

The Army Specialized Training Program And the Army Ground Forces

Were you an ASTP trainee? Although this article was originally published in 1948, it contains many details of the ASTP adventure that most of us have not likely seen in print—the purpose of the program, the struggle at the start, the selection process, training conflicts, the conflicting opinions on the need for specialists, the need to “brain-up” the Infantry, post D-Day manpower needs, and the demise of the program.

The critical shortage of infantrymen in the winter of 1943–44 was largely responsible for the virtual liquidation in February 1944 of the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP), which had been initiated at the close of 1942 on broad grounds of public interest and policy. The ASTP had been approved by the Secretary of War in September 1942, in anticipation of the lowering of the draft age from twenty to eighteen. The program was established primarily to ensure a continuous flow of technically and professionally trained men for the prosecution of the war, men who could not be procured without deferments if the draft age should be lowered to eighteen. Continuous replenishment of the national stock of young men with such training was an urgent necessity, especially if the war should last more than four or five years. There were strong arguments for training them in the colleges and universities. The training and educational facilities of the Army were believed to be insufficient in extent and character to give the type of education required. More over, the use of the colleges and universities would protect these institutions from impoverishment or collapse, and the provision of students by the Army might be expected to lower the resistance of civilian educators to the reduction of the draft age to eighteen. To avoid the shortcomings of the Student Army Training Corps of World War I, the plan for the ASTP was to be tied firmly to the military program of the Army. Selected enlisted men were to be assigned to various colleges and universities for academic instruction, but only after they had received basic military training, which was to be continued under a cadet organization while they were in college. Under the plan proposed, the Army would be assured of receiving from each oncoming age group a due proportion of men with advanced training, shaped with reference to ultimate military requirements. At first it was contemplated that most of these men would become officers after completing their college work.

On 30 September 1942 Army Ground Forces (AGF) was requested to submit, within five days, its plan for application of the program to the Ground Forces. Given the effect of current policies on the quality of men being assigned to the Army Ground Forces in 1942, such a program was bound to present itself to that command as another means by which men of the higher intelligence levels would be withheld or withdrawn from combat positions. With four or five divisions being activated each month, and preferential assignment to the Air Forces in full effect, this was the period of worst personnel shortage in the history of the Ground Forces and of great strain in the procurement of officer candidates. “With 300,000 men short,” exclaimed the AGF G-3, “we are asked to send men to college!”

General McNair, taking a grave view of the Nation’s requirements for effective strength in combat, based his opposition to the ASTP on strictly military considerations. Confronted with the ASTP proposal of 30 September 1942, he observed that a college program would further deplete units in training of high-grade men and would compete with the program of officer candidate schools, whose quotas the Ground Forces were already having difficulty in filling. He recommended that the college program not be launched until it was clear that the war would last beyond 1944. For the time being the Army, in his opinion, had a sufficient backlog of college-trained men. Fourteen percent of the men who had entered the Army in 1942 had had some degree of college education, and if General McNair believed that, in view of the general policy of providing liberal opportunities for promotion and of tapping all available manpower, not more than a quarter of the officer corps need be college graduates. Fearing that the military discipline and the few hours of military training received by ASTP men in colleges might be considered the

equivalent of regular Army training, he advised against the introduction of this phase of the program. "If it is necessary to keep men in college to provide Army officers, then their whole effort might well be placed on academic studies, because, presumably, that is the reason for their going to college."

The decision to institute the program had already been made when General McNair submitted these observations on 4 October 1942. With them he submitted a plan as requested. The plan took the form of estimates, necessarily hurried, of the number of graduates of the proposed program which Army Ground Forces could use. The organizers of the program construed these estimates as a statement that the Ground Forces "required" these graduates. Army Ground Forces immediately disclaimed this interpretation. It was reiterated that, in the arms for which the Army Ground Forces was responsible, the supply of college men would last through 1944 and the facilities of the normal officer candidate schools were sufficient for officer training.

The Army Specialized Training Program was formally established in December 1942. It differed from some of the preliminary proposals in placing attention not so much on the production of officers as on the production of specialists who might or might not ultimately be commissioned. The specialties were chiefly scientific, engineering, medical, and linguistic. The maximum number of men to be in the program at any given time was set at 150,000. Enlisted men under twenty-two years of age, and having an AGCT score of 110 or more, were eligible. For advanced study men over twenty-two might be sent. "The mission of the Army Specialized Training Program," it was announced in February 1943, "is to prepare personnel for officer candidate schools and for other military tasks."

