

Gignilliat Sets the Stage

Culver's Schoolboy Training Program – 1915-17

Robert B.D. Hartman

For its first two years of operation the Culver Military Academy wallowed under the confused leadership of an Episcopal priest and an incompetent army major. The first was unable to manage, the second unable to recruit, and both failed to deal with the “military” issues relevant to the operation of a military school. By the fall of 1896, Henry Harrison Culver's grand experiment on Lake Maxinkuckee was moribund and nearing collapse.

In a wonderful piece of historical serendipity, his third effort to find the perfect leader proved the charm. Colonel Alexander Frederick Fleet, a Confederate veteran, a widely recognized classics scholar, and the superintendent of the Missouri Military Academy, was dealt a cruel hand when his school burned to the ground in September of 1896. Sensing the opportunity to save his own school, the quick-thinking Henry Harrison Culver extended an invitation to Fleet to bring his students, and faculty to Indiana. He proposed an acceptable deal and less than two weeks later Fleet arrived with 72 cadets and five faculty. It was the transfusion of life for the Culver Military Academy.

Fleet observed a corps of cadets that was disorganized and in need of a controlling hand. With Henry Harrison Culver's blessing, he contacted a placement agency in Chicago and solicited assistance in finding a youthful and aggressive graduate of a military college to serve as his commandant of cadets and second in command. He found his man in a 22-year old graduate of the Virginia Military Institute, Class of 1895, Leigh Robinson Gignilliat (Gin-i-let). On a snowy night in early January of 1897, he reported to Fleet at his headquarters in Main Barrack and began a 42-year career as Culver's most illustrious leader.

His designation as commandant placed him second in command with the rank of major. The Academy's military system was internal and bore no relation to regular army rank or tenure. It was, in fact, referred somewhat derisively by the professional military as a “Wrought Iron Range” rank. This proved embarrassing for Gignilliat since two of Fleet's stalwarts from Missouri Military Academy, Bert Greiner and Hugh Glascock, were captains. Nevertheless, they worked without rancor and in time, “The Three Gs” were recognized as the heart of Academy leadership.

Parenthetically, Gignilliat's own rank traveled the path from a W.I.R. major to a Lt. Colonel, Indiana Reserves in 1910, a Lt. Colonel in the Infantry Reserve Corps in 1916, and Lt. Colonel in the National Army of the U.S. in 1917. After service in France as G-2 for the 84th Division, he was promoted to Colonel in the Reserve Corps of the U.S. Army in 1919. A year later he was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal for

his performance in France . In 1922 he was promoted to Brigadier General in the Officer Reserve Corps.

From his first meeting with the cadet corps on January 14, 1897, Gignilliat struck the military posture he would maintain for the rest of his life. His critical eye focused first on a disorganized, generally unkempt contingent of cadets and he asked them a rhetorical question: “Do you want to play at this business of being soldiers? Or do you want the real article?” In his own mind, he knew his personal direction and in their eyes he read approval for a strong military program.

One of his first observations was the condition of the uniform issue. Cadets wore a cadet-grey black banded blouse similar to West Point ’s. Most, however, were loose fitting and the “Mother Hubbard-look” offended the new commandant. He brought a tailor from nearby Plymouth and ordered him to remove the excess material. When the job was done the result was quite noticeable and the cadets were delighted with the neat cut of their new uniforms. Pride was further boosted when white duck pants were added just in time for the hot weather. At the June Week Commencement, Gignilliat staged Culver’s first cotillion ball. Good morale, he knew, was important to a successful program.

Gignilliat was full of ideas and formed the Black Horse Troop less than four months after arriving on campus. He proved to be a showman of the first order and he proudly led the new troop to an encampment of Union veterans at the Grand Army of the Republic conclave in Richmond , Indiana . A year later he took the entire corps to Chicago and marched with them in the Spanish-American War Victory Parade. Appearances of the winter and summer schools at the St. Louis Exposition in 1903 followed. In 1907 he led 376 Summer Naval and Cavalry School students to the tri-centennial celebration of the Jamestown Colony founding. It was clear that whenever a chance to show off the Academy presented itself, Gignilliat would be out in front.

When Fleet retired in 1910, it was axiomatic that Gignilliat would become Culver’s next superintendent. Already recognized as a promoter of every phase of Academy life, he was now the master of his own army.

The next feather in his cap came in 1913 when the corps of cadets marched in Woodrow Wilson’s first presidential inaugural parade. Three weeks later he led 60 cadets in rescue efforts during the great Logansport , Ind. flood. Clearly he was always positioning the Academy for greater things.

Delighted with the visibility of their school, the Culver family voted their satisfaction with additional campus construction. The Administration Building and North Barrack were completed in 1913 and Argonne and Chateau-Thierry barracks, honoring American contributions in WWI, opened in 1919. By 1920, enrollment was 742.

A basic tenet of Gignilliat's military philosophy was the Academy's responsibility to train its cadets as citizens and "that in the minds of Culver Men the training they had undertaken was natural and service inevitable should the need arise." He was convinced that his regimen and the leadership qualities of Culver-trained cadets would project them into future conflicts and believed that "the Academy [should] concern itself with how it might render the greatest service to the Country."

