



INITIAL OFFICER TRAINING AND EDUCATION IN THE BRITISH ARMY

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Nations, their armed forces and the organisations, structures and processes which their armed forces employ all differ. They may have similarities: for example, all armies tend to have corporals, captains and colonels. However, underneath such relatively superficial similarities, the differences may be significant. Those differences may not be organisational and procedural but cultural, and therefore perhaps less obvious.

Initial officer training in the Swedish Armed Forces takes three years; in the British Army, one year. This obvious difference has attracted attention. This paper was commissioned in order to allow the Swedish Ministry of Defence to understand the British system. It was written following initial research, a seminar in Sweden¹ and then further research by the author². It incorporates feedback to issues raised during that seminar.

Although the initial requirement was to describe the initial training and education of British Army officers, two major secondary questions arose. The first was why British initial officer training is so short, by Swedish standards. The second was to understand why and how the British Army recruits and employs graduate officers.

This paper first describes the historical and social background to current British practice. It then considers the qualitative and quantitative requirement for army officers before describing the officer entrants, the process of officer training and education, summarising and concluding.

The Author makes no conscious attempt to support the British Army's current practice. His own perspective is to be sceptical as to whether current systems and processes are as good as they might be. He has tried to deploy his scepticism as objectivity, as far as that is possible to an observer who is (to some extent) a product of the system. He also makes no recommendation here. All armed forces differ; it is for the Swedish Armed Forces to consider the evidence and make decisions which will affect their own officer corps.

Background

The British Army was established on a permanent footing in 1685. Since then it has almost always been an all-volunteer, professional force. Soldiers serve for between 4 and 22 years.

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A small number are commissioned from the ranks, either with less than 4 years service or after about 22 years (from the ranks of sergeant major)³. The two groups are referred to as 'serving soldier' and 'late entry' officer candidates. The great majority of officers are commissioned directly from civilian life, and are referred to as 'direct entry' officers. They serve for between 4 and 37 years. An immediate pension is payable to officers and soldiers after 16 years service, so 16 years represents a significant outflow point for both groups.

An academy for engineer and artillery officers was established at Woolwich in 1741, and a college for infantry and cavalry officers at Sandhurst in 1801. During the 1930s, plans were made to combine both as the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, with a common syllabus for all officers. There would also be some subsequent branch training. Higher technical training would take place at a new Royal Military College of Science at Shrivenham. The facilities at Shrivenham were built, but not occupied, just before the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. After the War, Sandhurst and Shrivenham were opened to officers of all branches. However, conscription remained in force until 1960. To cope with the increased requirement for officers, two additional wartime officer training units were kept open (at Mons near Aldershot and Eaton Hall near Chester). Eaton Hall was closed in 1961 and Mons in 1971. Thereafter all initial officer training for the Regular Army took place at Sandhurst.

The Sandhurst course for full-career officers had been two years long. Short-service ('conscript') officers had trained at Mons and Eaton Hall for just 6 months. The new, combined course was for two terms each of four months. Officers who had already been awarded Regular (full-career) commissions completed a third term. Short service officers who subsequently transferred to regular commissions returned to Sandhurst undertake that third term.

Historically, a small number of graduate entrants had joined the Army each year as officers. No training was provided. However, many graduate entrants had some military training from the Territorial (that is, volunteer reserve) Army (TA). During the 1960s the number of graduate entrants increased, and a separate one-term course was provided for them at Sandhurst. In time this was changed slightly, so that those who had no TA training served a few weeks longer at Sandhurst. In 1982 both graduate courses were combined into a single, eight-month course.

Until the early 1990s there were very few female officers. Nurses and female medical officers were trained separately. The few female 'line' officers were trained at a much smaller college a few miles from Sandhurst. Ladylike pursuits such as flower arranging were included on the curriculum.

During the mid-1980s a high-level report found that the eight-month course was failing the non-graduate male cadets. One specific criticism was that many were insufficiently mature on completion. They were often not even 19 years old. A further observation was that schoolboy entrants tended to be unduly influenced by the small number of serving soldier candidates who attended the same course. The latter were normally slightly older, but more experienced and typically more mature. Some of them displayed a 'do-minimum, never volunteer' attitude, which was a bad example to the other cadets.

³ Strictly, sergeant majors and above are warrant officers rather than NCOs, but the term 'warrant officer' can cause confusion in non-British armies.

