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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Ted Wilson, my adviser, mentor, and friend, for his wisdom, skill, hospitality, and scholarly editorial pen. Professors Phil Schrodt, Chris Gabel, Peter Mancall, Philip Paludan, and Susan Twombly all helped to make me as good a historian and an educator as they could. The faults in this book are entirely mine; the good analysis is frequently theirs.

My colleagues of the School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, where I have the privilege of being on the faculty, gave invaluable support, helping me pursue my research and writing while teaching. In particular, Professor Emeritus Bob Berlin and Professor Jake Kipp taught many classes so I could have the luxury of work and research simultaneously. Candace Hamm, the godmother of SAMS, made everything work, always. The directors of SAMS, Brigadier General Robin Swan, and Colonels Jim Greer, Kevin Benson, and Steve Banach took many risks to let me go to Lawrence and elsewhere to work on my studies and this book. That we still succeeded in educating some of the finest young minds in today’s military is due to their patience and professionalism.

This book would not have been possible without the support, long hours, and willing assistance of Timothy Nenninger, a friend and colleague whose encyclopedic knowledge of the records in the National Archives is a real national treasure. The encouraging words, sage advice, helpful criticisms, and deep professionalism of Peter Mansoor, Colonel, U.S. Army retired, were and are invaluable. Kathy Buker, Elizabeth Merrifield, Rusty Rafferty, Pam Kontowicz, Ginny Navarro, and Pamela Bennett, the professional researchers and archivists of the Combined Arms Center Research Library (CARL) at Fort Leavenworth, in whose capable hands the curricular archives of the Command and General Staff School rest, were absolutely indispensable and unfailingly friendly. A tireless helper in all circumstances was Susan Fowler, my best contact at CARL. The records they maintain with a gentle care are a storehouse of historical information that is all too infrequently mined.

Paul Jacobsmeyer and I share two things—a friendship longer than the interwar period, and a continual curiosity about why things happened the way they did. Without his help, criticism, and encouragement, this book would not exist.
Steve Bourque and Dan Fullerton share the dedication to ferreting out the truth—at least as we see it.

My former classmates at the University of Kansas are too numerous to name, but the friendship and advice of Walt Kretchik, Randy Mullis, and Mike Stewart helped get us through long days and nights as full-time teachers and full-time graduate students.

Michael Briggs and the staff at the University Press of Kansas were unflinching in their professionalism and dedication. Their frequent words of encouragement were essential.

My wife, Sandy, and my daughter, Rachel, bore the brunt of years of “I’ll be in the library.” I promise I will get back to the joys of being a husband and a father any day now.
ABBREVIATIONS

AEF American Expeditionary Forces
CGA Combat Command A
CCB Combat Command B
CCR Combat Command Reserve
CCC Civilian Conservation Corps
FSR U.S. Army Field Service Regulations
America’s School for War
Introduction

A military historian recently asked me how the United States, indifferent and even contemptuous of the military in peacetime, had been able to produce a group of generals proficient enough to lead armies successfully against German might. . . . I am now convinced that the intensive and imaginative training at the Command and General Staff College had a great deal to do with it. . . . Most of us saw Armageddon as a certainty.

—Major General Ernie Harmon, *Combat Commander*, 1970

Explanations given for the victory of the U.S. armed forces over the totalitarian states of Germany, Japan, and Italy in World War II include the logistical and industrial might of the United States, the inherent advantages of democracies fighting wars of national existence, and the ability of U.S. tactical formations to fight effectively against German and Japanese veterans. What has not yet been explained is how the intellectual and educational development of regular officers enabled the fighting effectiveness of the United States Army in World War II. To borrow historian Gerald Linderman’s phrase, how did senior army officers see and understand doing their job? How did the army maintain the professional competence of commanders and staff officers in the two decades after World War I? What were the principles of tactical competence in the army, and how were they inculcated in a new generation of professional officers? Although historians have assessed the competence of some senior army generals, and have begun to assess the competence of army formations, there has been no comprehensive look at the preparation of the professional leaders who engineered the victory in World War II. Any such attempt must examine the professional preparation of generals commanding large military formations, as well as the staff officers who did the detailed work required to effectively move, sustain, and employ large formations.

