

Rhodes Scholars – the First of Six

By the time Lieutenant Colonel Leigh Gignilliat departed for military service in France during World War I, he had already demonstrated a breadth of vision which belied the Academy's midwestern provincialism. Edwin and Bertram Culver were already strong supporters of international growth and Gignilliat's successful Schoolboy Camps of 1915-17 had led to the school's incorporation into the newly formed ROTC movement.

Returning from Europe in 1919, he demonstrated a growing sophistication about the world and was anxious to introduce men from the finest universities in Europe to the Academy's academic programs. For the next decade new faculty arrived from Spain, France, Russia, and Great Britain. Of particular interest to Gignilliat were Americans who were Rhodes Scholars. His brother-in-law, William Frederick Fleet, a graduate of the University of Virginia, was one of the first men selected by Oxford in 1904. In the post-war period, Gignilliat set out to employ more men who had passed muster of this great university. Five joined the faculty between 1920 and 1923.

The following description of Rhodes Scholar William Alexander Fleet CMA 1899 appeared in "Oxford of Today, 1923, and included the following:

He was nearly twenty-one but looked younger. He had a frank, boyish, and guileless face. But there was nothing soft about him. He played lawn tennis for the University and Rugby for the College. He was not a great Scholar, but got a Third Class in Classical Honor Moderations. It was impossible not to like him. Nor could you take him for anything but what he was, a fine Southern gentleman.

In "The First 50 Years of the Rhodes Trust – 1903-53," a lengthy paragraph noted:

[William A. Fleet] decided that his best course at Oxford was to take Honours Moderations, the work for which required two years of his Scholarship. On his return to his country he became a teacher in one of [its] most important secondary schools. As the war went on he became

more and more convinced that he himself owed some kind of personal service to the cause of the Allies. The result was that in 1916 he resigned his position, returned to England, enlisted in the English Army, and was given a commission as a Lieutenant in the Grenadier Guards.

He was killed May 18, 1918, near Arras, by a German bomb. No Rhodes Scholar who has ever gone to Oxford has done more truly the work which the Founder intended – of cultivating good relations between America and England. His record at Oxford is one which the coarse thumb and finger of statistics cannot measure. But his character, his enthusiasm, his modesty, and his capacity for friendship make his career a tie of flesh and blood and affection between all those of both countries whose good fortune it was to know him.

A FAMILY OF SERVICE TO EDUCATION

The fire that destroyed the Missouri Military Academy in 1896 was a disaster to the residents of Mexico, Missouri, and singularly to its superintendent, Alexander Frederick Fleet. Six years earlier this Confederate veteran had invested his savings of \$7,000, along with capital provided by town fathers, to start the school. By the morning of September 25, the investment had gone up in smoke.

All good Culver men and women know of Henry Harrison Culver's famous telegram – "You have the boys. I have the buildings. Let's get together." Fleet's response to Culver's invitation was prompt and in the affirmative. Twelve days later, he arrived with seventy-two cadets and part of his faculty who, like their employer, had been left jobless.

Opening legalese aside, the agreement set forth the following: Mr. Culver would make no claims on the income earned by Colonel Fleet at MMA and he waived all first semester tuition fees for the boys brought to Culver. Fleet, however, was to pay first semester salaries and expenses of the four faculty who came with him to Indiana (two were gone by the end of

the school year and the others, Bert Greiner and Hugh Glascock, were among the Academy's earliest giants).

Starting on January 1, 1897, Mr. Culver assumed full financial responsibilities for the new arrivals. Under his part of the agreement he would receive five percent from the *gross* annual income of the school in consideration for his investment of \$70,000 in facilities and physical plant. Fleet's return would be predicated upon his managerial successes. He would receive all *net* profits up to \$5,000, after which he and Culver would divide any excess equally. Tuition was set at \$375, based on an enrollment of approximately one hundred cadets.

Improvements to facilities, new construction, etc., would be borne by Mr. Culver. Parenthetically, Fleet was offered an opportunity to invest in these projects, but he rejected an equity position in any new construction. Perhaps memories of that tragic fire in Missouri on night on Sept. 24, 1896, had left an indelible imprint in his mind. At forty-nine years of age, future risk-taking held little attraction.

Fleet, for the closing months of October, November, and December in 1896, received a monthly compensation of \$100. Thereafter, and for the remainder of the contract, he received \$300 per month, provided earnings justified such an allowance. Culver also provided, at no cost, a dwelling, meals for Fleet and his family in the Mess Hall, and authorized \$300 for "beds, bedding, carpets and other necessary furnishings" for his home. The dwelling specified in the contract was a large, white, clapboard structure that stood between Main Barrack and the lake.

Finally, it was agreed that both principals to the contract "be allowed to put into the Academy three boys free of expense, as to board and tuition." This provision was applied to Culver's son, Knight K., nephew Wallace C., and grandson Edwin R. Jr. and Fleet's sons John Sedden, William Alexander, and Reginald.

WILLIAM ALEXANDER FLEET

Availing himself of this special agreement, William A. Fleet quickly became the academic leader in his class. He was a member of *The Vedette* staff, held the Academy's tennis championship, and rose to the rank of sergeant in the Corps of Cadets. While he was recognized by his classmates and faculty for his mental endowment, Fleet was better remembered for "his

unusual qualities of heart, his unselfish, clean and wholesome life,” according to his Latin instructor, Hugh Glascock.

Like his father and older brother, he attended the University of Virginia and distinguished himself as a scholar of the first order. In his senior year he was nominated for a Rhodes Scholarship, and when he won approval of the Oxford committee, became the first representative of Mr. Jefferson’s University in the initial year of the prestigious award.

He left for England in 1904 and began two years of study, social life, and athletic competition with some of the British Commonwealth’s finest intellects. Fleet returned to America in 1906 and went to Princeton as a member of its faculty. It was there that he became associated with its president, Woodrow Wilson. In 1911 Fleet returned to Culver and was made a captain, an instructor in Latin and Greek, and aide to the new superintendent, Lt. Col. Gignilliat.

Following Wilson’s election to the U.S. presidency in 1912, Gignilliat approached the War Department and requested an invitation to escort former Indiana Governor and now Vice President Thomas Marshall in the Inaugural Parade. His solicitation was met with immediate rejection. No vice president had ever had an escort and the Army was not about to extend a precedent-establishing invitation to a military school from Indiana. Alas, the generals had not seen Gignilliat mobilize his alumni force.

Knowing of his aide’s earlier service as a member of the Princeton faculty and his friendship with Wilson, Gignilliat sent William Fleet off to Trenton, New Jersey to call on the president-elect. His mission was successful and he hand-carried a note from Wilson to the Army chief-of-staff which read: “Mr. Marshall, by all means, must have an escort next March fourth. I will consider it a personal favor.” The chief of staff understood the subtleties of the message and the troop was assigned a position directly before and behind the vice president’s carriage. The remainder of the Corps of Cadets followed in the van of the parade on March 4, 1913.

Fleet, not surprisingly, was greatly affected by the war in Europe. In 1916 he resigned from the Academy and sailed for England where he joined the British Army. He was commissioned as a lieutenant and joined the first battalion of the Grenadier Guards. He was killed in action on May 18, 1918,

at the age of 35. He is buried at the British cemetery at Saulty in the Department of Palais-de-Calais.