As a result, it was decided that all young entry candidates (male, female, graduate and non graduate, together with serving soldiers) would undertake a single, combined, year-long course. Schoolboy entrants would have longer to mature, and the effect of serving-soldier candidates would be diluted by the presence of large numbers of graduates. Whereas this can be seen as rectifying shortcomings, it could also be seen as Sandhurst re-inventing itself in its own image, just 15 years or so after the two-year course had been abolished. The officers who prepared the report had all been commissioned under the two-year system.

It should be remembered that a full career for an officer is up to 37 years long (or up to 47 for lieutenant generals and above). As a result, since 1945 the system has never been entirely stable. During that time, there has never been a cohort of officers who have served for 37 years and retired with the system under which they trained still in place.

The British school and university system needs to be understood in order to understand the officer training and education system. The school system is a mixture of public and private provision⁴. Many, but not all, private schools are boarding schools. A few public schools have private boarding facilities. Until the 1970s all schools were selective at age 11 (for public schools) or eight (for private schools). Virtually no officers were commissioned unless they had attended a private school or a selective public school (the so-called ‘grammar’ schools), except for the few serving soldiers. That was largely because the educational entry requirement was for passes in two subjects at the A-Level examination, taken at age 18. Students at non-selective schools did not stay at school until 18, and therefore did not sit A-Levels.

Private schools typically obtain better A-Level results than public schools, when measured in terms of student improvement from entry (at age eight or 11). The reasons include smaller class sizes, better facilities, and student activities out of formal teaching hours (such as supervised homework periods). Conversely, former public school students tend to obtain better degrees at university, when measured solely by A-level results. The reasons may include that private school students do less well when unsupervised, or that the original selection standard was not as high as for grammar schools. School ethos may also be important. Of the 5,000 or so secondary-level schools in Britain, the top 100 when measured solely by A-level results were all old public school foundations, whatever their current status. So, for example, St Paul’s School in London, founded in 1509 for students ‘without regards to means or race’ was ranked 41st in the country, but is now a private school charging about £6,200 per year. The school which came top was Colchester Royal Grammar School, founded in 1539 but still a public grammar school. Eton (College), founded in 1440, is probably the most prestigious private school in Britain. It is the school where both Princes William and Harry were educated. However, by A-level score alone, it was not in the top 100. Many schools in Britain are several hundred years old.

Until the mid 19th Century there were very few universities in Britain. Most (such as Oxford, Cambridge, Durham and St Andrew’s) were originally medieval religious foundations. These might be called the ‘traditional’ universities. From the mid-19th Century a small number of universities were founded in large industrial cities. Examples include London, Liverpool, Leeds, Manchester, Sheffield, Birmingham and Glasgow Universities. These are

⁴ Confusingly, in Britain the term ‘public school’ generally means a fee-paying, private school. In this paper the term ‘public school’ is used to describe a government-run school at which the education is provided free of charge. The term ‘private school’ is used to describe one where the education is paid for. Some are run as private enterprises, whilst others are run by charitable trusts.

often called the ‘red brick’ universities, due to their architecture. From the 1950s a further wave of new, or substantially enhanced, institutions became universities; typically in non-industrial cities such as Bath, York and Lancaster. These are usually referred to as the ‘white tile’ universities, again due to the style of their architecture. Finally, in the early 1990s a number of higher education establishments were reclassified as universities. This sometimes had ridiculous consequences. For example, a carpentry instructor at a technical institute in a northern industrial town found that he had become a professor ‘of the plastic arts’ or similar – for doing the same job. These institutions are usually referred to as ‘former polytechnics’.

In broad terms, the standard of education provided at universities decreases from ‘traditional’, through Red Brick and White Tile universities, to former polytechnics. There are, however, significant exceptions. For example, Imperial College (until recently part of the University of London) is a world leader in science, and particularly engineering. Some of the former polytechnics are extremely good in relatively new or emerging subjects, such as business management, film and media studies, or computer games design. Many polytechnic degrees are, however, of questionable value. At time of writing, unemployment of graduates of the class of 2010 was averaging about 5% nationally, but from some former polytechnics it was about 15-20%. It has been said informally that, for example, an officer with three good A-level passes from Eton would be better than one with a degree in media studies from (say) Luton Polytechnic. That may be correct in a narrow sense, but understates issues such as the cost of five years at Eton (to age 18) as opposed to three at Luton Polytechnic (to age 21); or the social background of Eton pupils.