Ernie Harmon serves as an example of the generation of officers who survived their baptism of fire in World War I and went on to competent performance as senior leaders in World War II. Harmon, born in 1894, was commissioned from West Point in the World War I class of May 1917. As a captain, he,
in effect, commanded a provisional squadron of horse cavalry in both the St. Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne offensives, engaging in frequent combat with German forces. Returning to the United States after the Armistice, but concerned that America would have to return to Europe to complete the “unfinished business” with Germany, Harmon initially stayed with 2nd Cavalry for troop duty at Fort Riley, Kansas, then served as a tactics and horsemanship instructor at West Point, where he competed in the 1924 Summer Olympics in Paris, France. After another few years with the 6th Cavalry, he was assigned as commandant of cadets at Norwich University for four years and then put in two years as a student at the Fort Leavenworth Command and General Staff Course. Harmon remembered his two years at Leavenworth as the “most difficult years of my training.” Finishing in the top 10 percent of his course, he was sent to be a student at the Army War College. After graduating from the War College, he returned to troop duty, this time with the 8th Cavalry at Fort Bliss, Texas.5

In 1935, Harmon was assigned to the War Department’s General Staff in Washington and worked in the G4 section on army logistics for four years. Harmon then asked to be assigned to the First Mechanized Cavalry Regiment at Fort Knox, Kentucky. This was only a brief assignment; in late spring 1941 he was recalled to the General Staff and service in the War Plans Division and then to duty as G4 for Lieutenant General Lesley McNair, chief of staff of General Headquarters. After some six months with McNair, Harmon moved on to be the chief of staff for the Armored Force at Fort Knox, then went back to troops as a brigadier general with a newly formed armored division. During active operations in World War II, Harmon commanded 2nd Armored Division in North Africa, 1st Armored Division in Italy, and then returned to 2nd Armored Division in Western Europe. He ended the war as commander of XXII Corps and went on to command the American Constabulary Forces in Germany until his retirement in 1947.6

As for the more junior officers—those who served necessary functions as staff officers at the division level—Hamilton Howze is a good example. Born in the commandant’s house at West Point in 1908, he graduated from the United States Military Academy (USMA) in 1930 and served in a succession of troop assignments, from Fort Bliss to Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, and by 1938 was in the Philippines serving with the 26th Cavalry (Philippine Scouts). Two years later, declining an extension of duty in the Pacific to retrieve the family’s Irish setter from a kennel in the United States, Howze and his wife sailed from Manila on the last troopship out of the Philippines, returning to the United States and duty with 3rd Cavalry at Fort Myer, Virginia. Offered command of a mechanized cavalry troop at Fort Bliss, Howze was on a picnic with his wife when the news of Pearl Harbor reached Texas.7
Offered assignment to the forming 8th Armored Division, Howze reported to Fort Knox and command of the divisional reconnaissance battalion. “But then, to my amazement,” as he reported in his memoir, he was offered assignment as the G3 (Operations) general staff officer of the fully formed 1st Armored Division, already prepared for overseas movement. It may not be coincidental that the commander of this division, Major General Orlando Ward, was related to Howze’s wife. Howze recorded his disbelief in being offered the assignment, as “I knew nothing about tank tactics and nothing about staff work—I had not so much as ridden in a tank, and had not been near the Army’s Staff College at Fort Leavenworth.”

Now in a regular army division, Howze attempted to coordinate the return of training equipment, the packing of combat gear, the movement of the division from Fort Knox to its loading ports, and then its stationing in Ireland prior to movement to North Africa. As he related the story, after nearly nine months of packing, unpacking, and moving, the “sharpness, our cutting edge, was about that of a broom handle.” After a punishing experience fighting the Afrika Korps in Tunisia, Howze and the 1st Armored participated in the Mediterranean theater for the rest of the war, with Howze promoted to colonel and command of one of the combat commands of the division. After the end of World War II, he returned to the United States, his wife, and their Irish setter. Sent initially to Fort Riley as an instructor at the Cavalry School, preparing officers for assignment to the Pacific theater, he was selected for attendance at the first class at Fort Leavenworth’s new peacetime-schedule Command Course, an experimental War College equivalent course, graduating in 1946 after a five-month course. Howze eventually gained promotion to four stars before his retirement in 1965.