On 25 January 1943 General McNair asked for reconsideration. The AGF feared that all Class I and most Class II men of the 18–22 age bracket would be taken from the ground combat arms, trained as specialists and technicians, and hence on leaving college be assigned to other forces for the duration of the war. The result would be to aggravate for Army Ground Forces the unfavorable consequences of the vocational emphasis in the classification system and of preference given the Air Forces in the distribution of intelligent personnel. General McNair asked that the Ground Forces be assured at least of receiving back from the ASTP the same number of Classes I and II men as might be transferred from the Ground Forces into the program—a request which, though urged upon the War Department, was not met. The answer given to the request for reconsideration was that the fears of Army Ground Forces arose from an erroneous and narrow conception of the program. The program, according to G-I of the War Department, was designed to benefit the Army as a whole. It would not jeopardize the procurement of officer candidates; graduates would be assigned to the several arms and services in accordance with branch requirements for "specialized training."

So critical did its own needs appear that AGF thought it necessary to take measures by which it could receive back, or "require," ASTP graduates within the terms laid down by the War Department. Army Ground Forces was consistently disposed to value leadership above specialization. But with the ASTP in operation, many of the best potential leaders in the younger age group would be obtainable only in the guise of specialists. To fill its need for intelligent personnel, AGF had to express a need for men with specialized training.

One device was to make sure that the ASTP included courses of study useful to the ground arms. If the colleges taught such subjects, Army Ground Forces could claim students on the basis of their specialized training. AGF staff officers, in conference with the Army Specialized Training Division and with civilian educators, arranged for courses to be given in basic engineering, surveying, internal combustion engines, communications, and acoustics and optics. Training in most of these subjects could be of value to any ground arm; the course in acoustics and optics was designed for artillerymen.

Numerical requirements of the Ground Forces for graduates of the ASTP were submitted on 27 March 1943. Elaborate computations were made; though in the end they were not used, they illustrated the way in which the Army Ground Forces believed the program could be employed. The stated need for 1944 was 52,404 men, distributed among types of specialized training.

These men were to be assigned, in proportions computed by the Army Ground Forces, to the various ground combat arms. Graduates of the Advanced ASTP (except engineers) were too specialized for exact

assignment in the combat arms, and were less desired by the Army Ground Forces than were Basics (2-year college men). Later, in 1943, the Ground Forces called for 80 percent of Basics, hoping to obtain high-intelligence personnel for duty with troops as quickly possible.

Of these 52,404 ASTP graduates the Army Ground Forces proposed, in March 1943, that all the 16,103 4-year college men and 13,421 of the 2-year college men be allowed to attend officer candidate schools. The figures were based on the concept that 25 percent of officers should be college graduates, 25 percent should have two years of college, and 50 percent should be commissioned on grounds of performance in the field irrespective of education. The reduction of the Troop Basis in June 1943, reducing the anticipated requirements for officers, made it impossible to consider commissioning so many ASTP graduates, long before the ASTP itself came to a virtual end.

ASTP went into full operation on campuses in the spring of 1943. The first college units were recruited, not from new inductees, but from men already in training. During 1943 about 100,000 students for the program were taken from the three major forces, and about 50,000 from new inductees. Selection of the new inductees was by complex and constantly fluctuating procedures. At first the required AGCT score was 110—the same as for officer candidates. It was soon raised to 115. At first it was intended to rely on voluntary applications of the kind used in recruiting officer candidates and aviation cadets. This not proving feasible, all eligible enlisted men were automatically passed through a testing and screening process (frequently altered), after which commanders designated those to be sent to college. Those eligible consisted of all enlisted men (with various exceptions, such as men in alerted units), who had completed basic training or part of it, who if under twenty-two had had a high school education or its equivalent, and who if over twenty-two had had at least one year of college (with certain other conditions), and who in any case had an AGCT score of 115. Unit commanders, suffering constant drains to other activities, showed a want of alacrity in designating men for ASTP. Gen. George C. Marshall issued a memorandum explaining the ASTP and insisting on its support. Headquarters, Army Ground Forces, circulated this memorandum to the field for compliance.

The Army Ground Forces supplied about 47 percent of the ASTP trainees drawn from the three major commands in May–July 1943. Even superficially considered this was somewhat more than an even share, since the Ground Forces at their maximum comprised only 42 percent of the troops in the United States. In reality it was substantially more than an even share, since men with the required AGCT score of 115 were proportionately less numerous in the Ground Forces than in the Air or Service Forces.

Although the operation of preferential assignment policies had concentrated a large number of ASTP eligibles in the Army Air Forces, the latter supplied proportionately fewer men to the ASTP than did either the Ground or Service Forces during this initial period.

