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# ‘The Staff College candidates are not right yet’:<sup>1</sup> The Importance of Nomination to British Army Staff College Entry, 1919-1939

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## ABSTRACT

*Between 1919 and 1939, entry to the British Army Staff College was via a dual process of competitive examination or nomination by a panel of senior officers. Recent historiography has scorned the latter, arguing that by allowing entry to the less academically gifted the Staff College's place as an elite institution was undermined, calling into question the belief that the Staff College represented the most academically rigorous educational institution within the Army. This article contends such an interpretation of the process of nomination to the Staff College is incorrect. Using fresh analysis and underutilised sources, it argues that officers obtaining vacancies via nomination often performed better than those entering on competitive vacancies. Furthermore, it will argue that, far from being a flaw in the system of entry, the process of nomination represented a means to achieve a balanced staff, not only in terms of representation by arm of service but also in terms of the type of personality required.*

## Introduction

In his 2015 article, ‘Qualified, but Unprepared: Training for War at the Staff College in the 1930s’, Edward Smalley asserted that the process of nomination to the Staff College, Camberley, ‘reached the point of undermining the credibility of the Staff

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<sup>1</sup>The UK National Archive (hereinafter TNA) WO 279/65, Report on the Staff Conference Held at the Staff College, Camberley 14 to 17 January 1929, p. 117.

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College graduates' by allowing inferior officers to gain access to this elite institution.<sup>2</sup> Building on this, he argued that not only did these officers undermine the status of the college in the interwar period, but the army inexplicably continued to support the use of nominations despite their contribution to the declining quality of officers in attendance. Smalley's argument is supported by comments by Major-General Charles Gwynn (Commandant of Camberley 1926-1931).<sup>3</sup> However, this conclusion is not supported by a detailed examination of nomination to the British Army Staff College in this period. Not only do they underestimate the capabilities of officers who gained nominated vacancies to the Staff College, Camberley, but they fail to appreciate fully the centrality of the role of nomination in assembling a student body composed of officers with wide experience and talents, and its place in attempts to reform the system of staff training in the interwar British Army. Akin to this, the recent application of a 'client, broker and patron' framework to British Army systems of patronage ties promotion not only to effectiveness and skill, but also to traditional notions of patronage in the British Army, and establishes a narrative of a British Army keen to promote merit however it was identified.<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, this article aims to add to the growing body of literature challenging the notion of the British Army as a rigidly hierarchical institution in the interwar period; it was, instead, consistently seeking to advance those deemed worthy, and with varied talents, not simply the academically gifted. Further, it will argue that far from being an alternative method of entry, nomination represented an integral and much-valued aspect of the process of Staff College entry, with nominated candidates maintaining existing academic standards. It will highlight that the British Army had recognised problems with the quality of Staff College candidates by the late 1920s. It then sought to find the means to address this through ensuring that officers responsible for selecting officers for the Staff College had correctly assessed not just the academic qualities of their subordinates, but also the suitability of their personal qualities as officers and future commanders. Such arguments continue to re-evaluate our knowledge of officer education, emphasising its broader impact on the social

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<sup>2</sup>Edward Smalley, 'Qualified but Unprepared: Training for War at the Staff College in the 1930s,' *British Journal of Military History*, Vol. 2, No. 1, (November 2015), pp. 55-72, p. 59. Hereafter, the 'Staff College, Camberley' will be referred to as 'Camberley'.

<sup>3</sup>Edward Smalley, *The British Expeditionary Force, 1939-40*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 188-189.

<sup>4</sup>Aimée Fox, 'The Secret of Efficiency? Social Relations and Patronage in the British Army in the Era of the First World War,' *English Historical Review*, Vol. 135, No. 577 (2020), p. 1529 & p. 1557.

construction and operational capabilities of the British Army, and highlighting efforts to prepare officers for commitments of varying scope and intensity.<sup>5</sup>

Any examination of nomination and its place within the interwar British Army sits within the broader historiographical examination of the role played by patronage and networking within the nineteenth and twentieth century British officer corps. A key issue was whether the system of promotion was dominated by personal influence and rivalries, becoming a highly personalised system built on relationships as a driver of an officer's career.<sup>6</sup> However, recent historiography has highlighted that while a feature of the British Army's institutional ethos, it functioned alongside more recognisable attributes of professionalism in ensuring the progression of meritorious officers, albeit through personal patronage networks.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the continuation of this system via the promotion of meritorious officers to the staff in the First World War through the various 'staff learner' schemes stands as a further example of the positive influence of a patronage/nominative approach to training. Initially an ad-hoc system of apprenticeship to introduce regimental officers to the junior roles of General Staff Officer 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade (GSO3) and Staff Captain, the War Office formalised the system through GHQ directives over the course of 1916-1917.<sup>8</sup> The process was continued alongside the establishment of Junior and Senior staff schools by the War Office,

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<sup>5</sup>Such studies include Ian F. W. Beckett, *A British Profession of Arms: The Politics of Command in the Late Victorian Army*, (Norman, OK.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018); Roger Broad, *The Radical General: Sir Ronald Adam and Britain's New Model Army 1941-46*, (Stroud: Spellmount, 2013); Anthony Clayton, *The British Officer: Leading the Army from 1660 to the Present*, (London: Pearson, 2007) and Douglas E. Delaney, Robert C. Engen and Meghan Fitzpatrick (eds.), *Military Education and the British Empire, 1815-1949*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018).

<sup>6</sup>Tim Travers, *The Killing Ground: The British Army, the Western Front and the Emergence of Modern Warfare, 1900-1918*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987), p. 6 & p. 11.

<sup>7</sup>For examples see Ian F.W. Beckett, *A British Profession of Arms: The Politics of Command in the Late Victorian Army*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018), and Fox, 'The Secret of Efficiency,' p. 1534, and Mark Frost 'The British and Indian Staff Colleges in the Interwar Years,' in Douglas E. Delaney, Robert C. Engen and Meghan Fitzpatrick (eds.), *Military Education and the British Empire, 1815-1949*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018), pp. 152-175. For a theoretical examination of what features can be used to define professionalism in a modern military force see Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*, (Cambridge [Ma]: Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 7-19 and Sam C. Sarkesian, *Beyond the Battlefield: The New Military Professionalism*, (New York: Pergamon, 1981), pp. 5-41.

