

## **White Paper for USMA Association of Graduates**

### **Retention of USMA Graduates on Active Duty: Should the Association of Graduates Address This Problem?**

by

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## **Apologia**

The beauty of a White Paper is that anyone can decide to read it—or not, to agree with it—or not. But it does afford the writer an opportunity to create a body of thought in the form and of the length that encourage careful or at least attentive reading. I am of the Old School, and the modern methods of communicating, such as chat rooms and list-serves require a quickness of reaction and an immediacy of thought that I do not possess. For me, following the threads of a discussion of a complex issue on an evanescent forum is an exercise in futility, as so many entries are tangential, spiky, and hardly do justice to complexity. The purpose of this White Paper is simple and limited: to illuminate what I consider a serious problem—retention of USMA graduates on active duty—which I believe should be addressed by the Association of Graduates and which I believe is not so being addressed. This is a think-piece, not a political manifesto. I hope the reader will enjoy it, and I hope it accomplishes its purpose.

## **Kudos to the Association of Graduates**

God bless the USMA Association of Graduates! As an organization and as people, it is indispensable to the health and welfare of both the Academy itself and of its graduates. Any one graduate may be familiar with only one or two of the AOG's activities, but they are manifold. The AOG provides diverse services to individuals, to classes, to societies, and to the Academy itself. The AOG publishes the *Assembly*, the *Register*, and numerous other documents. They keep the graduate community informed by means of a Web site, death notification service, newsletters, and directories. There is hardly a graduate organization function that one could think of that is not being done by the AOG. The list is exhausting; think of all the effort—and good will—that goes into implementing all these objectives of the Association. They helped make my class reunion (1944) a huge success just last May. This White Paper acknowledges all this value of the AOG.

## **And Yet...**

And yet, no organization is perfect. So it is with the AOG. The AOG has avoided one issue, apparently as a matter of choice. I am speaking, of course, about retention of USMA graduates on active duty. In the rest of this White Paper I will try to describe the nature and extent of the problem as I perceive it, give two reasons why it is important, provide some crude but accurate and useful statistical analysis, muse over the possible causes, explore possible remedies, and most important, suggest why the AOG should adopt this issue for continuing examination and consideration. Its purpose is to describe a situation which hopefully will be addressed in future meetings and activities of the AOG and its Board of Trustees.

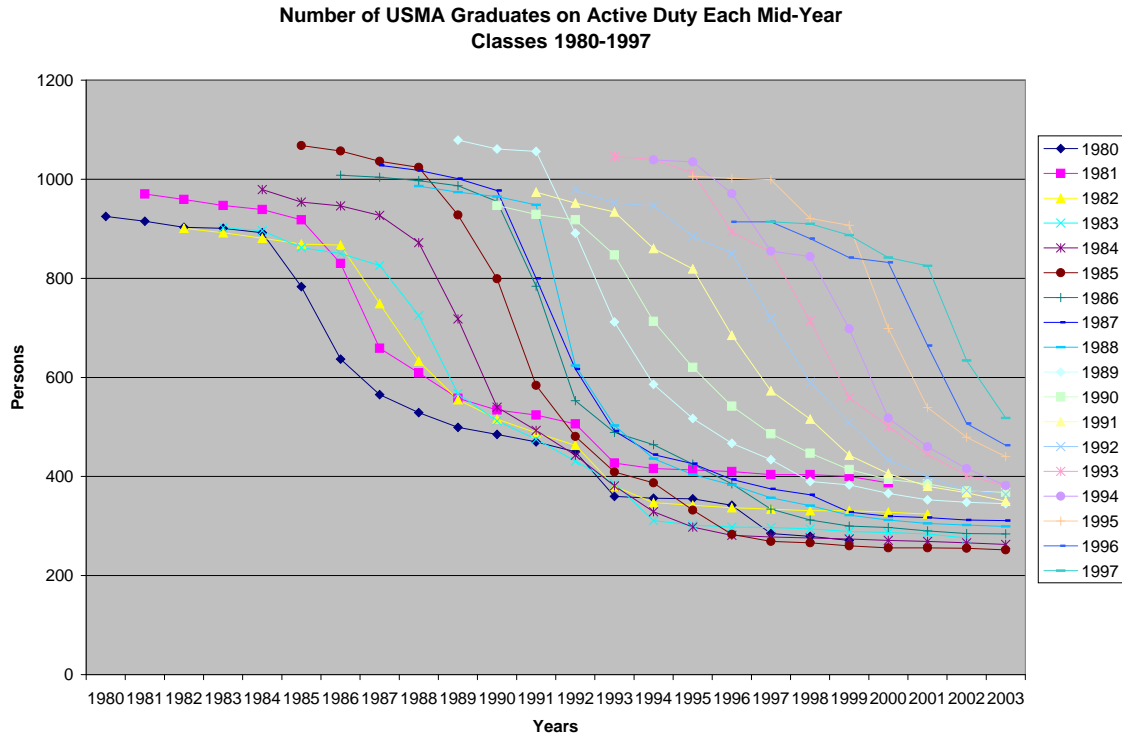
To provide thoughtful context for the rest of the paper, I will assert up front that the retention situation is dangerous and/or damaging in two major ways:

