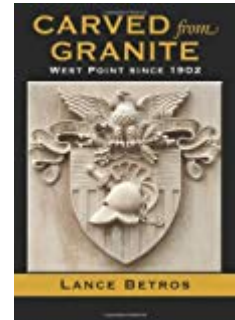


Lance Betros. *Carved from Granite: West Point since 1902.* College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2012. xvii + 458 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-60344-787-4.



Reviewed by Peter Schifferle

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Lance Betros, formerly the head of the History Department at West Point, pulls few punches in his history of the last one hundred years of the United States Military Academy at West Point. However, although exceedingly useful for future historians working on assessment of precommissioning education and/or training, *Carved from Granite* rests uncomfortably within the context of several significant histories of officer education in the US Army in the twentieth century. Studies of field grade officer education (this reviewer's 2010 *America's School for War*, for one) and studies of US Army doctrine (the books by Michael Matheny and Walter E. Kretchik), and even a comparative history of German interwar officer education and that of American cadets and commissioned officers (Joerg Muth's very controversial discussion of the Fourth Class system in *Command Culture* [2013]) all attempt to sort out whether the officer education and doctrine systems worked well, adequately, or extremely poorly, specifically in preparation for WWII. There are also very important recent studies emerging from the Center of Mili-

tary History (here Edgar F. Raines Jr.'s *Rucksack War* [2011] comes to mind) that raise issues of combat effectiveness, efficiency, and defeat or victory, all in part based on officer competence as commanders, staff officers, and planners. *Carved from Granite* fits into this historiographic niche of officer precommissioning education and leader development, but an assessment of the competence of officers based on all precommissioning educational systems is not Betros's aim. He is only concerned with the system at West Point, not all precommissioning systems. To discuss all the methods of commissioning in the twentieth century would take several historians. What Betros has achieved is a functional and comprehensive assessment of the internal workings of the Academy in the last hundred years, although one clearly focused on the issues of governance.

Betros instead went to a detailed assessment of the USMA narrative—looking at what changes occurred at the Academy, which he finds more prevalent than continuity. This is an accurate reflection of where the Academy itself rests today.

Reformers continue to ask if a West Point education is worth the effort or the price.etros does not answer these questions, at least not directly, but he does offer a comprehensive set of assessment possibilities. His assessment rests on two characteristics that waxed and waned over the last hundred years. The first characteristic of an Academy education is the paternalistic nature of the system, and the relationship of the faculty with the cadets. As it began to be replaced by a more realistic attitude towards the development of leaders, paternalism slowly lost most of its grip on the Academy, but it took a century. Admitting the existence of this paternalistic system, and its stifling effect on education, is still a significant challenge for the Academy.

The second is a system of attrition which frequently generated resignations, course failures, and honor code violations, as well as the need to know, understand, and follow all Army regulations, not to mention specific incidents of near-hazing. From the perspective of the teaching faculty, the leadership of West Point, and the Academic Board and other governance entities, attrition was a given in the concept of education, known as the Syvanus Thayer method of instruction, implemented at the founding of the Academy. Based on the principle of daily recitations and frequent “re-sectioning,” which helped to identify cadets who were being overwhelmed by the academic grind, much of the Thayer system remained in place until the liberalizing atmosphere of the post-Vietnam War critics and reformers of the Army reached the post on the Hudson River. Some liberalization occurred in the 1950s and early 1960s, but the bulk of changes occurred from the mid-1970s onward. This attrition was based on a paternalistic notion that the faculty always knew best and that cadets were immature and not to be trusted out of sight of the faculty.

Deeply intertwined with paternalism and attrition are issues associated with excessive focus on student competitive national collegiate sports

teams. The slow movement from intramural sports, based on another paternalistic notion that gentlemen compete in sports for the leadership and physical development of the cadets, has gone so far as result in instructions to have a cadet team in every sport recognized as intercollegiate. To field competitive teams, West Point began an expensive, resource-intensive effort to recruit high-school star athletes, including allowing selection from among those whose intellect was problematic for a successful four years as a cadet and on-time graduation.

Using these two concepts, paternalism and attrition,etros then offers a chapter on certain specific issues, starting with the old West Point, and issues left over from the nineteenth century. He then devotes a chapter to each significant issue faced by the leaders and cadets at West Point. Influenced by recent accreditation issues,etros devotes a chapter each to governance (including the byzantine influence of the Academic Board), admissions, academics, physical training and competition, military training, leader development, and character building. With these eight chapters,etros does an excellent job of making his findings very accessible to future historians and others interested in the manifold developments at West Point.