<sup>8</sup>Paul Harris, *The Men Who Planned the War: A Study of the Staff of the British Army in the Western Front, 1914-1918*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 98-100.

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initially at Hesdin, France and Mena House, Egypt, before their transfer to Britain in 1917.<sup>9</sup>

The success of such courses and the utility of nomination to educational courses in wartime can be determined by the congruence of the declining number of pre-war Staff College trained officers employed on the staff in the latter years of the war, and the continued improvement of staff processes and organisation across the British Army from 1916.<sup>10</sup> This is not to dismiss pre-war trained staff officers, or to suggest that it was only through nomination that British staff processes improved. Indeed, that the British Army continued to improve its efficiency in spite of a reliance on war-commissioned and war-trained officers serves to confirm that, whilst not perfect, a paternalistic, patronage-based system of nomination did not diminish the capabilities or quality of the British Army staff, despite the increasingly complex and technical staff requirements of the First World War. In addition, the use of civilian experts and their temporary nomination to prominent roles in the wartime army to address particular requirements further recognises that many senior officers had a knack for spotting and encouraging talent, to the benefit of the British Army.<sup>11</sup> In short, the British Army continued to strike a balance between outright paternalistic selection and professional meritocracy. As the examination of nomination to Camberley will show, this continued throughout the interwar period, with the complex interaction between patronage and academic merit represented through nomination's continued usage and advancement in discussions of reforms to staff training.

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<sup>9</sup>Harris, *The Men Who Planned the War*, pp. 105-114, and Aimée Fox, *Learning to Fight: Military Innovation and Change in the British Army, 1914-1918*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 85-94.

<sup>10</sup>Harris puts the percentage of staff officers with a p.s.c. in 1918 at 20%, *The Men Who Planned the War*, p. 129. For examinations of the development and growth in efficiency of army staffs in the second half of the First World War see Peter Simkins, 'Building Blocks': Aspects of Command and Control at Brigade Level in the BEF's Offensive Operations, 1916-1918,' in Gary Sheffield and Dan Todman (eds.), *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army's Experience 1914-18*, (Stroud: Spellmount, 2007), pp. 141-173, and Aimée Fox-Godden, "'Hopeless Inefficiency'? The Transformation and Operational Performance of Brigade Staff, 1916-1918,' in Michael LoCicero, Ross Mahoney & Stuart Mitchell (eds.), *A Military Transformed? Adaptation and Innovation in The British Army, 1792-1945*, (Solihull: Hellion, 2014), pp. 139-157.

<sup>11</sup>For examples see Christopher Phillips, *Civilian Specialists at War: Britain's Transport Experts and the First World War*, (London: University of London Press, 2020), and Fox, 'The Secret of Efficiency,' pp. 1546-1550.

## **Staff College Entry**

Nomination had been a feature of Staff College selection since 1880, when a War Office committee established it as an additional method of entry into Camberley. Entry had initially been restricted to a competitive process where the top scorers of the Staff College entrance examination were selected for attendance, but the introduction of nomination allowed opportunities for those that passed, but did not qualify, to gain entry based on their personal merits.<sup>12</sup> The examinations were held once a year in London and Delhi, with officers in isolated postings able to compete locally under standardised conditions.<sup>13</sup> It was divided into two sections (obligatory and voluntary subjects) and tested the skills deemed necessary to succeed as a staff officer. Mandatory subjects included: Training for War (four papers); Organisation and Administration (two papers); and Imperial Organisation (two papers). Optional subjects included a variety of languages, alongside physics, chemistry, political economy, and the history of British India, for a total of eleven papers.<sup>14</sup> With its emphasis on training and organisation, this list of subjects resulted from ongoing reform, reflecting a growing professionalisation, emphasis on military subjects and a reduction in focus on mathematics and science.<sup>15</sup> The inclusion of optional subjects recognised that 'every branch of military science and organisation [...] will continue to become, infinitely more complex than in the past.'<sup>16</sup> The result was an examination which was notoriously competitive, arduous, and represented a stiff test for any officer.<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that such efforts of professionalisation were not without precedent outside of the army. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Civil Service

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<sup>12</sup>A.R. Goodwin-Austin, *The Staff and the Staff College*, (London: Constable & Co., 1927), pp. 189-194, and F.W. Young, *The Story of the Staff College 1858-1958*, (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1958), p. 1.

<sup>13</sup>For examples see British Library (hereinafter BL) IOR/L/MIL/7/3187, Entrance Examination, Staff College, Quetta & Camberley, and TNA CO 795/95/4, Northern Rhodesia Regiment: Staff College Entrance Examination.

<sup>14</sup>*Report on the Examination for Admission to the Staff Colleges at Camberley and Quetta held in February-March 1925 with copies of the Examination Papers and Remarks of the Examiners Thereon*, (London: HMSO, 1925), p. 2.

<sup>15</sup>A.R. Goodwin-Austin, *The Staff and the Staff College*, pp. 160 & 213, and Young, *The Story of the Staff College*, p. 8

<sup>16</sup>*Report on the Examination for Admission to the Staff Colleges at Camberley and Quetta held in February-March 1921 with copies of the Examination Papers and Remarks of the Examiners Thereon*, (London: HMSO, 1921), p. 4.

<sup>17</sup>The nature of the process of entry to the Staff College in this period is highlighted in; Goodwin-Austin, *The Staff and the Staff College*, pp. 278-80; Mark Frost, 'The British and Indian Army Staff Colleges in the Interwar Years,' p. 154-155; David French, *Military Identities*, pp. 160-161 and David French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, p. 62.