1. The situation begs the question: Why should the public subsidize such an expensive educational and developmental operation only to find that its output is diverted, early on, from its primary purpose?
2. The egress from the active duty Army of so much talent and presence, long before its useful service period has expired, is a loss of huge proportions which can be ill afforded at any time.

This is a thorny, complex, difficult, subtle problem that does not admit of quick or cheap solutions (assuming even that solutions are required). And assuming that the reader agrees with the two arguments I have just given for the importance of the subject, there is still the question of what, if anything, can or should the AOG do about it that the AOG is not already doing?

### **Some Simple Statistics**

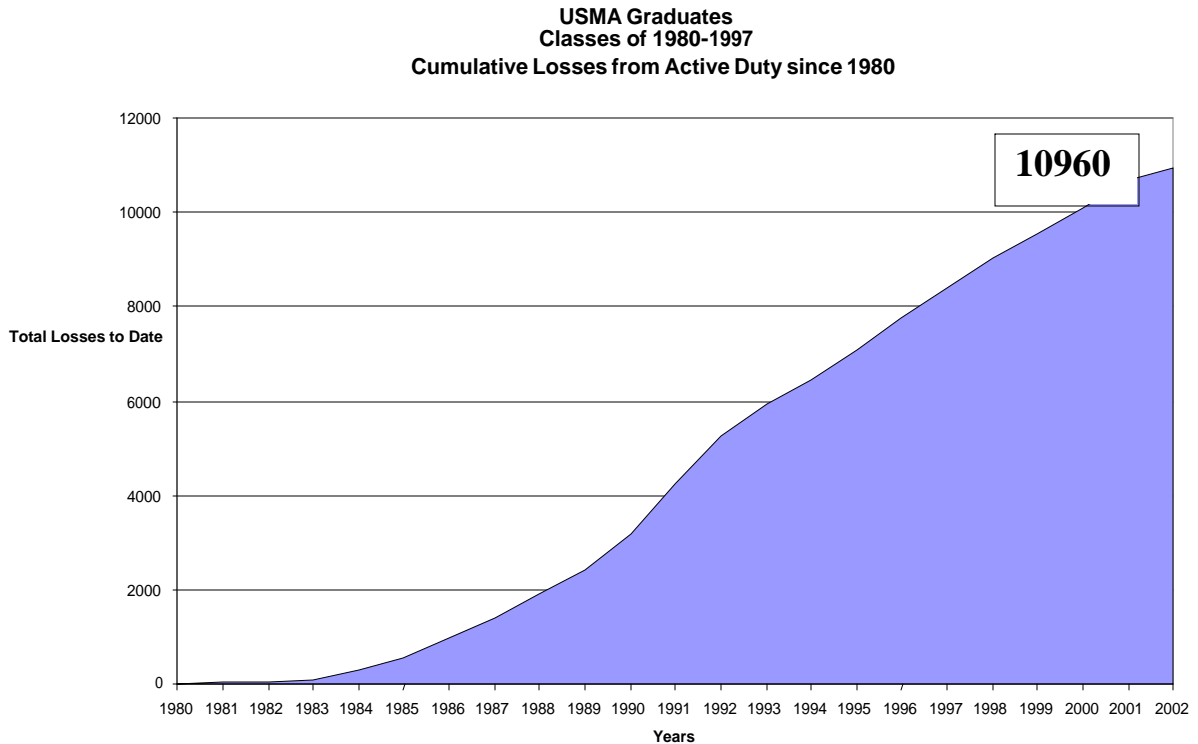
In order to keep this subject bounded. I offer two graphs. The first shows the fall-off of active duty members of classes from 1980 through to 1997. The second shows the cumulative loss to the U.S. Army of active duty officers beginning with that same Class of 1980. I have chosen 1980 arbitrarily because that class has gone into the 20+-year retirement cycle, and I do not wish to muddy up the waters by mixing in graduates who retire after twenty years with those who resign before twenty years. Admittedly, the statistics gloss over losses due to medical discharge, early retirements, and other non-resignation reasons, but those are in the noise level of the overall numbers.



