

ABSTRACT for 88<sup>TH</sup> MEETING OF THE CAMWS-SOUTHERN SECTION

*“The Rudder’s Guidance and the Curb’s Restraint”*: Classics, Education, and the US Military

“...he (Philip) considered that the task of training and educating his son was too important to be entrusted to the ordinary run of teachers of poetry, music and general education: it required, as Sophocles puts it ‘The rudder’s guidance and the curb’s restraint’ so he sent for Aristotle.”

Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, 7.2-3, trans. by Ian Scott-Kilvert

Since 1992 I have been involved in educating US and foreign military officers ranging from officer cadets to four-star generals, through the US Air Force’s professional military education (PME) system. The contemporary technological focus of much of Air Force PME has provided quite a challenge to a faculty member whose own educational background was steeped in the classics, majoring in Classics as an undergraduate and reading for the M.A. and Ph.D. in ancient history. But despite the administrative attempts to purge any material not “current and relevant”, I have achieved a measure of success in using the classics to teach a wide variety of subjects to military officers.

This paper examines the pedagogical challenge I have faced and suggests some sound reasons for including ancient curriculum content in the courses taught to military officers today. The examination is organized around three bodies of pupils. First, I will discuss the experience of teaching cadets at the US Air Force Academy in a curriculum that considers the dividing line between ancient and modern history to be the Wright Brothers’ first powered flight in 1903. Despite official prejudice and discouragement, I managed to insert classical content and courses in several key areas and began to grow a devoted group of faculty and students who were eager to learn and teach about the ancient world. This part of the paper will culminate in an analysis of my teaching an elective course entitled “The Roman Empire” which set the all-time record for enrollment for a special topics course in the history of the institution, clearly demonstrating a deep interest in the classical world among cadets.

The second body of students examined will be the future commanders of the military, more specifically mid-level officers. Teaching a seminar on Alexander the Great to students who have seen combat in Mesopotamia and Afghanistan adds a new twist to the classroom dynamic. I examine the very different challenges with teaching officers half-way through their careers and also the unique opportunity offered an educator teaching Advanced PME to a select group of designated “fast-track” officers. Particular focus will be given to the use of Thucydides, following Secretary of State George Marshall’s advice, and to the possibilities and pitfalls of gazing into the polished bronze of ancient soldiers’ armor and glimpsing the battles of today.

Finally, I spend part of the paper discussing the unique opportunity of teaching female cadets and officers, students who are often frustrated by the lack of leadership role models and gender-specific issues in traditional military history. My attempts at using ancient history to answer these concerns met with its own unique set of challenges and rewards, as well as giving me an understanding of why Athena is always depicted in ancient art as armed for war.