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underwent a similar balancing act between traditional systems of patronage and new professional practice. It has been noted that whilst the entrance examination introduced in the 1870s was based on the desire to promote merit, patronage and selection remained as another way of recognising talent and ensuring its continued progression through the ranks of the Civil Service.<sup>18</sup>

To be eligible, for anonymous nomination to Staff College by the Military Members of the Army Council an officer had to achieve the minimum pass mark on the competitive examination, establishing a baseline competency for all officers admitted to Staff College.<sup>19</sup> Between 1919 and 1920, officers were selected via nomination to attend a shorter, one-year course to overcome the backlog resulting from the closure of both colleges in 1914 and enable 'distinguished field officers to supplement their battlefield experience with formal, theoretical training in staff matters.'<sup>20</sup> Its secondary purpose (which assumed greater importance through the 1920s) was to allow those who struggled to perform in the examination, but were considered to be deserving of a place on the staff, due to their dedication and performance.<sup>21</sup> As noted, this facet of nomination has been heavily criticised, with Smalley arguing that it 'undermined the credibility of the Staff College.'<sup>22</sup> Such an approach takes a binary view of Staff College entry and assumes that academic ability provided the only metric by which to judge ability.

Evidence suggests that passing the entrance examination did not necessarily indicate the requisite ability to succeed at the Staff College. While many officers undertook an intensive period of study over several years to prepare themselves for the arduous examination process, others did not, instead engaging the services of a 'crammer.'<sup>23</sup> This allowed an officer to receive a condensed burst (usually a few weeks in duration) of instruction in the types of question to be encountered and the information required

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<sup>18</sup>Patrick Joyce, *The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State since 1800*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 200-201, pp. 258-262.

<sup>19</sup>See Mark Frost, 'The British and Indian Staff Colleges,' p. 155, and David French, 'Officer Education and Training in the British Regular Army, 1919-39,' in G.C. Kennedy and K. Neilson (eds.), *Military Education Past, Present and Future*, (Westport CT: Praeger, 2002), p. 109.

<sup>20</sup>Smalley, 'Qualified but Unprepared,' p. 58.

<sup>21</sup>TNA WO 279/57, Report on the Staff Conference held at Staff College, Camberley, 17-20 January 1927.

<sup>22</sup>Smalley, 'Qualified but Unprepared', p. 59.

<sup>23</sup>J. Smyth, *Milestones*, (London: Sedgewick & Jackson, 1979), p. 77.

to pass.<sup>24</sup> Although impossible to definitively assess the extent of their influence, contemporary references by Major-General A.R. Goodwin-Austin, highlight the large number of such courses, and suggests that many officers made use of their services.<sup>25</sup> As a result, although the examination represented a test of an officer's intellectual capabilities, for many, it represented a test of their ability to retain information temporarily. Furthermore, with officers able to sit the examination three times, there were opportunities to play the system if failing the examination by acquiring the knowledge to pass in subsequent sittings.<sup>26</sup> Such an approach was the result of a conflicting institutional ethos within the British Army emphasising the importance of regimental-led officer training whilst simultaneously recognising the importance of a highly trained staff. This led to uneven educational practices across the officer corps depending on the enthusiasm of commanding officers.<sup>27</sup> Such a conclusion can be extrapolated from the available data on the Staff College's examination pass-fail rate between 1923 and 1926.

|                        | 1923 | 1924 | 1925 | 1926 |
|------------------------|------|------|------|------|
| <b>No. Competitors</b> | 200  | 240  | 360  | 400  |
| <b>% Failure Rate</b>  | 44.9 | 71.5 | 45.2 | 74.1 |

**Table 1. Overall Percentage of Failures, Staff College Entrance Examination: 1923-1926.**<sup>28</sup>

The relatively stable fluctuations suggest that those with lower failure rates contained a greater proportion of officers who had previously failed and had a better understanding of the examination requirements. Some substance can be given to this by examining the published reports on the Staff College examinations. In years that experienced high failure rates, it was noted that:

A very noticeable point was the lack of care with which candidates appeared to read the questions to be answered [...] Too many officers [...] wrote round their subject,

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<sup>24</sup>Goodwin-Austin suggests that not all such courses were reputable, whilst even those that were made use of information readily available to the candidates themselves. Goodwin-Austin, *The Staff and the Staff College*, p. 283.

<sup>25</sup>Goodwin-Austin, *The Staff and the Staff College*, p. 283 and French, *Military Identities*, pp. 160-161.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Frost, 'The British and Indian Staff Colleges,' p.155; Young, *The Story of the Staff College*, p. 25 and Edward Smalley, *The British Expeditionary Force*, pp. 187-188.

<sup>27</sup>David French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, p. 59.

<sup>28</sup>TNA WO 32/3090, Figures taken from Staff College Examinations, Allotment of Vacancies by Arms to be Abolished & Report on the Staff Conference held at the Staff College, Camberley, 17-20 January 1927, Appendix B.



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apparently hoping that the examiner would evolve an opinion for them out of the half-expressed ideas they had written.<sup>29</sup>

In contrast, the 1923 and 1925 reports focussed more on the standard of English expression and the format of answers rather than failings of content.<sup>30</sup> Where content was highlighted, it was noted that 'The desire to display knowledge, whether it was relevant to the question or not, was also noticeable [...] It also lends colour to the suspicion of cramming.'<sup>31</sup> Such comments, linked to the variance in failure rates, suggest that many of those who failed to pass the entrance examination on their first attempt proceeded to engage a crammer to be better assured of passing the examination in the future. This combination of factors serves to undermine the idea that officers gaining competitive vacancies to the Staff College represented the cream of the army's officer corps and also undermines the belief that nominated officers were the only contributing factor to any qualitative decline. Indeed, as will be seen, the British Army was faced with a far more pervasive problem with the quality of officer applying to Staff College.

### **Manpower Problems: The Selection of Candidates for the Staff College**

In highlighting this issue, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), Field Marshal Sir George Milne, stated in 1929 that 'the Staff College candidates are not right yet [...]. The two points that have got to be considered are how to get the proper candidates and then how best to admit these officers to the Staff College.'<sup>32</sup> The problems highlighted by Milne were so severe that the following year he commented that, 'going through the recommendations by commanding officers, I am astonished at the casual way they recommend officers for the Staff of the Army, and I...would not have some of them on my staff at any price.'<sup>33</sup> This failure to ensure appropriate candidates were gaining access to the Staff College was a longstanding problem for the

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<sup>29</sup>Report on the Examination for Admission to the Staff Colleges at Camberley and Quetta. Held in February-March 1924. With Copies of the Examination Papers and Remarks of the Examiners Thereon, (London: HMSO, 1924), p. 3.