The reader may become a bit frustrated with *Carved from Granite's* near isolation from the narrative of the American unlimited wars of the last 110 years--World War I, World War II, Korea and Vietnam are all dealt with by telling the story of the decisions reached by the senior faculty as the nation approached war, or found itself in a fight.etros tells this story only from the perspective of the administration and bureaucracy at both West Point and in Washington. The reaction of each administration was to shorten classes, conduct early graduations, and debate concerns about the military readiness of cadets who graduated and were commissioned at least two years earlier than expected. Butetros does not provide

the human history. Adding the individual stories of one or two cadets, from selection to retirement or death in combat, would have made a slightly longer but much more powerful narrative. For narratives of those classes that went immediately into combat, or that graduated in peacetime but sooner or later faced war, other books will have to suffice.

Since Betros settled on a thematic approach, with chronological discussion within each theme, the reader is a bit challenged to visualize what West Point was like in, say 1917, or during the Depression, or what a cadet's experience was like in 1939, as the United States began to prepare for war with Germany.

Betros does offer a detailed assessment of the two largest scandals in USMA history--the 1951 honor crisis, involving many members of the football team under the legendary Earl Blaik, and the 1977 electrical engineering violators of the honor code. The pages of *Granite* that discuss the changing honor code system, most of which came after the 1951 crisis, provide glimpses into the daily cadet activities at West Point.

The majority of Betros's themes of governance, admissions, academics, physical skills, intercollegiate athletics, military training, leader development, and character building would resonate on most university and college campuses undergoing periodic accreditation. As Betros describes change and continuity--his primary thesis is that West Point was more about change in the twentieth century than continuity--the reader is challenged to see this with the same clarity as the author. Different educational missions should drive different forms of academic expertise, leader development, and physical development.

Here is where Betros could have produced a stronger case against the twin failures of USMA in the last three decades. Under pressure from "old grads," a series of superintendents, commandants and Masters of the Sword have moved the Academy away from its core mission of developing lead-

ers for the future armed forces of the United States. Recognizing the need to recruit from a wider pool of intellectual talent, the leaders appear fascinated with remedial education, especially at the West Point Preparatory School, the source of remedial education for some 15 percent of each incoming class at the Academy, and with intercollegiate athletics and the athletes who must be recruited from a population of young men and women who initially had no idea that they could gain admission to the Academy, or even wanted to consider it. According to Betros, and substantiated by his sources, neither of these two types of incoming cadets will remain in the Army ten years after graduation. If the school instead sought to commission some of the finest minds in the nation, and treat physical conditioning as a developmental task, then the number of retained graduates would increase markedly.

As the reader approaches the conclusion of *Granite*, the consistent organizing principle of the book becomes clearer. Betros has provided a clear prescription for increasing success at USMA. Although he could have used a chronological approach, his organization of the material around specific themes suffers from an overarching aim both to present evidence but more importantly to demonstrate that the Academy has been a consistent source of some of the best leader development, intellectual mastery, physical fitness, and team building for the past 100 years. However, these themes would have been significantly stronger--or at least more interesting--if he had added three or four pages about a individual cadet's life at West Point, and what he or she did in their career in service to the nation. The biggest weakness of *Carved from Granite* is that Betros only does this once, at the very end of the book.

Betros states in his conclusion, "By the early twenty-first century, the Academy had achieved a reputation as an elite undergraduate institution and one of the premier leader development institutions in the world" (p. 302). Well, perhaps. How

could a historian ever substantiate that claim? Perhaps an assist from graduates, and their narratives of their success or failure as military officers, would have helped.

Betros closes the book with a “coda” of four pages. Here the story of a West Point graduate who served in the Army Special Forces at the very start of the war in Afghanistan. It is a short biography of Jason Amerine, USMA class of 1993, a junior officer commanding a Special Forces A Team that directly supported Hamid Kharzai’s return to power in Afghanistan. This outcome was made possible by Amerine’s leadership and the training he conducted for his team before deployment. Amerine’s progress as a leader came via the intense education he received as a student in the Infantry Officer Basic Course, the Captains’ Career Course, and ranger school, and through his on-the-ground experiences in war. What served as the foundation for his success was USMA, where this officer developed both the character and the intellect to persevere against hardship and think through the issues associated with advising a future Afghanistan president.

For Betros, this expertise, competence, and willing admission of error and needs, is best developed at USMA, and would be even more effective if the Academy could slowly replace an overemphasis on intercollegiate athletics and the extra year of preparation of soldiers who need five years to complete the four-year USMA education. Neither, according to Betros, results in long-term, high-quality officers serving in the armed forces of the country. The nation does not need more athletes who resign their commissions as soon as they can, nor officers who cannot handle the academic challenge of an undergraduate education at the Academy. Betros’s conclusion is crystal clear: athletes and the mentally challenged need not apply, or be recruited by the admissions office. A return to the founding nature of West Point, and its continual challenge to remain simultaneously engaged with American culture and

still produce graduates of the first order, remains the mission of the United States Military Academy.

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