The Requirement

The Army requires about 600 young entry⁵ officers per year. The majority undertake a Short Service commission of 3 years, extendable up to 8 years. Such officers typically serve one or two tours as platoon commanders. The second tour is typically either commanding recruit platoons, or specialist platoons such as infantry support weapons or signals. Some are awarded Intermediate Regular Commissions. They serve for up to 16 years and become company commanders and junior staff officers. A smaller number are awarded Regular Commissions. They may command battalions and then go on to higher ranks. The policy for awarding commissions varies from time to time. All officers command a platoon (or equivalent) in the field army as their first posting. Since the mid-1990s all have received further branch-specific training after Sandhurst. It varies between about 3 and 8 months in length. About 12% of officers are women⁶.

The number of late entry officers varies. It is typically about four per battalion, plus some in staff appointments. Late entry officers serve for between six and about 15 years. 15 years is the length of time between commissioning after about 22 years’ service and retirement at age 55. A small number become lieutenant colonels⁷. It is rare for LE officers to command companies. They almost never do so in the field army. They never command battalions. They are generally employed in highly routine staff jobs, typically in personnel or logistic functions.

⁵ The term ‘Young Entry’ includes direct entry and serving soldier candidates, but not late entry candidates

⁶ As opposed to about 8% of soldiers.

⁷ For example, the 38 infantry battalions between them provide 4 infantry LE lieutenant colonels.

Territorial Army (TA) officers are employed in many of the same appointments as Regular officers, but in Territorial rather than Regular units. They may command Territorial battalions and can reach the rank of colonel.

All entrants must pass a selection process. For young entry officers it lasts for three and a half days. It is based on psychometric and, primarily, situational testing which places the applicant in charge of a group undertaking practical tasks. There are at least three entrants for every successful candidate, which implies that competition is quite hard and that standards are fairly high. In practice, passing the selection tests is more of a barrier to entry than educational standards.

Officers are required to display leadership, intellect and maturity as well as the specific skills of their branch. As a benchmark for comparison, an infantry staff sergeant may command a platoon aged about 30. He may be a good leader and be quite capable of commanding a platoon. Conversely that job is normally done by a lieutenant aged about 19 (if a non-graduate) or about 22 (if a graduate). The lieutenants normally have greater intellect than the staff sergeants. At the end of two years' experience they are generally as good, if not better, at commanding their platoons. It can be suggested that the minimum intellect required to command a platoon is not particularly great. However, since commanding a platoon is only the first job that an officer undertakes, considerably higher standards of intellectual ability are required of officers.

Emotional maturity is, however, a different issue. It is reasonable to suggest that most 15-year-olds are insufficiently mature to lead adult soldiers into battle. Conversely, if they are not mature enough at 22 or 23, they probably never will be. The question is at what age most of them become mature enough. It was considered that the former eight-month course, which in many cases produced platoon commanders in the field army who were not yet 19, was failing in that regard. The current officer selection process does, sometimes, grant passes to 18-year olds. In many cases, however, they are deferred. They are typically either told to attend Sandhurst in one or two years' time, or asked to re-apply in due course.

Since regular, volunteer soldiers can serve for up to 22 years, the British Army has a experienced and highly capable NCO cadre which is trained to high professional standards. In the infantry, for example, lance corporals attend an internal battalion training course of about five weeks and are selected from those who pass. Corporals must attend an external training course of about 10 weeks, and sergeants a further course of similar length. The main organisational consequence of having a long-serving NCO cadre is that recruit training is conducted by NCOs, in recruit training battalions. Almost all soldier continuation training is conducted by NCOs, as is most NCO training. Officers conduct some training in subjects such as tactics and military ethics. As discussed below, much initial officer training is also conducted by senior NCOs.

As a result, officers are not required to be particularly proficient in instructing basic military skills (such as shooting, map reading or first aid). They are required to be able to plan and supervise that training. Similarly, the personal training standards that officers are required to reach is no higher than that of the soldiers they lead. It can be argued that this saves a considerable amount of time in the officer training process. That may in part account for what can be seen as a relatively short officer training course.

There is a further category of officers. A few graduate specialists, who are employed directly for their professional skills, attend a much shorter course at Sandhurst. Examples include military chaplains, medical, dental and veterinary officers, and lawyers. They are collectively described as 'professionally qualified entrants'.

