demonstrations. Among the latter, the "concrete case" on the map and in the field takes first place for weapon tactics, general tactics, staff work and the implementation of services (health, stewardship, ammunition, transport, etc.). The school year is divided into two periods: the sedentary period, from November to May,

known as the training period, and the travel period, from May to August, known as the application period. Before entering the School, officers who have passed the last competitive examination complete six months of training in arms other than their own: introduction to weapons, training methods and the spirit of each of them" [2].

The aim here is not to examine all the lines of this training, but to provide some reference points to situate the proportion of engineer-specific training in the schooling of the trainees by successively addressing the stage of prior learning, that of the entrance examination and then that of the engineering training itself.

Candidates to the GSE are not in terra incognita

First of all, it should be noted that trainees are not "virgins". Most of the officers admitted to the ESG come from Saint-Cyr and Polytechnique. In these initial training schools and in the speciality training schools, they attended courses in military art and history, the course in the use of arms; the art of fortifications is not unknown to them. In addition, and especially for the first post-war promotions, they experimented in combat with techniques for organizing the terrain and witnessed the emergence of new procedures that belonged to the engineer weapon. Moreover, their travels took them to the battlefields. Under the guidance of their elders, they studied works and fortifications. Thus, in principle, they approached the entrance examination to the Higher School of War with strong notions, most of them implemented in Morocco, the Levant or in the numerous colonies of the Empire from the 1920s onwards.

Nevertheless, since everyone had specialized in his or her weapon, training should be harmonized to provide everyone with the same chances of success. This was the Commander-in-Chief's concept, and it prevailed throughout the period: "I have decided that in each region, candidates could be authorized by the general commanding the region to complete a one-week training course in those corps of arms other than their own stationed on the territory of the region. The purpose of these courses will be to facilitate the study of the characteristics of the various weapons and equipment in service there. It shall be the responsibility of the generals commanding the Regions to regulate the execution of these courses and to grant them only to those candidates whom they consider qualified to take the competitive examination of the Superior School of War under good conditions" [3]. This decision is naturally relayed in the Regions: "Short-term training courses (15 days) will be carried out by candidates in weapons other than their original weapon. These courses will be paid for in such a way as not to impose any expense on the State and on the persons concerned. They will take place only in garrisons where there are troops of different weapons. A memorandum will be issued in February of each year to regulate the organization of these courses. During the six months preceding the competition, all afternoons will be left at their disposal, unless prevented by service. The Command nevertheless notes the need to present themselves with a satisfactory level of knowledge: 'The attention of the Chiefs of Corps will be drawn to the need to perfect as far as possible the professional training of the candidates and their knowledge of their weapon. During the two years preceding the competition, candidates will be required to complete short courses in the various specialities of their corps. This professional training must be supplemented by one-week courses in the weapons [...] which must constitute a complete course, carried out at the most favourable times, in the following arms: infantry, cavalry, artillery, engineers'.[5]

The admission competition

Then it's time for the contest. It is during the oral exams that the candidate is asked about engineering. He is offered a concrete case that he must solve by writing a written decision of about ten lines. The questions put to the candidate are drawn by lot and the examination lasts between thirty and forty minutes. The mark for this test is assigned a coefficient of 6 out of a total of 50 and is given by the members of an engineering sub-commission.

For example, the members for the years 1935, 1938 and 1939 are:

1935:

Brigadier General Charité, commanding the Paris telegraph brigade;

Lieutenant-Colonel Fortin, of the Commission d'organisation des régions fortifiées (C.O.R.F.);

Lieutenant-Colonel Carrier, Superior School of War.

1938:

Major General Philippe, commanding engineer of the Paris region;

Lieutenant-Colonel Cayatte, chief of staff to the general commanding superior troops and communications services;

Major Sorano, Superior War College.

1939:

Brigadier General Hanoteau, from a staff of the Superior Council of War (C.S.G.);

Colonel Chancenotte, staff of the Superior Command of Troops and Signals Services;

Major Amathieu, Superior War College.

The concepts of telegraphy, signals, and the organization of fortified regions are a good reflection of the organization of our forces in this period, as well as employment concerns. The engineers were responsible for signals, aerostation and aeronautics until the creation of an autonomous air force on January 30, 1929, and then of the air force in 1933. It is therefore legitimate to see the examiners emanate from these weapon subdivisions during the competition. Candidates are thus questioned on the whole spectrum of knowledge. In order to reach this level of competence, candidates had to assimilate many notions based on the regulatory documentation. These resources reflect the nature of the engineering weapon: it is one in its diversity, and that character remains today.

It was the 3rd office, which was responsible at the time for the organisation of training, which determined the nature of the instructions and regulations to be used by GSE candidates:

- Campaign work. Instruction of 22 August 1917 on the organization of the field for the use of troops of all arms. ^{1st and 2nd part}.

- École des ponts - Officer's book (general indications).

Pensées mili-terre

Centre de doctrine et d'enseignement du commandement

- Summary instruction of 16 December 1918 on the construction and maintenance of roadways and military roads.

- School of levers. General indications.

Additions to the programme will be made as required and as technical developments occur.

Training courses in the "first year".