These two officers, separated by fourteen years of experience and a significant gap in peacetime educational preparation, came together professionally during the defeat of the U.S. 1st Armored Division at the Battle of Kasserine Pass in February 1943. Harmon, in Northwest Africa preparing the 2nd Armored Division for the planned invasion of Sicily, was ordered to Lieutenant General Dwight D. Eisenhower’s headquarters for “limited field duty.” Eisenhower, who apparently preferred officers who lived by “hard—almost slavish—work, team play, self-confidence, and an enthusiasm that amounts to dedication,” seemed uncertain of what to ask of the former West Point halfback (“155 pound[s] wringing wet”). Told by Eisenhower to either relieve Major General Lloyd Fredendall, the commander of II Corps, or Major General Orlando Ward, commander of 1st Armored Division, Harmon blurted out, in his typically outspoken and aggressive manner, “Well, make up your mind, Ike, I can’t do both.” Ike told Harmon to place himself in the role of deputy corps commander and to report back. Traveling forward to II Corps’ command post, some sixty miles to the rear of the
fighting, Harmon recalled: “I have never forgotten that harrowing drive: it was the first—and only—time I ever saw an American army in rout.” Fredendall turned over immediate responsibility to Harmon, asking him if the command post was to move. Harmon, shocked by both the question and Fredendall’s attitude, said firmly that the command post would not move. Fredendall then handed Harmon a typewritten paper giving him command authority over both U.S. 1st Armored Division and British 6th Armored Division. In Harmon’s words, “I had journeyed out there in the dark; at that point I didn’t even know where the front was.” Nevertheless, he was in command.

Fredendall then informed Harmon it was expected that the Germans would attack at dawn with their “Sunday punch.” About 3:00 a.m., Howze (the operations officer of the 1st Armored Division) called, questioning an order from Fredendall. Concerned with the order to send a battalion of tanks forward to meet the Germans, with crews that had no training on their tanks, Howze asked for the order to be rescinded. Harmon recalled, “If I am in command, let me settle this.” He told Howze that the tanks would do no one any good if the Germans broke through, so they needed to come forward, even if the crews were untrained.

Angry and eager to do something, Harmon went forward by armored half-track to the command post of 1st Armored Division. Meeting General Ward, Harmon was informed that a division counterattack order for the morning (named “Operation Howze”) was being drafted. Harmon decided that first the retreat needed to be stopped; only then was an attack in order. Harmon told everyone to “hold today, counterattack tomorrow.” Ward issued an order to the division: “All units will be alerted at dawn for movement in any direction except to the rear.” Harmon then moved to the British 6th Armored Division to check on its status, in the process countermanding the order of the overall British commander, General Sir Kenneth A.N. Anderson, for a unit to withdraw. Harmon returned to 1st Armored Division at dawn as the Germans fired a desultory artillery barrage; the front was quiet for the rest of the day. Harmon moved about the units of the division, issuing orders for a counterattack the next day. The counterattack began as scheduled on February 25 but found only mines and booby traps, the Germans having withdrawn during the night. The U.S. forces at Kasserine, after suffering nearly 9,000 casualties in a little more than two weeks, counterattacked, stiffened by Harmon’s personality, decisiveness, professional confidence, and competence at handling large military formations.