The Entrants

About 80-85% of young entry officers have a degree of some sort, but only a small proportion have a degree which is directly relevant to their branch or employment. About 10% are non-graduate, but many of those have spent some time at university (or other occupation after school). About 5% are serving soldiers. Since the closure of the Royal Military College of Science to undergraduates a few years ago, all undergraduate university education takes place outside the Ministry of Defence. Neither Sandhurst nor any other military institution grants first degrees.

Roughly 40% attended private schools. They tend to have upper- or upper-middle class backgrounds. About 55% attended schools which were or had been grammar schools. They tend to be middle-class. The serving soldiers tend to be of working-class backgrounds. Few entrants from genuinely working-class backgrounds obtain A-Levels and go on to join the army as direct-entry officers.

Sandhurst now takes a high proportion of graduates from former polytechnics. This strongly implies that candidates who, in the 1960s or 1970s, would have joined straight from school are now going to university first. They may spend a year out of education before doing so. As a result they are typically aged 22 or perhaps 23 when they complete officer training. This begs a question: what is the value to the army of a three-year degree from a poor course at a poor university? That issue is discussed later.

Many universities have associated Officer Training Corps (OTCs), which are primarily intended to provide officer candidates for the Territorial Army. About 20-25% of entrants to Sandhurst have had some experience in OTCs. In addition, many private schools and some public schools (most of them current or former grammar schools) have cadet corps. Between OTCs, school cadet corps and serving soldier candidates, about 40% of all entrants to Sandhurst have some prior military experience.

Roughly 5% of graduate entrants have degrees in War Studies. A further 10% have degrees in politics, International Relations or similar. About 30% of graduates have science or engineering degrees. Different branches have different requirements. For example, the education branch has been all-graduate for many decades. Maintenance officers are all graduates, and the great majority of them have mechanical or electrical engineering degrees⁸.

Officer Training and Education

Since the late 1980s all young officer entrants have attended a single, common commissioning course at Sandhurst. There are three courses a year and the course lasts for 48 weeks. The syllabus is a combination of basic military skills, leadership, generic officer training (such as preparing and giving orders), professional military education (in subjects

⁸ Some are aeronautical engineering graduates. Some have other scientific and technical degrees.

such as war studies or military technology), sport and ceremonial. It includes the training given to all soldier recruits.

Graduates tend to rapidly assimilate as a group at Sandhurst. Some of the non-graduates, and particularly those from public schools, tend to develop as individuals only after five to seven weeks of training. However, public school entrants tend to show more determination than those from private schools. The latter, and particularly some graduates from private schools, can lack everyday practicality and judgement.

The more intellectually capable cadets tend to master the academic subjects quite easily, but can then lose interest and become bored. This is not too surprising, given the ability range of the cadets. For example, a graduate in War Studies will find that the War Studies course, which has to accommodate the requirements of non-graduate cadets who will typically not even have A-Level history, quite easy. Overall, however, it seems that the single commissioning course is beneficial both to the students and to the Army as a whole. It was said in interview that ‘a monoculture would not be a good thing’. The weaker cadets benefit from the experience and support of the stronger ones. The stronger ones benefit, perhaps to a lesser extent, from the challenges and rewards of supporting the weaker ones and the teamwork which that underpins. This author’s own experience at Sandhurst of what was, at the time, effectively a high-quality monoculture (of graduates who all had prior military experience) tends, on reflection, to support that view.

The final parade at the end of the course is almost always inspected by a member of the Royal Family. The standards required to conduct that parade are exceptionally high. Preparation includes both learning drill movements which are not normally taught to soldiers, and considerable rehearsal for the actual event. An extremely experienced former staff member (one of the few people ever to have completed three tours of duty there, two of them as an NCO) has said definitively that, were it not for the effort required to conduct the final parade, all of the drill training could be completed in the first term. That would be a major reduction.

This is a highly emotive subject to many British Army officers. Most would agree with what, to officers from other armies, may be an unconventional or anachronistic view: that drill is the basis of military discipline. However, the amount of drill taught to soldiers who do not go into units such as the Guards is quite small. It is taught to Regular soldiers as a small part of the 14-week initial training course which is common to soldiers of all branches. It could therefore be taught in the first term of the commissioning course.