**Figure 1. Number of USMA Graduates on Active Duty Each Mid-Year, Classes 1980-1997**

Data courtesy of OPA/USMA

Graph Copyright © 2004 Geoffrey Cheadle



**Figure 2. USMA Graduates Classes of 1980-1997 Cumulative Losses from Active Duty since 1980**

Data courtesy of OPA/USMA

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I believe that the graphs are self-explanatory. They admit of a number of conclusions:

- First, all classes have shown significant drop-offs, mostly in years 5-7. That suggests that the losses represent a chronic cause and effect.
- Second, the active duty numbers in each class descend over about a three-year period after the first four or five years from around 1000 to around 250, which is a very significant drop.
- Third, some classes show much greater early losses than the rest. This is probably due to circumstances which are beyond the scope of this paper (e.g., changes of Army policy).
- Fourth, the shapes of the loss curves remain similar over the total range, suggesting that the causes and effects are similar over all the indicated classes.
- Fifth, in the twenty plus years of the graph, the Army has lost at least 10960 graduates before twenty years—the equivalent of about ten classes at the Academy.
- Sixth, the rate shows no signs of decreasing. By simple extrapolation, it can be expected to continue in years to come.

Assuming that losses on the scale indicated are alarmingly high, the fifth bullet above indicates why it is imperative that all graduate resources be brought to bear on this situation. Once again, what is at stake here is the future of the Military Academy and the highly undesirable loss to the Army of qualified graduates. I will have a few thoughts about this further on, but first let's examine the past.

## **The Past is Prologue**

One advantage of being older is that one develops a multi-generational outlook. Being a history buff, I believe that we can learn about today from looking at (not imitating) the past. I have seen the Army changing greatly over the years, and this probably has a bearing on the present. Let me elaborate.

**The Old Army (WWI--WW2):** I grew up in the Old Army. My father was Class of 1913, Infantry. We moved from place to place. The bad news was that pay was very low. My father was 17 years a major (better than 17 years a captain, admittedly, but the pay was not that much more). The good news is that there were innumerable fringe benefits. We sometimes had quarters (large brick or multi-story wood) or a housing allowance enough to live comfortably on the economy. One could buy almost anything through the PX at substantial discounts. The QM laundry would pick up and deliver, even out in civilian areas. Soldiers were available to help with projects and intra-city moves. On post it was possible to have orderlies ("strikers") or even trustees from the stockade to help with the household chores. The officers clubs were great bargains and available for all kinds of personal functions. In short, perks made up for lack of hard cash.