<sup>30</sup>Report on the Examination for Admission to the Staff Colleges at Camberley and Quetta. Held in February-March 1923. With Copies of the Examination Papers and Remarks of the Examiners Thereon, (London: HMSO, 1923), and Report on the Examination for Admission to the Staff Colleges at Camberley and Quetta, (London: HMSO, 1925).

<sup>31</sup>Report on the Examination for Admission to the Staff Colleges at Camberley and Quetta, (London: HMSO, 1925), p. 3.

<sup>32</sup>TNA WO 279/65, Report on the Staff Conference Held at the Staff College, Camberley 14 to 17 January 1929, (London: HMSO, 1929), p. 117.

<sup>33</sup>TNA WO 279/66, Report on the Staff Conference held at the Staff College, Camberley 13 to 16 January 1930, (London: HMSO, 1930), p.59,

interwar British Army. In 1925, the Commandant of Camberley, Major-General Edmund Ironside, stated that although ninety-eight per cent of officers received the *p.s.c.* (passed Staff College) qualification, in his opinion only fifteen per cent were truly capable of holding high rank. Despite this, 'to the army, all *p.s.c.* certificates are equal.'<sup>34</sup> This was demonstrated in 1926 during a discussion over the withholding of *p.s.c.* certificate from officers receiving adverse reports in their staff posts. Whilst in theory, officers deemed unsuitable for staff employment after their first year should be returned to their units, arguments were made for awarding all officers completing the two-year course the coveted *p.s.c.* The Director of Staff Duties (DSD), Major-General Archibald Cameron suggested that an officer who:

Has been through the full two years course at the Staff College [...] must have benefited by the instruction he has received. The effect of refusing an officer the *p.s.c.* is to leave a stigma against him and in a worse position than if he never went up for it.<sup>35</sup>

As the British Army was struggling to recruit officers in this period, and was working to improve the pay and conditions of regimental officers, such reputational damage resulting from the withholding of the *p.s.c.* would have been a bitter blow.<sup>36</sup> Unsurprisingly in this context, in November 1927 Cameron sent a memoranda to Camberley Commandant Charles Gwynn, establishing that an officer's suitability for a *p.s.c.* would no longer be included on their final report, and that the Army Council would make the final decision. He also noted that it should be rare that an unfit officer was allowed to complete the Staff College course as those deemed unfit should be ejected at the end of their first year.<sup>37</sup> From this it is clear that the declining quality of Staff College graduate was in part the result of the army's need to retain career progression and to improve conditions of service for officers.

Additionally, efforts to ensure good candidates were put forward for Staff College were hampered by hostility from regimental commanders, and the regimental system's pervading influence on the institutional culture of the British Army. David French has

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<sup>34</sup>TNA WO 32/4840, Report on Higher Education for War, December 1925.

<sup>35</sup>TNA WO 32/3102, Major-General Archibald Cameron to Field Marshal Sir George Milne, 2 November 1926.

<sup>36</sup>TNA WO 32/3737, Report Lord Plumer's Committee on the Promotion of Officers in the Army (1925); TNA WO 32/3744, Committee on the Promotion of Regimental Officers (1935); TNA WO 32/4461, Report of the Committee on the Supply of Army Officers and TNA WO 279/65, Report on the Staff Conference Held at the Staff College (1929), pp 96-116.

<sup>37</sup>TNA WO 32/3102, Major-General Archibald Cameron to Major-General Charles Gwynn, 17 November 1926.

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noted that, 'some commanding officers regarded subordinates who wanted to widen their knowledge by attending the Staff College as being disloyal to their regiment.'<sup>38</sup> With commanders being responsible for providing an officer with their Certificate D attestation as to fitness for command and staff posts, Milne's assertion that sceptical commanding officers were using the Staff Colleges as a way to get rid of unwanted officers has merit.<sup>39</sup> Likewise, while studies are quick to conclude that the increased competition for places at the Staff Colleges speaks to the recognition of its importance to promotion to the highest levels of army command, such conclusions mask a broader range of motivations among British officers.<sup>40</sup> For many, it was their regimental duties, contact with the troops, and combat leadership that served to shape their careers and their motivation for continued service. Colonel Thorpe, a General Staff Officer with the British Army of the Rhine, noted: 'There are lots of officers I know who do not wish to go on the staff, but would rather command their battalion or regiment.'<sup>41</sup> Gwynn expressed similar views, noting that 'there are a great number [...] who do not compete at all, they are keen on regimental work [...] and to work at the Staff College, they must neglect some of their regimental work.'<sup>42</sup> The extent to which these attitudes were widespread, or whether they represented a desire to avoid the tedium of office work associated with the staff, or a lack of familiarity with headquarters duties is open to interpretation.<sup>43</sup> However, these comments highlight the division between the British Army's regimental culture and its desire to retain a centrally trained corps of officers for planning and organisation. This points to a further challenge in the selection of candidates.

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<sup>38</sup>French, *Military Identities*, p. 153. Similarly, Field Marshal Ironside recounted an example during his time in hospital in India when his visiting commanding officer questioned the books on military matters at his bedside suggesting he should be happy as a gunner officer, Ironside, Edmund, 'The Modern Staff Officer,' *JRUSI*, Vol. 73, No. 491 (August 1928), p. 436. Similarly, in 1910 W.N. Nicholson when deciding to apply for the Staff College was told by his company commander that only wasters left the regiment. W.N. Nicholson, *Behind the Lines: An Account of Administrative Staffwork in the British Army, 1914-1918*, (London: Strong Oak Press, 1939), p. 168.

<sup>39</sup>TNA WO 32/3103, Memorandum by the C.I.G.S on points dealing with the entrance and selection &c., of officers to the Staff College discussed during the War Office Staff Conference, January 17-20. Milne's belief in unscrupulous commandants was expressed in TNA WO 279/57, Report on the Staff Conference Held at the Staff College, Camberley 17<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> January 1927, p. 45.

<sup>40</sup>For examples see: Frost, 'The British and Indian Army Staff Colleges,' pp. 156 – 158; French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, p. 62, and French, *Military Identities*, p. 160.

<sup>41</sup>TNA WO 279/57, Report on the Staff Conference Held at the Staff College, Camberley 17<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> January 1927.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid, p. 48.

<sup>43</sup>French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, p. 164.