Each platoon of 25-30 cadets is run by a captain⁹ and a staff sergeant¹⁰. The platoons are grouped into companies, and the companies into two colleges. Each college has a small headquarters and there is a much larger Academy headquarters. There are academic departments staffed by civilian lecturers, many of whom have PhDs, covering subjects such as War Studies and military technology. There are specialist training wings for military subjects such as signals, physical training and weapons training. Platoon staff sergeants teach much of the basic military instruction such as drill, fieldcraft and minor tactics. The training wings ensure that the instructors (who are NCO specialists) are of high quality, reduce the instructional burden on the platoon staff sergeants, and effectively reduce class size.

⁹ Companies in the British Army are commanded by majors.

¹⁰ Infantry staff sergeants are called ‘colour sergeants’. Most platoon instructors are actually colour sergeants.

Platoon staff sergeants are also responsible for much of the cadets' activity out of regular working hours. That is primarily due to their role in teaching and supervising the cleaning of clothing and equipment. Given the amount of drill in the syllabus and the attitude of the British Army to this issue (which is quite different from that of, say, the German or Israeli Armies), that accounts for a lot of non-programmed activity. Each company has a sergeant major and each college has a regimental sergeant major (RSM). The Academy has its own sergeant major, who is one of the most senior soldiers in the Army. Much of the preparation for the final parade falls within the responsibility of this group, which is to some extent a parallel chain of command.

The platoon staff sergeants are drawn from the best in the Army. Most go on to become RSMs, and many are then commissioned as late entry officers. They typically have about 12 year's service on arrival. Many will have had operational experience. At present, some may have served in Iraq or Afghanistan on three or four separate tours. All will have commanded sections and been platoon sergeants. Some will have commanded platoons. Quite rightly, they are highly respected by the cadets. It is a highly challenging and rewarding appointment. Some late entry officers who have served as instructors at Sandhurst have said that their time there was as, or even more, rewarding than their time as an RSM. Being an RSM is normally seen as the summit of a British soldier's career.

The input of these senior NCOs has many benefits, not least that of harnessing much of their considerable ability and experience. However it also has some disadvantages. One is a tension between academic and military instruction. This arises out of a clash between the requirement for out-of hours academic study and for out-of-hours clothing and equipment preparation. Given their day-to-day contact with the cadets and what is effectively a second chain of command, the sergeant majors' wishes tend to prevail. Another disadvantage is that some cadets, and particularly the less mature and more impressionable ones, tend to treat their platoon staff sergeants with reverence. This behaviour, which most officers are vaguely aware of, was identified by an extremely senior psychologist who worked as an academic instructor at Sandhurst. Respect is quite appropriate. Reverence is not. In these circumstances it can be unhealthy.

The one-year course was intended primarily to benefit 18-year olds. They were sometimes insufficiently mature, and could be unduly influenced by serving soldier entrants. Those problems have largely disappeared. About 85% are now graduates, and very few 18-year-olds now join the course. When graduates with OTC experience who had just completed a 17-week course were shown the syllabus of the eight-month graduate course, they thought it highly repetitious and a waste of time. There were virtually no extra subjects on the syllabus. Tellingly, the Academy staff made no attempt to rectify that impression or justify the extension to them. What graduates on the eight-month course thought, when told that their successors would have to spend 12 months at Sandhurst, is not known.

The amount of time actually spent on drill and ceremonial has shown a repeated tendency, over about 30 years, to creep upwards. Formal syllabus reviews normally cut back the time spent on drill, but in practice it creeps back again. One of the purported benefits of the one-year course was that cadets would have a considerable amount of time in the syllabus for programmed, private study; particularly for academic subjects. But it appears that, over the 20 years or so of the one-year course, that has been steadily eroded. One academic staff

member recently said that cadets ‘just have no time to think’. That is despite the extension to a year’s duration.

The culture of the Academy would reward considerably deeper, objective, study. It does, however, nevertheless appear that Sandhurst has a very strong culture which frequently asserts itself. Part of the mechanism for that is what can be seen as the NCO’s alternative chain of command. Many of the platoon staff sergeants come from the Guards¹¹. Until a few years ago all of the company sergeant majors came from the Guards. Most still do. All of the Regimental Sergeant Majors and the Academy Sergeant Major come from the Guards. Many of the more senior NCOs are on second or subsequent tours of duty there. This gives them a collective memory, and supports preferred modes of behaviour which are very consistent with the traditions of the Guards. That, coupled with the fact that senior Army officers have, in the past, had memories of up to two years spent at Sandhurst, may contribute to a institutional self-perception, and a perception in the minds of other officers, about what Sandhurst should be like. It does, however, beg the question of whether the current one-year course is the best use of the available time or money.