Even more important than perks in the Old Army was the mystique. We were "Army," and we enjoyed the feeling of being in an almost religious congregation. There were so few officers that they tended to know each other. The uniforms—ah, the uniforms! The last era of pinks and greens, the Sam Browne belt, and britches and boots. Army officers were distinctive and rightly proud. They went their austere way, making themselves ready to fight wherever and whenever the country called. That was their understood *raison d'être*: service in combat. And very few resigned or even retired after twenty years. Officer professional skills—except for the Engineers who built bridges and dams—did not include what corporate America was in the market for. Retention was not a problem. Clouds were on the horizon, however. The *Army Navy Journal* of July 1930 reported that "resignations in the Air Corps during the past fiscal year set a new record of 27." Reasons given for losing Air Corps and Corps of Engineer officers was that "private employment promises better financial returns." This is probably the main reason for most resignations now as well as then, but the avalanche had not yet started.

**The Post-War Army (1945-1970):** (An aside: at my age "The War" always means the Second World War, so Post-War means after WWII.). Now everything began to change. From big changes like taking away PX purchase privileges and adding surcharges to commissary purchases to other changes like the uniform. The War caused a huge expansion of the Army, which stayed large even after. Now officers didn't generally

know each other, and a very large percentage were not graduates. The Doolittle Commission deliberately democratized the Army. The uniform became drab (the idea, as I understood it, was that officers should not be lordly as compared to enlisted persons). The uniform became so plain that an Air Force classmate of mine was mistaken for an usher twice at the Metropolitan Opera House.

In pay, where it hurts, the situation was miserable. The pay scales did not inflate, but the perks were taken away. Seldom could one obtain soldiers to help with moves, for example, and special ordering through the PX on expensive items became non-existent. These and like restrictions made the effective take-home pay of officers go way down. One heard true stories about soldiers/airmen on food stamps, and the situation for families of junior grade officers was as bad during the Korean War.

The Army retained a certain amount of its religious congregation flavor, but that was fast eroding. One stopped hearing about "The Army" as a special way of life, about dedication of officers to preparing for the next conflict. I believe that resignations began to rise in these times, but not right away. There was obvious pull from the civilian work community. West Point graduates now had appeal for corporate America. It was recognized by CEOs and their recruiters that graduates had a combination of skills and attitude which was hard to equal on the civilian market.

During this period there was a certain amount of momentum left over from pre-War times. Graduates who were veterans of WWII and Korea apparently felt committed to a career. At least the five-years-and-out syndrome had not appeared. My class (1944) saw most of its graduates stay on active duty for thirty-year careers. But times were changing.

**The Post Vietnam War Army (1970 on):** It would be hard to catalog the changes in graduates' attitudes and circumstances after Vietnam. There was the bad public attitude toward anything military which abounded for years after Vietnam. In this unfriendly climate, I believe the main influences attracting graduates away from active duty were two-fold: the opportunity to work in exciting jobs for far greater pay and to enjoy far greater location stability in civilian life on the one hand and DA personnel policies on the other. On the outside, there arose the realization of corporate managements that graduates could be enticed out and would make marvelous new hires.

Probably as a result of this negativity toward all things military, I feel that the idea of the Army as a career, as a way-of-life, as a contribution to the country's welfare, hasn't persisted. Our fathers had it and we had it, but in both cases it came with the territory. We stayed in because there was nothing in particular that drew us outside. Also, we were fighting wars, in which we all had important roles to play.

The reason for all this nostalgia is to search for overall, underlying reasons for the increase in early resignations in the last thirty years. Pay is part. Instability is part. Job satisfaction is part. Attitude of cadets and new graduates is part. DA personnel policies is part. Congressional funding is part. This is a very complex situation. The purpose of this

paper is not to solve the problem, however. Rather, it is to highlight that there is a problem, suggest how it might have come about, and explore what the Association of Graduates could do about it, if indeed it should do anything.