While a proportion of the British officer corps was evidently happy with regimental promotion and desired nothing more than to command their regiment, this was not enough for many in the interwar period.<sup>44</sup> Between 1919 and 1939, with the drastic reduction in the army's size and its reversion to a role primarily garrisoning the empire, the rapid promotion and enhanced career opportunities of wartime service disappeared. Instead, officers found themselves wedded to a system of promotion that was glacial, with some serving twelve or more years as Lieutenants before promotion to Captain.<sup>45</sup> In this context, attendance at the Staff College allowed officers to break away from the regimental promotion structure, allowing rapid advancement for ambitious officers in the interwar British Army.<sup>46</sup> By doing so, the British Army, whilst recognising the importance of its regimental tradition, sought to build on an ever-developing ethos which emphasised the promotion of merit and experience. Recognising this, increasing numbers of officers applied for the limited number of vacancies available each year, with 440 officers competing in 1926 and 409 in 1929 for only 56 vacancies.<sup>47</sup> Accompanying this was a surge in the number of competing officers from the technical arms, particularly the Royal Engineers.<sup>48</sup> Promotion in the engineers was slower than in combat arms as all officers in the Corps were placed on one promotion list and promoted via seniority.<sup>49</sup> Coupled with this was the assertion that many regimental officers and potential candidates for commissions were discouraged by the army's relative lack of prospects and seeming deadening of

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<sup>44</sup>TNA WO 279/57, Report on the Staff Conference Held at the Staff College, Camberley 17<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> January 1927; TNA WO 279/65, Report on the Staff Conference Held at the Staff College, Camberley 14 to 17 January 1929, p. 116 and Smalley, *The British Expeditionary Force*, p. 182.

<sup>45</sup>Anthony Clayton, *The British Officer: Leading the Army from 1660 to the Present*, (London: Pearson, 2007), p. 195.

<sup>46</sup>David French, *Military Identities: The Regimental System, the British Army, & the British People c. 1870-2000*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 162.

<sup>47</sup>Brevet-Major A.R. Goodwin-Austin, *The Staff and the Staff College*, (London: Constable & Co., 1927), p. 278, and David French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, p. 62.

<sup>48</sup>By 1930, the number of Royal Engineer officers in the top 50 of the Staff College examination had doubled from seven in 1926 to fourteen in 1930. Correspondingly, the number of infantry officers in the top 50 had declined from nineteen in 1926 to twelve in 1930. Figures from TNA WO 32/3092, Staff College Entrance Examinations 1926-1930. Distribution by Arms of first 40, 45 and 50 candidates competing for Camberley.

<sup>49</sup>Ian F.W. Beckett, *A British Profession of Arms: The Politics of Command in the Late Victorian Army*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018), p. 38, and French, *Military Identities*, p. 28.

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ambition due to the monotonous nature of regimental duties in peacetime.<sup>50</sup> Regardless of an officer's suitability for staff or command roles, many saw Staff College as the only way to break free of limited promotion prospects and thus attempted to take steps to assure themselves of a qualifying mark and entry to the Staff College via competitive examination.

Underpinning these problems was the subjective nature of The King's Regulations regarding the requirements for an officer put forward for Staff College. Paragraph 723, (1923), stated that an officer must be capable of: '(i) Steadiness and prudence; (ii) Activity, energy and force of character; (iii) Intelligence and discretion [...] (iv) Disposition and temper; (v) Efficiency as a leader and instructor.'<sup>51</sup> Colonel R. G. Finlayson, then an instructor at Camberley, noted that these regulations gave 'to a commanding officer who is not perhaps so knowledgeable, strong, or conscientious as others, quite a loophole if he is held up to answer for the consequences of putting a bad officer on the list, and it does not help him very much if he doesn't know what is wanted.'<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, they could not be adequately assessed purely through the Staff College examination, reinforcing the notion that whilst competitive vacancies represented a test of an officer's academic ability, they did little to guarantee that such officers were suited for staff training. To overcome this, a change was made to the wording of the regulations. Milne's new wording unambiguously stated that to be considered eligible for staff work, an officer should 'be in every respect a thoroughly good regimental officer; he must possess professional ability, industry and power of command.'<sup>53</sup> Although seemingly at odds with a role that emphasised the need 'to assist their commander in the execution of the duties entrusted to him, to transmit his orders and instructions,'<sup>54</sup> this view of the required attributes of a future staff officer was widely accepted.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, these attributes would have been easily

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<sup>50</sup>TNA WO 32/4461, Second Report of the Committee on the Supply of Army Officers, December 1937, p.8.

<sup>51</sup>TNA WO 32/3103, Memorandum by the C.I.G.S on points dealing with the entrance and selection &c., of officers to the Staff College discussed during the War Office Staff Conference, 17-20 January 1927.

<sup>52</sup>TNA WO 279/57, Comments of Colonel Finlayson on Subject 6. Report on the Staff Conference Held at the Staff College, Camberley 17-20 January 1927, p. 45.

<sup>53</sup>TNA WO 279/57, Comments of Colonel Finlayson on Subject 6. Report on the Staff Conference Held at the Staff College, Camberley 17-20 January 1927, p. 45.

<sup>54</sup>Field Service Regulations, Volume I: Organization and Administration, (London: HMSO, 1923).

<sup>55</sup>TNA WO 32/3092, Lieutenant-General Charles Bonham-Carter to Lieutenant-General Archibald Cameron, 11 October 1928; TNA WO 32/3092 Lieutenant-General Hastings Anderson to Field Marshal Sir George Milne 3 November 1928; TNA WO 32/3092, Lieutenant-General Sir Webb Gillman to Field Marshal Sir George

identifiable by Colonels Commandant and individual commanding officers responsible for recommending officers for the Staff College who themselves may not have been through the institution.