The defeat of the U.S. 1st Armored Division at Kasserine Pass in February 1943 has become something of a legend—and tends to be overstated. Frequently ascribed to a combination of ineffective leadership, obsolete equipment, inadequate training, and poor basic soldier skills, Kasserine was only a “tactical
defeat. . . . Although the Americans had lost heavily, there was no breakthrough as the Germans had planned,” in the words of Gerhard Weinberg, the most competent historian of World War II.16 Misled by erroneous interpretations of ULTRA intelligence radio intercepts, which had forecasted a German attack in another area, and overconfident in the impending collapse of German forces, U.S. and British forces were indeed surprised by the Germans’ attacks. At the time of the defeat, in part due to efforts to protect the existence of ULTRA, alternative excuses and reasons for the defeat were generated.17 Despite some claims that the morale of the U.S. Army in North Africa had been “shattered” by the battle, U.S. forces attacked again and again during the ensuing three months, until the final defeat and surrender of the German and Italian forces in May 1943.18

Combat in Northwest Africa in 1943 foreshadowed the structure of combat between U.S. and German forces for the remainder of World War II. This form of combat was familiar to U.S. officers who survived their own baptism of fire in the 1918 Meuse-Argonne offensive. Warfare in both 1918 and 1943 was a combination of relatively stable defensive fronts and shorter periods of mobile warfare. Dangling at the end of a tenuous and ineffective supply chain, U.S. and British forces themselves were not in any condition to attack before the German attack at Kasserine. Faced with an unacceptable situation, German commanders decided that a last-ditch effort was needed to change the worsening situation. Gambling on their own ability to maintain strength while bleeding the U.S. and British forces, the Germans attempted a breakthrough. Despite heavy U.S. losses, the Germans failed, suffering grievously; combined with additional losses a few days later, this sealed the fate of the Axis forces in North Africa. The battles between relatively stabilized defensive fronts continued with increasing logistical strength on the Allied side and simultaneous weakening on the Axis side, as well as efforts by both sides to create mobile warfare where battlefield decisions could be achieved. However, not until the generation of heavy—and irreplaceable—losses in German lives and material could mobile warfare be achieved. The Germans’ Kasserine offensive, a last-ditch effort to salvage a lost theater, came at a heavy cost and accelerated their own defeat.19

The personal qualities of Ernie Harmon (“Old Gravel Voice” was one of his more polite nicknames), including his aggressiveness, outspokenness, and energy, are matters of birth, experience, and upbringing. But where did Harmon gain his intellectual competence as a division commander? To do the right thing under the extreme pressure of combat requires certain personal characteristics and leadership, but it also requires professional knowledge and decision-making skills—and the resulting professional self-confidence.20 Between World War I and World War II, the United States Army’s professional preparation, education,
and training of large-formation leadership existed only at Fort Leavenworth, on bluffs overlooking the Missouri River in Kansas. Yet, as will be revealed in this book, of the hundreds of officers responsible for the management of army divisions in World War II, only the most senior actually attended the Command and General Staff Course at Leavenworth before the war began. This influence of the senior commanders, all of whom attended the peacetime Leavenworth course, was the foundation of effective command and staff functioning of U.S. Army divisions during World War II.

The army between the two world wars has been characterized as an institution caught between its traditional role ("long years of patrolling vast American distances against Indians and Mexican irregulars") and its role during World War I (its "brief moment of European intervention in 1917–1918."). Army service during the interwar period was indeed a mixture of experiences. Omar Bradley, a major through most of the 1920s and 1930s, exemplifies the reality of life for a field-grade officer between the wars. Describing his tour of duty in Hawaii in the mid-1920s, Bradley reminisced:

Peacetime garrison life in Hawaii for a major and his family was pleasant indeed. We worked only half-days and seldom on weekends. . . . My primary concern was tactical training in the field on terrain my battalion was assigned to defend. . . . I played golf on Schofield’s fine eighteen-hole golf course four or five afternoons a week. . . . Our pay was still only about $300 a month, but that was sufficient to hire a domestic who made Mary’s life easier and gave us considerable freedom.

However, duty with troops was only a small part of officers’ professional life between the wars. A larger proportion of their time was spent as student or instructor.

In the schools, U.S. army officers learned valuable and enduring lessons from World War I. Beginning in France in 1917, the basic army staff organization scheme, defined in the years after the 1903 reforms under Secretary of the Army Elihu Root, was completely revamped, modeled primarily after the French staff system. General John J. Pershing had been so unimpressed by the staff work of the U.S. officer corps during World War I that he instituted a training school for staff officers at Langres, France, initially using French and British instructors. After the war, the army incorporated these lessons and reorganized its education system to provide well-schooled staff officers.