### **Do We Have a Problem At All?**

Some people have said that there is no retention problem, or if there is one, it is DA's problem, not the AOG's. After all, the Army is what DA and the Congress make it, and in their greater wisdom this may well include losing graduates as time goes on. If the graduates who have resigned are content, why worry? I contend that it is not part of the Academy's mission to form cadets into officers for the purpose of leaving active duty. It's that simple. It may be said that the Academy has always provided graduates to the civilian community, so what's new? I guess what is new is the magnitude of the losses. There is also the consideration that every graduate who leaves is using his/her background for a purpose not intended by the Academy and probably not, a priori, by DA or the Congress. I admit that such graduates usually contribute 4-7 years of active duty service as a commitment, but they were educated and formed for a career of twenty or more years and for possible future conflicts. I am not imputing any bad faith on those who have left. They did what was asked and did it well.

But examine the cumulative loss rate in Figure 2. The end amount of 10960 is appalling. The final cumulative figure amounts to approximately ten classes! Admittedly the Department of the Army sanctioned and authorized those losses, which (one would hope) means that our nation did not need those officers on active duty or at least would not fund them. One is tempted to say, if the Army doesn't really want them, then they are right to take their talents elsewhere. But all such reasoning, while probably correct, does not negate the ill effect of the loss to active duty Army of so many graduates. If nothing else, this represents an appalling failure of the System to optimize the use of its human resources. We could get bogged down arguing about the good that is done by civilian grads and their benefit to the overall community, or how some of these grads retain Reserve or National Guard commissions. Even admitting all of that, the net loss is appalling.

### **OK, So It's a Problem—But it is not the AOG's Problem:**

If we get by the first mental hurdle and admit that it is not a good thing that all those grads resign early, the next obvious question is, what can be done about it and who should be doing whatever that is? I admit right now that it is a DA problem, since DA is responsible for the active duty Army. Also it is the Administration's problem, because these are troops serving our Commander-in-Chief. And it is the responsibility of the Congress, because it takes money and legislative policy to organize, train and equip a fighting force. By the same token, it is the Supe's problem, because the Academy has a role in motivating its grads to stay on active duty. The issue is so complex that all those agencies have their own pieces of the overall retention problem. I contend that the AOG



also has its own piece. Regardless of whether the AOG can or cannot actually do anything to affect retention, it stands to reason that the AOG should at least be actively concerned with a problem of such magnitude, whose operating entity is graduates. The AOG is, after all, the Association of *Graduates* .

There is another argument that I have heard, to the effect that there really isn't anything the AOG can do to remedy the problem (if there is a problem), so let's get back to what we can do with reasonable hope of success (all the other programs). That makes me think of a prisoner of war camp in which the inmates say: Don't have an escape committee because it's impossible to escape. A problem this serious should have an on-going, resourceful effort placed against it by the AOG. There must be some fruitful enterprises that could be undertaken. The Long Gray Line is a formidable social unit, with thousands of influential persons in all civilian walks of life. Surely some good could be done by all those grads if they were only guided and motivated. Some obvious activities suggest themselves:

- Analyze the problem and derive possible remedies.
- Lobby lawmakers for pay and allowances (and whatever else suggests itself).
- Talk to Administration officials to promote remedies.
- Make presence known throughout society to encourage the Army as a career.
- Offer the Supe help in redefining goals and processes as necessary.
- Work to restore permanent commission to graduates
- Keep the subject alive and active in the AOG itself.

### **But the AOG Has Considered Retention and Has a Program:**

The way an average graduate (like me) can find out what the AOG is doing is to go on-line and read the minutes of the meetings of the AOG Board of Trustees as well as to make inquiries of the class member of the Board (if there is one). I have printed out the minutes from as far back as October 2000. The subject of retention has appeared only two or three times, and then as a flash in the pan. In February 2001 it was noted that "Pais '67 reported on ad-hoc committee meetings concerning this issue [i.e., retention] over the last few months. He said he would come back in May with a White Paper on what we can do to help retain graduates." General discussion was recorded on the subject. In May 2001 "Pais '67 noted that the first draft of the White Paper would be prepared within the next 30 days." A list of fifteen recommendations (apparently the distillation of the draft White Paper) was included as Enclosure 6. The White Paper Recommendations appear comprehensive, cogent, and doable.