The process of Staff College entry was beset with inconsistencies which had little to do with the process of nomination. Consequently, pinning the dilution of the Staff College's status on the continued use of nominations belies the shortcomings highlighted with the competitive examinations and wider problems of candidate suitability. Underlying these problems was the belief that any lowering of quality identified in the 1920s was the result of wartime casualties among junior officers rather than a more general problem with the quality of officer candidates. In a 1925 report to the Army Council, Ironside noted that during his period in command, officers attending the college could be broadly categorised into ability groups:

First Year

- (i) All officers, with the exception of about 2%, are fitted for posting to a 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade appointment. The unfit 2% leave the Staff College at the end of the First Year.
- (ii) About 50% are obviously unfitted for anything but lower staff appointments.
- (iii) About 18% are doubtful cases. They are underdeveloped or otherwise difficult to judge.
- (iv) About 30% are obviously fitted for further training.

Second Year

- (i) The 50% labelled as unfit [...] fall further and further behind [...] Their presence in the second year, moreover, retards the better students [...]
- (ii) Of the doubtful 18%, about 8% prove themselves [...]
- (iii) Of the remaining 30%, the best forge rapidly ahead [...] About 10% of the officers distinguish themselves above the others.<sup>56</sup>

Despite such damning opinion, these concerns were dismissed. In responding directly to Ironside's report, Cameron, requested that, 'when considering Ironside's proposals will you take into consideration that he may take an unduly severe view of the proportion of officers fitted to undergo the second year of the course, as he has been

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Milne, 6 November 1928; TNA WO 279/57, Colonel Thorne, Report on the Staff Conference Held at the Staff College, Camberley 17<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> January 1927, p. 42; An Ex-Staff Officer, 'Personality on the Staff,' *JRUSI*, Vol. 68, No. 469 (February 1923), pp. 126-131; An Ex-Staff Officer, 'Some Staff Duties,' *JRUSI*, Vol. 68, No. 472 (November 1923), p. 203; Edmund Ironside, 'The Modern Staff Officer,' *JRUSI*, Vol. 73, No. 491 (August 1928), p. 442.

<sup>56</sup>TNA WO 32/4840, Higher Education for War, 15 December 1925.

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dealing with officers still suffering from the abnormal state of the Army since the war.<sup>57</sup> Similar views were expressed by the Director of Military Operations and Intelligence, Major-General Sir John Burnett Stuart, who suggested that 'the majority of the best officers who would have gone to the Staff College in the last few years were killed in the war. In time the standard will recover.'<sup>58</sup> As a result, not only were the army experiencing serious problems in the recruitment of officers in the face of competition from both the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force, but those officers setting the army's future direction refused to acknowledge problems within the system, preferring to blame any declining standard on casualties suffered amongst junior officers during the First World War.

### The Allocation of Vacancies

Smalley has asserted that nomination to Staff College principally led to a decline in the quality of officer attending. However, to place the blame squarely on nominated officers overlooks both their performance at Staff College and structural inequalities in the manner in which vacancies were allocated to the various arms of the British Army. Under the system of allocation enacted in the interwar period (except for 1927–1929), each arm of service (Infantry, Royal Artillery [R.A.], Royal Engineers [R.E.], Cavalry, Royal Tank Corps [R.T.C.], Royal Army Service Corps [R.A.S.C.] and Royal Corps of Signals [R.C.S.]) was allocated competitive vacancies to the Staff College based upon the future needs of the army, with the remainder of competitive vacancies to be filled by a limited number of officers from India and the Dominions and the rest to be filled by nomination.

| Arm of Service | Infantry | Royal Artillery | Royal Engineers | Cavalry | Royal Corps of Signals | Royal Army Service Corps | Royal Tank Corps |
|----------------|----------|-----------------|-----------------|---------|------------------------|--------------------------|------------------|
| Vacancies      | 16       | 8               | 4               | 2       | 1                      | 1                        | 1                |

**Table 2: 1930 Allocation of competitive vacancies to Staff College, Camberley.**<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>TNA WO 32/4840, Lieutenant-General A.R. Cameron to General Sir Walter Braithwaite, 11 March 1926 & A.R. Cameron to Major-General Sir Archibald Montgomery-Massingberd, 11 March 1926.

<sup>58</sup>TNA WO 32/4840, Major-General Sir John Burnett-Stuart to A.R. Cameron, 11 March 1926.

<sup>59</sup>TNA WO 32/3092, Major-General Sir Charles Bonham-Carter to Field Marshal Lord Milne, 14 July 1931.

While this may have ensured that the proportion of officers attending the Staff College broadly met the army's needs, the imposition of a quota system had a negative qualitative impact on the officers gaining competitive vacancies. In 1931, the D.S.D., Major-General Sir Charles Bonham-Carter, noted that to fill the allocated infantry vacancies would require selecting officers who had placed between 70<sup>th</sup> and 85<sup>th</sup> in the order of merit.<sup>60</sup> An appreciation of the quality gap of candidate this represented requires an examination of the results of a June 1926 War Office examination into the removal of the quota system. Placing all British Service officers on a single list and awarding the top thirty-three candidates' competitive vacancies at the Staff College, the lowest qualifying mark increased by 456 to a total of 5929 out of a possible 10,100.<sup>61</sup> This represented an eighty-one per cent improvement in the lowest officer's qualifying score for those entering via competition and would have provided an instant panacea to the declining quality of officers gaining competitive vacancies. This experiment was not continued, largely due to the desires of senior officers to avoid the domination of the staff by technical officers and their preference for regimental officers on the staff.<sup>62</sup> Instead, it was decided to retain the quota system but limit competitive vacancies to officers passing in the top 50 candidates with any unfilled places added to those for nomination.<sup>63</sup>

While establishing a baseline requirement for officers obtaining competitive vacancies to the Staff College, the maintenance of the quota system effectively served to lower the average quality of officer attending. That many arms were not even able to meet these standards was evident from the extent to which these vacancies remained unfilled. In examining the allocations for 1930 and 1931, Bonham-Carter noted that while the theoretical distribution was eighty per cent competitive compared to twenty per cent nominated, the reality was closer to a fifty-fifty split.<sup>64</sup> Thus, although nomination has been blamed for the declining quality of officers obtaining Staff College vacancies, the real qualitative failure rested on the inability of the army's various arms

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<sup>60</sup>TNA WO 32/3092, Bonham-Carter to Milne, 24 July 1931.

<sup>61</sup>TNA WO 32/3090, Staff College [Examinations], allotment of vacancies [by arms to be abolished], 1926 and TNA WO 32/3090, Field-Marshal Sir George Milne to Lieutenant-General's Robert Whigham, Walter Campbell and Noel Birch., 17 June 1926.