Once admitted, the candidates are constituted in promotions. From 1919 to 1939, the School had trainees from the 40th to the 60th^{class}. Of course, there were famous names, including future engineering generals [6]. 6] They were then required, depending on their original weapon, to complete internships in the other weapons. The example of 1937, below, underlines the modalities of execution of this training. "This course will be carried out from 21 June to 3 July by officers not belonging to the Engineer Army. Its purpose will be the study of technical questions related to the movement and stopping of the movement of troops. It will be supplemented by information on the organization and role of engineer units in the field. The officers will be divided into troop corps as indicated in the following table".[7]

Region of origin (1)	Engineer Corps	Comments
7th ^{and 20th Regions}	1st Engineer Regiment	
1st, 2nd, 6th Regions	Strasbourg 2 nd Engineer Regiment	(1) The Paris training corps North Africa
Paris (8 officers) 14th ^{Region}	Metz 4 th Engineer Regiment	
Paris (10 officers) 3rd, 4th, 5th, 9th, 11th Regions	Grenoble 6 th Engineer Regiment	
Paris (10 officers) 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th ^{Regions}	Angers 7 th Engineer Regiment	
Paris (5 officers)	Avignon	

The distribution is almost identical for the other years, in proportion to the officers admitted.

Schooling

It is made up of lectures and trips. Lectures are given by eminent personalities, recognized for their art. With a few exceptions, they stay in this job for a long time. They give an account of their experience in the fire, in the sapper or in the staff. They are, like a whole nation, marked by the experience of the Great War and generally adhere to political choices [8]: "The engineering courses, directed by Colonel Chauvineau - one of the authors of the Painlevé project of the so-called Maginot Line - tended to show us the excellence of the fortified lines of the time, successive and cast in concrete in less than 3 to 5 days. The course was well done, and although it was entirely oriented towards

defence, it highlighted the importance of the engineer's weapon. The visit of the works of Verdun and Metz at the end of the ^{first} year was remarkably conducted by Colonel Saintagne and the lessons learned were invaluable for the reconnaissance that we had to carry out on various points of the frontier to be fortified. In reality, the course justified the theory of the least effort: defeat or attack, which was that of the governments of the time" [9].

For twenty-four days, the 49th class (1927-1929, that of Jean de Lattre de Tassigny) visited the border and the fortified towns of the northeast. Beginning with a visit to the port of Dunkirk, the journey continued with visits to the large marshalling yard of Lille-Délivrance and the industrial centre of Lille-Roubaix-Tourcoing. The officers then travelled through the Maubeuge and Ardennes region to carry out a study of the 1914 operations in Belgium (4th French Army). Afterwards, they visited Metz and Verdun, recognised the Rhine territories and completed this journey by visiting the autonomous port of Strasbourg. The 60th class met more or less the same fate. The study then focuses mainly on these regions that have just been fortified with large concrete reinforcements.

In the end, the War College's training achieved its objective in the inter-war period, namely to train young specialist staff officers. At the end of the two years of schooling, the officers were posted to divisional and corps headquarters, to central administration, both in metropolitan France and "wherever the battle takes them". The School taught them a method of reasoning of great formative value, allowing them to combine the action of the various weapons. Studious and applied, guided by their instructors, the commissioned officers were familiar with the problems of earthmoving, railway construction, military bridge building, siege work... It is likely that few subjects escaped them. But the means to apply this knowledge are lacking because the equipment is deficient. This is not the purpose of this discussion. Our country, having started from a very high position, under the illusion of victory, has come to experience one of the worst disasters in its history. Many officers will subsequently use the intellectual tool that is indispensable to the success of their enterprise under more favourable conditions of employment, because they will have been given the means. We can only agree with the words of Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, who notes that "the School produced a remarkable team of graduates [...] It enabled the French in their subsequent contacts with the Americans and the British to see that our training had been good" [10]. 10] This remark has remained a lasting one, but it has been turned to our advantage, as our English-speaking comrades are full of praise today for the success of our external operations, in Sahelian Africa in particular.

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[1] «Centenary of the Ecole Supérieure de Guerre. 1876-1976». Proceedings, 221 pages.

2] General Duffour, "Les exigences et les disciplines actuelles du haut enseignement militaire", Revue de Paris, March-April 1935/2.

3] E.M./Bureau of Military Operations and General Instruction of the Army. No. 4.601 3/11-3, of 2 April 1931.

4] Memorandum of 21 July 1927 from General Marty, commander of the 17th Corps concerning candidates for the entrance examination to the Ecole Supérieure de Guerre.

5| Notice No. 4142 of 27 March 1937 relating to the organization of the preparation for the ESG.

6| 41st: June, 42nd: Verneau, 44th: de Gaulle, 47th: Dromard, 49 th: de Lattre, 52 th: Adeline, 60 th: de Hautecloque and Playe.

7| EMA 3, N° 3948 of 15 March 1937. Provisions concerning the entry to the ESG of officers admitted in 1937.

8| See in this regard: Professor Guy Pedroncini, "The birth of the idea of a fortified system after the victory of 1918", Proceedings of the Colloquium on the centenary of the GSS, op. cit. pp. 105-109.

9| Colonel Yvon, "Thirty years ago. The 49th class of the Superior War College (1927-1929), in Bulletin des amis de l' ESG No. 7, January 1960, page 43.

10| Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, in Actes... op. cit. op. cit., page 113.

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