At the October 2001 meeting, "Pais '67 reported for the ad hoc committee. The recommendations were now down to ten, which were discussed and approved by the Board." These are too long to quote verbatim. Rather than ignore them, however, I will paraphrase:

- Endorse an Army TRADOC report
- A letter to society leaders
- ASSEMBLY articles

- Congratulatory letters
- Support retention but make career assistance available
- Develop list servers
- Special encouragement to Societies
- Publicize Internet initiatives

The work done by the ad-hoc committee was commendable, useful, and timely. By approving the recommendations, the Board affirmed that there are actions which can be taken, on an ongoing basis, to encourage the retention of graduates. The recommendations are well thought out and worthy of follow-up and implementation. Unfortunately, there is no record of either follow-up or implementation. The issue of retention was not made a mandatory concern of any committee. There were no provisions made for feedback or metrics to judge progress. One looks in vain in the remainder of board meeting minutes to date for any reference at all to retention, even mention of the word.

Also, I personally believe that these recommendations, while useful, fail in one crucial respect: They do not acknowledge that actions by DA, Administration, and Congress will be necessary, and the Long Gray Line has many smart and influential members to encourage a climate of acceptance in those arenas for retention-friendly policies.

Actually, it is questionable whether the ad hoc committee's recommendations raised any awareness in the AOG itself. The recommendations do not appear on the AOG's web site, as do other minutes of the Board of Trustees. I had to ask the AOG specifically to forward them to me. Even more important, there is absolutely no evidence of any implementation and follow-up after the recommendations were "discussed and approved by the Board." One would rightly expect to see the ad hoc committee turned into a full committee, with reporting responsibilities at Board of Trustee meetings. Or at least have a continuing agenda item on retention.

Retention is a very difficult enterprise on all counts. It will not happen unless somebody is supporting the proposition that more graduates should stay on active duty than are now staying. I am told that many if not most of the Board's Trustees are in civilian life (that is, before their classes have hit twenty years). Perhaps this is because they have more time and stability (and, usually and very significantly, more money) than active duty officers of all grades. I laud them for their sacrifice of time and talent to the good of the Association and of the Graduates. I would not think of impugning their motivations for resigning, and obviously they are helping the Long Gray Line now. It has been said to me, however, that such grads, because of their own situations, are not motivated to encourage retention goals. I trust this is not so. I credit them unreservedly with wisdom to do the right thing about retention. It is apparent from what I have said in this White Paper that I believe that more retention is necessary and that the AOG Board of Trustees has a continuing major role in furthering retention.

Reading Internet chatter among graduates concerning retention suggests that retention is not a problem. Or it is a problem but not the AOG's. Or that it is dangerous to raise the

issue because it could cause harm to the Academy (funding). Or it is a newer fact of military life. Or the Army can't tolerate as many captains as lieutenants, or majors as captains, etc. Or nobody's complaining so what's the pain? It seems that there are as many attitudes toward retention as there are graduates. I have read the many PowerPoint and Excel presentations on this subject. They are overloaded with statistics, some germane, some confusing, some extraneous (all this in my humble opinion, of course).

As a (hopefully) simple approach to considering retention as a possible problem, I suggest we consider first (or again) a very simple syllogism, as follows:

- Losing all those graduates from active duty is bad.
  - It raises the question, why USMA?
  - It diverts valuable resources from their primary reason for being
- It involves graduates
- It should, therefore, be of interest to the Association of Graduates
- It is not of interest now, or if it is, that fact is not reflected in the minutes of the Board.
- Therefore, the AOG should address retention as a major and continuing AOG issue.

I rest my case.