World War I was a revolution in military affairs, but analysts still debate the nature of that revolution. Colin Gray’s depiction of this revolution as an artillery-based change to the battlefield is compelling, as he describes a completely mod-
ern and novel system that explains the changes in fighting during 1917 and 1918. In this modern system, a series of sensors replace the eye of the commander, requiring combined rather than individual judgment (i.e., a staff) to make decisions in order to exploit the industrial tools operating at long distances and in great numbers. Personal leadership on the field of battle was no longer the purview of commanders above the rank of colonel; leadership by general officers was now made even more intellectually challenging by virtue of its disengagement from the battle itself.

The only school in the interwar army that taught the necessary principles, procedures, and techniques for this new form of combined arms warfare (combined infantry-artillery-tanks-airpower, controlled by a staff and led by a commander separated from immediate tactical decisions) was the Command and General Staff School at Leavenworth. Steeped in the lessons of the Great War, it focused consistently on division and corps operations. Thus it was the only school in the army that dealt with field unit general staff procedures. Leavenworth was the critical link in the chain that connected the World War I experience with the command and staff competence necessary for success in World War II. The U.S. officers who performed these critical tasks in World War II were educated chiefly at Leavenworth. How this education occurred, and what effect it had on the combat effectiveness of U.S. forces in World War II, virtually begs for a substantive analysis.

If the idea was to provide qualified officers to serve as the commanders and staff of U.S. divisions in World War II, something seems to have worked. At the conclusion of World War II, the U.S. Army convened a board of officers to investigate the future roles, missions, and organization of the infantry division. This board of officers concluded that significant changes were necessary to keep the infantry division relevant to modern battlefields. They recommended the addition of a tank regiment, the improvement of the artillery organic to the division, and significant changes in the supply and service organizations, antiaircraft, and antitank defenses. Practically the only satisfactory element of the infantry division, they concluded, was “the command and staff organization of division headquarters.” Staffed with officers from captain to full general, the board determined at the close of war in Europe that the doctrine and methods of army ground forces, and the organization of the command and staff of the infantry division, had proven themselves in combat. The proof was evident in the intellectual and professional development of the officers who successfully led divisions and served as critical general staff officers.

The central question to be confronted is this: How did the U.S. Army expand forty-fold in officers during World War II while maintaining its professional competence? Part of this professional competence was the effective, if not painless,
mobilization of the industrial might of the United States. However, industrial might required military competence to bring power effectively to bear on the Italian, German, and Japanese armed forces. This military competence must have resided in the regular officer corps of the army even through the leanest years of the interwar period, considering the overwhelming presence of regular army officers in senior positions in combat divisions. More significant, this officer corps, hampered by inadequate budgets, insufficient unit training opportunities, and no new battle experience for more than two decades, somehow managed its organizations in extremely challenging global combat.

For commanders and chiefs of staff at the division level, being a long-service regular was practically a prerequisite. Within the boundaries of their profession, these officers perceived required competencies within the framework of a particular view of future warfare, one that was based to a large degree on the experience of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF). The operational environment they foresaw was also a reflection of the 1917–1918 experience, although modified by developments in technology at home, as well as changes overseas. What emerges is an assessment that, in the U.S. Army of World War II, all commanders from division and above were graduates of Leavenworth. Practically all general staff officers of corps and above were graduates. However, at division headquarters—the primary place where combined arms were coordinated for battlefield effect—practically no general staff officers attended the peacetime courses at Leavenworth. Nevertheless, U.S. divisions were effective organizations for controlling violence on the battlefield.

The major topics of this book include what the World War II division commanders and staff officers experienced from the Great War through the interwar period to combat operations in World War II; how they perceived their profession; how they approached mastering their professional skills; and what they believed the next battlefield environment would look like. The knowledge they gained from the army’s educational program at the division and corps levels was based on the army’s experience in France in 1917 and 1918.