In addition to the one-year course, there are relatively short courses for late entry officers, TA officers and professionally-qualified officers.

Outputs and Outcomes of the Process

On completion of training at Sandhurst, officers proceed to branch training and then join their units. A typical officer would be deployed to Afghanistan (and previously Iraq) about six or seven months after leaving Sandhurst. Some might arrive there sooner, having completed their branch training and a short theatre-specific training and orientation course. It would be rare for that to be less than four months after leaving Sandhurst. During the early 1970s it was possible for a newly-commissioned second lieutenant to arrive in his battalion on operations in Northern Ireland only three days after leaving Sandhurst.

Non-graduates are paid £15,824 (the pay of a soldier recruit) per year whilst in training. That rises to £24,615 on leaving Sandhurst as second lieutenants. Three years later, as lieutenants, they will earn £29,587. Graduates are paid £24,615 (the pay of a second lieutenant) on arrival at Sandhurst, and are promoted to lieutenants (paid £29,587 per year) on leaving Sandhurst. That is, a graduate officer aged 22 would earn the same as a non-graduate officer aged 22¹². Those figures should be compared with the standard British graduate civilian starting salary of about £25,000 per year¹³. There is no other pay differential for graduate officers, and promotion from lieutenant is based on merit regardless of academic qualifications. Exit rates for graduates and non-graduates are essentially the same, and do not appear to be affected by prior academic attainment.

Experience in the field army and discussions with instructors indicate that every entrant who successfully completes the course at Sandhurst should be commissioned. However, informal surveys and anecdote reveal that about five per cent of those who are commissioned are borderline cases. That is, they are either dismissed before completion of three year’s service, or are very firmly given no opportunity to extend beyond three years. The ‘five per cent’

¹¹ There are currently five battalions of Foot Guards and two battalions of Household (ie, Guard) Cavalry.

¹² Assuming that the graduate entered university at aged 18 and went from there to Sandhurst, whilst the non-graduate went straight to Sandhurst aged 18.

¹³ All figures were correct in May 2011. For a broad comparison, use a conversion rate of £1 = 10 SEK.

statistic appears to be valid over the last 30 years, through either long years of garrison duty, repeated operational tours in Northern Ireland or, more recently, multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In practice, some officers who were clearly near to the lower end of the ability spectrum performed perfectly adequately as platoon commanders. Some, however, showed little potential to progress further. This suggests that the initial officer selection, training and education of officers is fit for purpose, by the standards of the British Army. Human factors experts from several disciplines have suggested that a selection and training regime that gets its output right roughly 95% of the time, and reaches high standards, is quite effective.

Experience from centuries of conflict has shown that the British Army's officer corps has rarely been found lacking. Even in the worst stages of the First World War (during which over 48,000 officers died), the key issue was not the motivation or other personal qualities of the officers, but simply how little military knowledge they had gained when they took over their platoons. This was a significant problem, because high officer casualties could mean that poorly-trained platoon commanders had to become ever less well-trained, and inexperienced, company commanders. There is an obvious and direct continuity in the British Army from before, during, and after that war through to today's officers. It therefore seems that, as long as the Army trains them for long enough (and during both the First World War and the 1970s and early 1980s it did not), it trains them well.

The training of late entry officers at Sandhurst started during the last decade. The course is short and tends to focus on the wider issues of being an officer, rather than branch or employment issues. Late entry officers have experience and maturity, and provide useful continuity in units. It is quite possible for a late entry officer aged about 46 to have served in the same battalion for all but perhaps four years of a total of about 28. Staff at Sandhurst believe that the *top* 10% late entry officers are better intellectually than the *average* young entry cadet. Given their age and experience, that is not perhaps surprising. If anything they might, perhaps, be better. The fact that they are not may reflect the fact that the most capable soldiers are encouraged to apply for commissioning as serving soldier candidates when they are much younger. They are therefore no longer available for commissioning after 20 or 22 year's service as a soldier. It should also be said that some late entry officers can display a lack of initiative and sometimes fail to take responsibility. That is not a criticism of all of them, but a general tendency amongst the weaker ones.