That men already trained and performing their jobs should be removed from troop units for a “specialized training” of rather distant military value was unavoidable under a principle that all enlisted men of a certain age and degree intelligence had a right to be considered for college. But the result of these removals was deplored as wasteful by officers of the Ground Forces. Although the number of men removed from units was relatively not large, those removed tended to be men who occupied key positions; the loss was especially heavy in key units. Units with enlisted men of high intelligence, such as headquarters companies, engineer topographical companies, and radio intelligence signal companies, suffered most. One company of the latter type had 81 out of 250 men selected for the ASTP. On the other hand, units with few men of the required intelligence could least afford to lose even one. The Army Ground Forces finally obtained a limitation on the number of men who might be selected from a given unit.

After July 1943, ASTP trainees came in increasing numbers from eligible men newly inducted into the Army. These were of three kinds: (1) inductees with an AGCT score of 115 or over; (2) enlisted reservists, or certain college students inducted into the Army but kept temporarily in a civilian status; and (3) A-12's, or certain high-school students who by pre-induction tests had established their eligibility for the ASTP.

Members of the first group were assigned on induction, as were inductees generally, to replacement training centers and to troop units, on the principle that they would later have the opportunity to go to

college through the screening process to which the whole Army was subject. Their subsequent selection for ASTP meant that replacement centers trained men who did not become replacements and that units trained men whom they could not keep. Since every inductee with an AGCT of 115 might go to college sooner or later, it was wasteful to train them except in segregated groups. Army Ground Forces proposed on 20 August 1943 that all men eligible for ASTP should be screened at reception centers and given basic training in special battalions, and that all ASTP quotas in the future should be filled from such special battalions only. The Army Specialized Training Division agreed, with amendments to assure that eligible individuals still in troop units should not lose the right to receive specialized training. In the autumn of 1943 progress was made toward concentrating the selection of ASTP candidates in reception centers. The flow of such candidates into units was thereby checked and the integrity of tactical units and replacement training centers better preserved. The deliberate withholding of high intelligence inductees from normal units was a price, however, which Army Ground Forces would have preferred not to pay.

Members of the second and third groups, enlisted reservists and A-12's, were already earmarked for the ASTP when they entered upon active duty. They had to have basic training before proceeding to ASTP units in the colleges. The War Department ordered that their basic training be given by Army Ground Forces. Army Ground Forces drew up a modified Infantry Mobilization Training Program and arranged to segregate the candidates in special branch immaterial training battalions. In this way the waste of training them in regular units would be avoided. The War Department estimated that the enlisted reservists and 1] A-12's earmarked for the ASTP would number 50,000, of whom 25,000 would begin basic training in June and 25,000 in July 1943. The Army Ground Forces provided facilities for 20,000 at Fort Benning and Camp Hood, available at this time because of the reduction in officer candidate quotas. Facilities for the remaining 30,000 were created at replacement training centers by stopping the production of 30,000 normal replacements.

The 50,000 expected trainees were slow in appearing. Only 17,152 were received by 15 August. Beds, equipment, training aids, enlisted cadres, and officer instructors for 32,848 men stood ready but idle. Of the total shortage of 32,848, the shortage of ASTP trainees expected in replacement training centers was 21,799. Twenty three battalions of replacements could have been in training with the facilities reserved for the ASTP.

With the invasion of Sicily in July 1943 a heavy demand for replacements set in. With Selective Service falling behind in the delivery of its quotas and with RTC quotas incorrectly adjusted to the actual rate of ground casualties, the replacement training centers could not meet the demand. Since the War Department now estimated that the remainder of the 50,000 ASTP trainees would become available in decreasing increments through January 1944, Army Ground Forces concentrated all ASTP basic training at Fort Benning and Camp Hood (later at Fort Benning only), in order to liberate the ASTP facilities at replacement training centers for ordinary replacement training. But time had been lost in the face of a replacement crisis that rapidly grew acute. The Army Ground Forces was obliged to take replacements from divisions and other units in training to meet the heavy current demand. Shortages reappeared, training was interrupted, and readiness of units for combat was delayed. The number of infantrymen taken from divisions for replacement purposes, about 26,000 by January 1944, was comparable to the number of replacements who might have begun training in the summer of 1943 if replacement training facilities had not been reserved for ASTP trainees who failed to appear. The ASTP thus happened to contribute to the quantitative crisis which prevailed in the Infantry at the end of 1943. This crisis was soon to overwhelm the ASTP.

Men began to return from the ASTP to troop units, after a term on the campus, in the late summer of 1943. Frequently they could not be so assigned as to use their specialized training. Nor could they be allowed to qualify for commissions; with the reduction of the mobilization program in June the need for additional officers in the ground arms almost disappeared, and the scanty quotas of AGF officer candidate schools were filled with college men of another type, the ROTC students whom the Army was legally obliged to allow to try for commissions.