<sup>62</sup>TNA WO 32/3090, Staff College [Examinations], allotment of vacancies [by arms to be abolished], 1926. For more detailed discussion of this see Iain Farquharson, 'A Scientific of Regimental Staff: The Reform of Staff College Selection in the British Army, 1927-31,' *Marine Corps University Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 1, (Spring 2018), pp. 53 – 73.

<sup>63</sup> TNA WO 32/3092, Bonham-Carter to Milne, 14 August 1930.

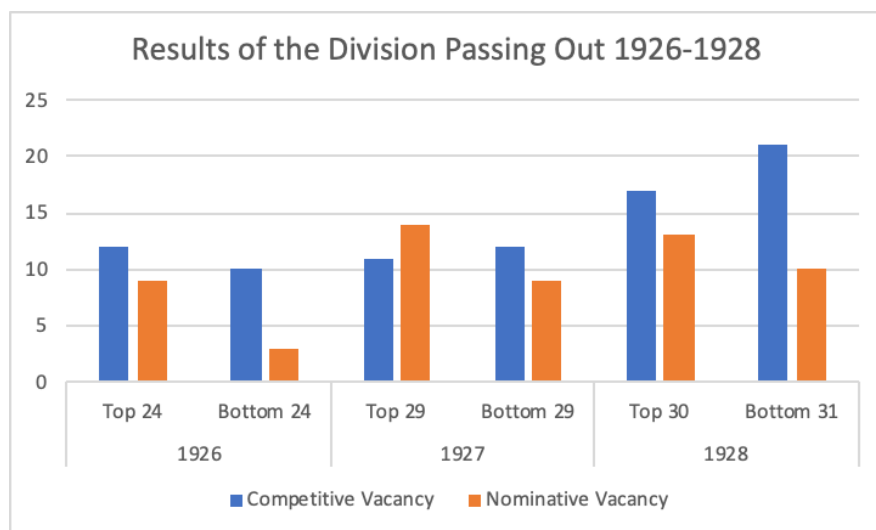
<sup>64</sup> TNA WO 32/3092, The exact percentages presented were: 1930 – 52% competitive, 48% nomination and 1931 – 59% competitive, 41 % nominated. Bonham-Carter to Milne, 24 July 1931.



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to put forward candidates capable of meeting competitive entry requirements. This lack of capability naturally led to an increased prevalence of nominated candidates to ensure student cohorts were full. While it is impossible to definitively state what position in the order of merit nominated officers were selected from, they were still required to have achieved a passing mark in the examination. Thus, much like the limiting of competitive vacancies to officers in the top 50, this requirement meant that no matter how suitable an officer's character may have been, they were still required to meet an academic baseline to be considered for admittance to the Staff College.

Furthermore, statistics presented at the time demonstrate that nominated offers were as capable, indeed more so, of succeeding at the Staff College. In examining the distribution of officers in the final order of merit, Gwynn demonstrated that nominated officers were, in most cases, equal to those who had gained entry via the competitive examination (see Table 3).



**Table 3: Order of Merit of officers passing out of the Staff College, Camberley by method of entry 1926-28.<sup>65</sup>**

In the three years examined by Gwynn, the lower half of the order of merit was consistently dominated by officers obtaining competitive vacancies, with no more than a third having gained entry via nomination. Gwynn further subdivided these statistics

<sup>65</sup>Numbers compiled from TNA WO 32/3092, 'Results of the Division passing out Dec. 1926.'

by arm of service and the dominions in 1928. He found that British officers accounted for sixty-seven per cent of officers who had obtained a competitive vacancy and passed out in the bottom half of the order of merit. Conversely, only forty per cent of nominated candidates in this lower half came from the British service.<sup>66</sup> However, the analysis of the 1928 figures only dealt with the junior division, with Gwynn conceding that 'it is too early as yet to weight the order of merit [...] The marking must be taken as a very rough approximation.'<sup>67</sup> As a result, contrary to Smalley's assertion, the nomination process was not allowing deficient officers to gain access to Staff College. Indeed, on average, nominated officers were performing better than those gaining entry via the examinations who tended to dominate the lower end of the order of merit. As a result, despite being set up as a fundamental flaw within the structure of staff training, nomination helped maintain academic standards at the Staff College. When discussion in the late 1920s turned to the allocation of vacancies to the Staff College by arm of service, its utility shifted from allowing deserving officers to access Staff College education, to seeking to maintain a balance of all-arms at the Staff College. In a memorandum to senior officers at the War Office, Milne noted that 'if it is necessary to adjust the numbers of the different arms [...] this should be done by the nominations in the hands of the Army Council.'<sup>68</sup> This view was broadly accepted among senior officers, with both Lieutenant-Generals Hastings Anderson and Webb Gillman (Q.M.G. and M.G.O. respectively) believing that the staff should contain an even proportion of officers from all arms.<sup>69</sup>

Moreover, nomination was consistently a feature of proposals for reforming staff training suggesting that, far from weakening the staff, reformist officers recognised its advantages in ensuring that the most suitable candidates were able to attend Staff College. Ironside's 1925 Report on Higher Education for War, alongside its highly critical commentary on the suitability of officers for future staff roles proposed, alongside the division of the staff course to a junior staff course and a senior war course, that entry should be fifty per cent competitive, fifty per cent nominated.<sup>70</sup> By 1938, the Report on the Military Education of the Army Officer, whilst also pushing for the division of staff training into two distinct courses, recommended a division of

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<sup>66</sup>Numbers compiled from TNA WO 32/3092, 'Results of the Division passing out Dec. 1926.'

<sup>67</sup>TNA WO 32/3092, Report by Commandant Staff College on Junior Division 1928.

<sup>68</sup>TNA WO 32/3090, Field Marshal Lord Milne to Lieutenant-General Sir Robert Whigham, Lieutenant-General Sir Walter Campbell and Lieutenant-General Noel Birch, 17 June 1926.

<sup>69</sup>TNA WO 32/3092, Lieutenant-General Hastings Anderson to Field Marshal George Milne, 3 November 1928 & Lieutenant-General Webb Gillman to Milne, 6 November 1928.