The serving soldier entry is very useful. It attracts a few outstanding candidates who, for various reasons, have not been recruited by the conventional commissioning process. For example, one former serving soldier recently worked as major on the personal staff of the Chief of the General Staff, and has just been selected for promotion to lieutenant colonel at the earliest opportunity. The serving soldier entry also demonstrates to soldiers that commissioning is actually on merit, rather than by accident of birth. A further, related issue is the provision that every soldier, in every single trade in the Army, can reach the rank of lieutenant colonel. Any serving soldier entrant can do so, since they are subsequently promoted on the same basis as direct entry officers. There is also a pathway for every soldier's branch and trade by which he or she can gain a commission, and reach lieutenant colonel, as a late entry officer. Relatively few do, and none reach the rank of colonel. The opportunity, nevertheless, exists.

Graduate officers tend to be better prepared intellectually for the challenges that face them during their career. They are generally better educated and more mature than their non-graduate comparators. The aphorism ‘train for certainty, educate for uncertainty’ is somewhat trite, but does have some relevance. Clausewitz characterised the environment of war as ‘the province of uncertainty’. The benefit of university education is, however, hard to characterise, let alone quantify. One non-graduate commanding officer recently complained that his graduate platoon commanders had little in common with ‘spotty 17-year old working-class recruits’. That comment may have some validity, but it may merely have demonstrated his own preconceptions. It is also questionable how much any middle- or upper-class officer has ever had in common with his soldiers.

A more relevant question is how quickly they learn; either about ‘spotty 17-year old working-class recruits’ or any other aspect of their work. Anecdote and opinion tend to suggest that graduates learn quickly, and that for most there is little difference between graduates and non-graduates by the time they are captains. Non-graduates may learn more slowly, but have longer to learn. However, one thoroughly mediocre graduate officer who reached the rank of colonel was a poor commanding officer. Analysis of his career suggested that he had spent less than three years in total actually commanding soldiers (rather than in staff appointments) before commanding a battalion. Current regulations would tend to prevent that. It is possible that, if he had spent longer commanding soldiers, he would have been a better battalion commander. It is also possible that he would never have been selected to command. The key issue is not that he was a graduate, but simply how little time he had spent in command of soldiers.

It is clear that if Sandhurst was not open to graduates, the Army would not recruit many of its best candidates. Some 15% of graduate entrants attended Oxford or Cambridge Universities. That is far higher than the overall proportion of graduates from those universities among all British graduates. They are demonstrably of the highest academic standards. It is reasonable to believe that a person who can attend Oxford or Cambridge would not choose to join a volunteer army if it were not open to graduates. It would be simplistic to say that no graduates would join, since some would join rather than go to university. It is perhaps more sensible to say that few who were already at university would consider joining, and that many of the intellectually best suited go to university before they have thought about their subsequent career in detail.

However, that is not to say that all the best officers are graduates. Two outstanding officers who this author knows personally are among the few he knows who have commanded Special Forces platoons. Both have become brigadiers. Neither is a graduate. At present the Chief of the Defence Staff, the most newly-appointed divisional commander, and the brigadier in charge of the Ministry of Defence’s strategy review were all non-graduates when they were recruited. However, that was during the 1970s, when far fewer school-leavers went to university. The Army sent all three to university. Two of them went to Cambridge. One current member of the academic staff at Sandhurst remarked that she had never met a non-graduate cadet who would not benefit from going to university. That may well be a valid comment. The question remains, however, of whether the *Army* benefits from that, and whether the time and money is well spent.

It has frequently been questioned (in this paper and elsewhere) whether a poor degree from a poor university is of any benefit to the Army. The time spent at university might be better

spent commanding a platoon. A graduate platoon commander costs about £10,000 a year¹⁴ more than a non-graduate, and in practice it is hard for graduates to spend much time commanding platoons before undertaking battalion staff appointments. In addition, because most branches are open to graduates of almost any discipline, there is usually little direct benefit from the subject of the degree. It appears that the Army believes generally that graduates are 'a good thing', and that it cannot afford to not recruit from the pool of civilian graduates.