Thus, toward the end of 1943 the Army Specialized Training Division faced the critical problems of the morale of its trainees and of its usefulness to the Army. It proposed in October 1943 that new military

occupational specialties be authorized by the War Department, that corresponding SSN's be listed in unit Tables of Organization, that the arms and services requisition men by these numbers, and that ASTP graduates be assigned to fill these requisitions with ratings as enlisted technicians in grades to be determined by the War Department. This was an effort to create jobs worthy of the effort expended by men in college. It was an attempt to fit demand to production. The consuming agencies, such as Army Ground Forces, were to use men designated as specialists, not because they sensed a need, but because such men were becoming available.

Army Ground Forces non-concurred in the proposal. Reasons given were that it would force commanders to ignore need, experience, and demonstrated leadership in making assignments; and that ASTP graduates, irrespective of their educational advantages, should demonstrate their ability in the unit to which they were assigned before receiving a promotion.

In January 1944 Headquarters, Army Ground Forces, went as far as it thought possible to meet the proposal by issuing an assignment guide to the field, listing the SSN's in which men with "specialized training" might suitably serve, and urging special care in the assignment of graduates of the advanced phase of the program. But the guide was not made mandatory, commanders were left free to use their own judgment, and it was insisted that the development of leaders, not the placement of specialists, must be the chief aim in employing men sent to college by the Army.

The ASTP, operating on a scale of 150,000 trainees, became especially vulnerable when personnel shortages threatened to impede military operations in late 1943. The ASTP served no need recognized as immediate by most elements in the Army.

Once the need for more and better combat troops became critical it was one of the easiest items in the Troop Basis to sacrifice.

On 5 November 1943, the G-3 of the War Department proposed a reduction of the ASTP to 30,000 trainees, largely in medical and related subjects; four-fifths of the men in the ASTP would return to active service. Army Ground Forces dispatched its concurrence to the War Department on the same day. The Troop Basis published on 15 January 1944, reflecting a compromise between various points of view, called for a gradual reduction of the ASTP to 62,190 by the end of 1944.

A month later this figure was more than halved. Both the replacement crisis and the alarm regarding the condition to which the ground arms, particularly the Infantry, had declined influenced the outcome. The efficiency of divisions in training was being gravely impaired by the wholesale transfer of their infantry privates to the replacement stream. Many of these same divisions were scheduled for early movement to take part in the impending invasion of western Europe. Men who had already received basic training were needed to refill their ranks. Meanwhile the War Department had come to the conclusion that the quality of enlisted personnel in the Infantry must be raised. General Marshall on 10 February 1944 informed the Secretary of War that 134,000 men already basically trained were required for the coming operation in France and that "the outstanding deficiency currently noted in our divisions is the number of noncommissioned officers who are below satisfactory standards of intelligence and qualities leadership." He recommended withdrawing all but 30,000 trainees from the Army Specialized Training Program. The alternatives which he presented were to cut the ASTP or to disband 10 divisions, 3 tank battalions, and 26 antiaircraft battalions.

The ASTP was immediately cut. A large number of its trainees, almost overnight, became infantry privates. They could not be used immediately to meet the need for more intelligent noncommissioned officers because of their lack of military training and experience, and because most units, with their privates withdrawn as overseas replacements, had at least a full complement, and sometimes a surplus, of noncommissioned officers. It was desired and expected that ASTP trainees would soon show their superiority over the older noncommissioned officers, win ratings, and become leaders of small units.

For its trainees, the ASTP was a series of disillusionments. Some, had they not been sent to college, would undoubtedly have gone to officer candidate schools, to the advantage both of themselves and of the Army Ground Forces, though it is true that recruiting for ASTP came at a time when OCS quotas were declining. Among civilian educators participating in the ASTP the abrupt termination of their efforts, though accepted as a military necessity, was difficult to understand. It seemed arbitrary, after repeated

declarations by the War Department of the importance of specialized training, suddenly to snatch away the young men undergoing such training, a select group numbering only 2 percent of the Army, for conversion into infantry privates.

The fact was that a crisis had been developing for two years in the ground arms. Quantitatively, the provision for combat troops in the Troop Basis, especially for infantrymen, left no margin of safety. Qualitatively, the ground combat arms had been persistently denied a proportionate share of high-intelligence personnel. The extension of ground combat in the last part of 1943 made the consequences fully apparent. They could not be ignored on the eve of the invasion of France. Conversion of manpower from the Air and Service Forces to the Ground Forces, though contemplated at this time, was difficult to effect. The sacrifice of the ASTP was one means, among others, of meeting the critical need for a speedy rehabilitation of the ground arms.

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