His military model of education began as cadet at VMI and was honed as he developed an educational philosophy as commandant of cadets. In 1916 he presented his treatise on the training of young men in "Arms and the Boy," published in 1916 by Bobbs-Merrill. It synthesized two decades of observations and expressed an unflinching confidence in his corps of cadets.

Sons of the founder, Edwin and Bertram Culver, were internationalists in outlook. As successful industrialists they viewed America as the next great power and their Academy as a training ground for the future. Edwin was well-traveled and was on a grand tour in Europe when the Germans invaded Belgium. After some difficulty, he and his wife made it to England and saw first hand British mobilization for war.

The impression was profound and when he returned to the United States, he and Bertram were receptive to Gignilliat's next big proposal – the start of what became the Schoolboy Camps (1915–1917). Unknowingly, their approval became the catalyst that projected Culver to the forefront of civilian military training and ultimately placed the school – and Gignilliat – in major leadership roles in the formation of the Reserve Officer Training Corps.

In the winter of 1915, planning began for a two-week long Schoolboy Military camp for high school-age youngsters. Gignilliat, completely confident of the proficiency and leadership qualities of his cadets, selected a cadre chosen from the second (junior) class to carry out the student training. Overall administration of the camp would remain under the watchful eyes of faculty tactical officers.

One of the first challenges was to gain support from the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, high school principals, and school administrators from Indiana's 92 counties. At the conclusion of a meeting in Culver in March of 1915, state and county officials endorsed the program for 200 boys, 100 from Marshall County and another 100 from across Indiana.

Gignilliat was ecstatic. Newspapers and press associations focused on the camp and it won the editorial endorsement of principal newspapers throughout the state. It was precisely what Edwin and Bertram wanted and they insisted that no expense be spared to make it successful. Candidates were selected by their high schools on a competitive basis with emphasis on leadership qualities.

Not surprisingly, the publicity savvy Gignilliat named the facility Camp Woodrow Wilson in a typical move to add luster to Culver's program and gain

recognition of the Academy's participation in the president's 1913 inauguration. The Vedette noted that "the name is not only in honor of the chief magistrate, but because the camp is a step toward his expressed ideal of a citizenry trained and accustomed to arms."

The tented Summer School Cavalry Camp was selected as the operational site and Gignilliat made every effort to conform to army requirements. A field kitchen and a large mess tent were constructed north of the Infirmary and the Army agreed to send mess gear and two cooks from Fort Leavenworth, Kan. A canvas roofed lecture tent equipped with bleacher-type seating was set up nearby. Even the YMCA chapter, a fixture at Culver since 1905, had a presence – a large R and R tent near headquarters under the direction of the chapter's general secretary, W.A. Miller.

Throughout the early spring, the tactical staff developed the curriculum and members of the cadre were selected and trained on their responsibilities. As the first week of May drew to a close, the cadets were excited, ready, and confident of their abilities, and anxious to prove to the War Department that Culver was very special.

The superintendent informed officials at the War Department of his every move. Gignilliat did not want anyone to miss what Culver was doing and the more communiqués he forwarded to Washington, the more limelight it would find. Had Rolodex's been in vogue at the time, his would have filled quickly.

The first contingent of boys arrived on May 9 and reported to Gignilliat at his headquarters tent. They presented their certificates of appointment, were assigned tents, given a physical examination, and issued uniforms. Each boy received a campaign hat with cord, an olive drab flannel shirt, two pairs of khaki cotton breeches, khaki puttees, a canteen, haversack, and mess equipment. By the following morning, 200 boys were registered.

Operationally the schoolboys were divided into a single battalion of four companies. For the first two days each boy was assigned to a cadet who taught him the manual of arms, what was referred to as "foot movements," and marched side-by-side with his instructor. By the third day they had merged into squads and platoons and were marching in extended and close-order drill. In all cases they were supervised by cadets.

The daily curriculum was intense. Because there were insufficient rifles to equip both the corps and the encampment, 200 cadets surrendered theirs when academic classes were underway and reclaimed them in the afternoon. Logistics were critical to the collaboration of the competing programs. Nevertheless, the Schoolboy Camp managed to find time in the schedule for instruction in scouting and patrolling, map sketching, guard duty, sanitation, tent pitching, wireless communication, signaling, marksmanship, and camp cooking. They were even tested under pack in a nine-mile march.

On the one hand the Schoolboy Camp accomplished the objectives set by Gignilliat and the trustees. When it was completed on May 26 the participants had

undergone a “unique and stimulating experience . . . [that] gave to the Country an experiment that helped the cause of preparedness.”

Culver gained more than it gave. Its methods of intensive instruction, developed to offset the limited period of the camp, proved so successful that it became integral to the winter school’s technique of military training. General Leonard Wood, the Army’s former Chief of Staff and in 1915 head of the Department of the East, reviewed the Schoolboy Camp as it neared the end of the session. He observed the boys at drill, pitching tents, administering first aid, and handling mess duties and noted his approval with a “Tip Top – that’s bully.”