<sup>70</sup>TNA WO 32/4840, Higher Education for War, 15 December 1925.

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entry which was twenty-five per cent competitive and seventy-five per cent nominated.<sup>71</sup> Following the debates discussed above, this additional emphasis was caveated with the note that the judgment of the recommending officer would be questioned if a nominated candidate proved deficient.<sup>72</sup> In both cases, access to the higher-level war courses was to be by nomination only, with both allowing an officer who hadn't attended a junior staff course to be admitted if it was believed they were exceptionally suited to higher-level posts.<sup>73</sup> Reliance on a form of nomination to fill vacancies at the Staff College was even more pronounced in the armies of the Dominions. Australia had, by 1930, developed a system whereby an officer's suitability for staff training was noted on their confidential reports, and the list of officers recommended was reviewed annually by the Military Board. This system was noted as being 'of great value in ensuring that only suitable candidates are allowed to sit for the examination.'<sup>74</sup> Amongst both reform-minded officers and those senior officers at the War Office there was clearly a recognition that it was not necessarily the most academically gifted officers who were best suited to staff roles. Indeed, one of the points of agreement between these two groups was the belief that more extensive use of nominations represented the means to address the deficiencies in the army's staff training system.

This client-patron system can also be identified as continuing into the Second World War. Pre-war patronage networks remained in operation, with Staff College connections being much in evidence among those appointed to subordinate command and staff positions by Field Marshal B.L. Montgomery.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, it has been noted that in July 1941 he informed the divisional commanders of XII Corps that, 'he personally selected the officers from his command who were to be sent to the Staff College.'<sup>76</sup> The extent to which this practice was commonplace across the British Army and its impact during the Second World War requires further research, but it is evident there

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<sup>71</sup>TNA WO 32/4357, Report of the Committee on the Military Education of the Army Officer, March 1938.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>TNA WO 32/4357, Report of the Committee on the Military Education of the Army Officer, March 1938.

<sup>74</sup>National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA) B1535 765/2/35, Staff College Entrance Examination, 2 May 1930.

<sup>75</sup>See Mark Frost, 'The British and Indian Army Staff Colleges,' pp. 164-7.

<sup>76</sup>Corps commanders' personal memoranda to commanders, 20 July 1941, Allfrey MS 1/5, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (LHCMA), quoted in David French, 'Colonel Blimp and the British Army: British Divisional Commanders in the War against Germany, 1939-1945.' *English Historical Review*, Vol. 111, No. 444 (November 1996), p. 1195.

is a degree of continuity, albeit an evolving process based on the particular circumstances of the period under examination.

## **Conclusion**

As a result, the idea that nomination to Staff College served only to undermine its graduates' quality should be firmly dismissed. Instead, several other factors served to undermine the quality of officer graduating from the Staff College. Key among these was the lack of consideration of its students' differing abilities and the continued commitment of as many as forty per cent to higher-level training from which they, and the army, derived no benefit. Alongside the misguided belief that all p.s.c.'s were equal (despite assigning classifications and the branch to which they were best suited in their final reports), this led to many unsuitable officers finding their way onto British staffs, a problem only mitigated with the division of the Staff College course in 1938. Similarly, the methodology used in appointing officers to the Staff College Selected List and their progression to the Staff College Examination are worthy of criticism. It is evident that some regimental commanders utilised the Staff College as a means to remove unpopular or ineffective officers, whilst for others, the complex language used in King's Regulations to describe the requirements for staff officers allowed enough ambiguity to put forward unsuitable candidates who wished to attend Staff College, or simply to become confused as to what was required of them. That nomination was continually utilised by advocates and opponents of reform speaks to its broader centrality within the army's culture of promotion and advancement in the continuing process of the development of its ethos of promoting by skill, merit and an element of personal interest. This recognition requires some revision of our existing understanding of the British Army's officer education system in the interwar period, not dismissing existing conclusions regarding the arduous and testing nature of the Staff College examination, but recognising that examination success should not be taken as the only, or indeed the most accurate measure of ability.<sup>77</sup>

Finally, it is clear that for those officers pressing the cause of Staff College reform, nomination was seen not only as a way to overcome many of the existing problems associated with selecting candidates and the allocation of vacancies, but also as a key element in the process of officer education. Across all discussions, the percentages of nominated candidates were significantly increased, suggesting widespread support for the practice among senior officers. In addition, the three-year examination of the allocation of vacancies demonstrated that nominated candidates performed significantly better than officers gaining competitive vacancies. As a result, far from undermining the Staff College's status, the nomination process can be seen to have

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<sup>77</sup>Examples of this emphasis can be seen in French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, p. 62; French *Military Identities*, pp. 160-161; Frost, 'The British and Indian Army Staff Colleges,' pp. 154-156 and Goodwin-Austin, *The Staff and the Staff College*, p. 276.

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improved the qualitative output and served as a means of ensuring that the most suitable officers were progressing to staff and command roles within the British Army. Such conclusions do much to underpin broader studies of officer education and military education in general by establishing the importance of nomination and the lengths taken to preserve its use.<sup>78</sup> Through this, we can continue to revise our understanding of the British Army, highlighting that whilst adhering to a hierarchical command structure, this structure did not stifle ingenuity and merit. Indeed, through the persistence of patronage and influence, the interwar army maintained a meritocratic promotion system on the staff within what was otherwise a strictly hierarchical system of promotion by seniority.

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<sup>78</sup>Alongside the studies already mentioned above, such broader examinations encompassing military educational developments include Jay Luvaas, *The Education of An Army: British Military Thought 1815-1940*, (Chicago IL: Chicago University Press, 1964); Gregory C. Kennedy & Keith Nielson eds.), *Military Education: Past, Present and Future*, (Westport CT: Praeger, 2002); Brian Bond, *The Victorian Army and the Staff College, 1854-1914*, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972). Such studies are not limited to the army, but also encompass those looking at the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. Key studies of these forces include Joseph Moretz, *Thinking Wisely, Planning Boldly: The Higher Education and Training of Royal Navy Officers, 1919-39*, (Solihull: Hellion & Co., 2014), and Randall Wakelam, David Varey & Emanuele Sica (eds.), *Educating Air Forces: Global Perspectives on Airpower Learning*, (Lexington KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2020).