A colonel who used to be the head of postgraduate education for the Army addressed this issue directly. She was professionally convinced that poor degrees from poor universities were not worth having. However, she pointed out two important issues. The first was that the most senior officers of the Army showed no enthusiasm to address this question. Practically, that means that it is unlikely to be addressed, at least in the near future. Secondly, as a postgraduate education specialist, she indicated that there would be some difficulty in discriminating between different universities, different subjects and different classes of degree. That problem could be addressed. It should be remembered, however, that it would not be reasonable to tell an applicant currently studying at university that the degree he is studying for would not be considered suitable for him to join as a graduate entrant. Not least, he would probably simply look elsewhere. That is a consequence having an all-volunteer army.

Real, practical difficulties are associated with this question. Entrance is voluntary, so compulsion (that is, forcing graduates with given degrees into given branches) would not work and would tend to reduce applicant numbers. Restricting more branches to certain types of degree would tend to deter highly-motivated applicants who might have made a poor choice of degree. Furthermore, what kind of degree is most applicable to, say, an infantry or armoured corps officer? There is in practice some selection on entry (such as for maintenance officers) and some further internal selection. For example, this author was selected for a particular career stream within the Army because he was one of the relatively few infantry officers qualified to undertake postgraduate technical training. In practice the Army accepts a wide range of degrees and then manages the available pool of talent reasonably well.

There are disadvantages to employing graduate officers. At most they spend three years as a lieutenant. Some of that time is taken up with branch training. They are relatively expensive. They are older; they can be intellectually arrogant; and they tend to have less experience by the time they become company commanders. Their university degree may have no direct, and little indirect, value in their current appointments.

Since many entrants are graduate and most have access to university OTCs, it would be quite possible to radically revise the initial officer training process. By making more use of OTCs and recruit training battalions, and removing the final parade, initial officer training at Sandhurst could be contained in one, fourteen week term. There would be no overlap between intakes, the establishment could be much smaller, and excess capacity could either be used for continuing officer education, or sold off. The purpose of this suggestion is not to propose it as a course of action, but simply to indicate that other alternatives might be considered.

¹⁴ The full economic cost of employing a member of the British Armed Forces is about twice his salary. Thus a difference in salary of about £5,000 means a total cost of about £10,000.

Summary and Conclusions

The way in which the British Army conducts its initial officer training and education reflects several underlying issues. Firstly, it is (and almost always has been) an all-volunteer army. Secondly, the scale of civilian undergraduate education has increased significantly, to the point where about 50% of school leavers go on to higher education of some sort. Thirdly, much of the training is delivered by experienced and skilled senior NCO instructors. Lastly, the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst is a mature institution, with a strong culture which asserts itself in many ways. Some of that culture is due in part to the NCO structure, which in some ways acts as a parallel chain of command, and influences the way in which education and training are delivered.

Several of those issues have consequences which are interlinked. For example, since Britain produces so many graduates, it would be difficult (and perhaps impossible) not to have a system which is open to (and to some extent attracts) graduate entrants. Secondly, real practical difficulties would arise if the Army tried to assign entrants to branches on the basis of university degree. Thirdly, graduate officers are bright and learn quickly, but officers are not required to train soldiers directly. This combination may account for the relative shortness of the main commissioning course at Sandhurst.

There are many advantages in employing graduate officers, and the Army does generally seem to think that graduate officers are 'a good thing'. However, it does not address the question of whether all degrees from all university departments are worth the time and money spent by officer candidates in obtaining them. There is evidence that some are not.

The length of the course at Sandhurst has been the subject of much discussion, both in this paper and elsewhere. Swedish officers might be surprised to find that the main thrust of the discussion considers whether one year is too long, rather than too short. It is certainly true that the stated reasons as to why it became one year long largely no longer apply. There are relatively few (if any) 18-year old cadets, and they are no longer unduly influenced by serving soldiers (who are now in a small minority in the commissioning course). The great majority of cadets (80-85%) are graduates, and the main commissioning course might profitably be revised to reflect that. The real reason why the course is a year long, however, may lie in deeply-held attitudes as to what Sandhurst should be like. Those cultural attitudes are held both at Sandhurst and across the Army. Culture is pervasive and hard to change, but its manifestations are not always beneficial.

The description of initial officer training and selection in the British army in this paper is not entirely flattering. It is not intended to be. It is intended, as far as possible, to be objective and even-handed. It is for the reader to assess the contents of the paper and make decisions based on them.