More importantly, Wood, a tireless champion of military preparedness and training, solidified a bond with Culver, Gignilliat, and the War Department. He was tremendously impressed with the abilities of the corps of cadets, and when the National Defense Act of 1916 was passed in June, Culver was one of a handful of military preparatory schools to qualify for senior status in the newly formed Reserve Officers Training Corps.

The schools selected were required to have an enrollment of more than 100 students 16 years of age or older and to have received an “Honor” rating by the U.S. Army for the previous three years. These requirements precluded what some wag called the “hip pocket” schools and only the largest schools qualified on all counts. Until 1942, when wartime conditions ended all ROTC programs, Culver commissioned many hundreds of graduates as second lieutenants into the infantry, artillery, and cavalry.

Edwin and Bertram Culver looked at the costs they had agreed to bear – \$3,742.06 – and concluded their pledge was more than justified. They were, however, not prepared for the onslaught of applicants that came when the 1916 session was announced. “Camp Newton D. Baker,” named in honor of the Secretary of War, opened in May with 489 boys from nine states. This time the sponsoring community was charged \$17.75 for every boy it sent.

To show support for the program, public spirited organizations raised the funds necessary for fees and transportation. With a proven curriculum in place and new cadets anxious to show their mettle as instructors, the program went forward without a hitch. The only significant change to the camp was the relocation of the field kitchen and mess tent to a site north of the Academy mess hall to take advantage of that building’s refrigeration system.

The cadre that trained the units, now two battalions of four companies, was ready. According to *The Vedette*, they intended to “alleviate the amazing military ignorance” of the participants. With war raging in Europe, there was urgency to the training and, according to all reports, considerable progress was made in accomplishing the goals.

Among the most enthusiastic members of the second-class instructors were Cecil Raleigh, Charles Murray, George Chance, John Schneider, and Julian Brown. Just weeks after passing through the Iron Gate in June of 1917 these cadre members were formally commissioned as second lieutenants in the Marine Corps and soon departed for France . Collectively their decorations for gallantry included two Distinguished Service Crosses, two Navy Crosses, two Silver Stars, and numerous other awards. Brown and Murray remained in the Corps after the war and rose to the rank of brigadier general.

It is difficult to believe that Gignilliat could administer the Culver Military Academy and still engage in the plethora of detail involved in operating the Schoolboy Camps. Yet he did and his near-symbiotic relationship with Edwin and Bertram Culver was as remarkable as was his tenacity.

The success of the first Schoolboy Camp was not lost on the alumni body and in 1916 a number of graduates petitioned Gignilliat to organize and support a camp for alumni. They reflected on the changes that had occurred since their graduation and expressed the need to “brush up” on their military knowledge. The trustees and the superintendent were enthusiastic and agreed to support what became the first of two camps.

The first alumni group, 75 strong, reported to Camp Leonard Wood on May 29, 1916. In an almost jocular manner they began to refer to themselves as “Culver’s legionnaires.” Gignilliat, always quick to latch on to a good phrase, liked the sound and suggested the bulky Culver Military Academy Alumni Association he had founded in 1910, be changed to the Culver Legion. It was approved unanimously.

The gathering of this group for the first Alumni Camp was not frivolous in its intent to serve the nation. The training cadre, full of confidence following the successful Schoolboy Camp, was demanding and the instruction they gave was meaningful. Forty-two of the 75 in attendance went on to serve in the Army, Navy, and Marines during World War I. Twenty-nine were officers, 18 served in Europe, and two were decorated with the Distinguished Service Cross and the Silver Star.

The second Alumni Camp opened on April 16, 1917, 10 days after the United States declared war. Gignilliat had already departed for active duty, 11 other faculty, including Robert Rossow and Cal Chambers were preparing to leave, and acting superintendent Major Hugh Glascock had assumed all administrative responsibilities. Alumni demands for the limited number of billets brought a decision to permit an open enrollment for shorter periods of time. The so-called “brush up” instruction was intense – and hurried – and did not achieve the same quality of results as the previous year.

When the last Schoolboy Camp assembled on April 30, 1917, there was little frivolity. America was already at war and many of those in attendance would soon enlist or be drafted into the military. When the final roll was called, 590 boys had completed the two-week program. Overall, 1,279 schoolboys from across the United States had received training at Culver. The Academy had confirmed Gignilliat’s theses

that Culver cadets stood tall and could teach and be prepared for war. When the call to colors came, over 6,000 winter and summer alumni joined 46 faculty in service to the nation.

Regrettably, there is no postscript to add to the Schoolboy Camp. For most of the lads who attended, few maintained contact with the school. Today an occasional query arrives at the alumni office from a genealogical researcher who has come across a letter or a card from The Culver Military Academy and dated in the summer of 1915 through 1917. "Did my grandfather, Joe . . . attend Culver?" We have no answer. Sad, too, for a great story might be hiding somewhere.

In 1916, 75 graduates assembled two weeks before Commencement and initiated the first Alumni Training Camp. The cadet cadre that had just trained the Schoolboy camp delighted in teaching the old grads about the changes since they graduated and did much to "alleviate the military ignorance" that had developed over their years away from Culver.