

EARLY RECORDS OF THE WAR DEPARTMENT GENERAL STAFF IN NATIONAL ARCHIVES

THE War Department General Staff had its beginnings in the Army War College, which was established in Washington, D.C., in 1901. The college was under the direction of a board of nine officers, known as the Army War College Board, many of the duties of which were, in effect, those of a general staff. The functions of the board were to direct instruction and education in the Army, to prepare plans for action under all contingencies of possible conflict by acquiring information on and studying subjects relating to training and mobilization of the Army for war, and to furnish advice to the commander-in-chief upon all questions of plans, armament, transportation, mobilization, and military preparation and movement. Responsibility for the war-time efficiency of the Army, however, remained divided between the Secretary of War and the General Commanding the Army. To eliminate this division of authority, Congress in 1903 passed an act providing for a general staff. This act, which was approved on February 14 and became effective on August 15, 1903, abolished the separate office of General Commanding the Army, provided for a military Chief of Staff to the President, who, acting under the directions of the President or of the Secretary of War representing him should have supervision not only of all troops of the line but also of the administrative and technical services; and it created for the assistance of the Chief of Staff a corps of forty-four officers who were relieved from all other duties. The duties of the General Staff Corps are to prepare plans for the national defense and for the mobilization of the military forces in time of war; to investigate and report upon all questions affecting the efficiency of the Army and its state of preparation for military operations; to render professional aid and assistance to the Secretary of War and to general officers and other superior commanders; and to perform such other military duties not otherwise assigned by law as may be from time to time prescribed by the President.

This act did not go into effect until August 15, 1903, but preliminary steps toward the creation of the General Staff were taken almost immediately after its passage. On March 20, 1903, an order was issued convening a board of general officers in Washington to select the officers for the General Staff and to complete its first

organization. After the officers were selected by this board they were ordered to Washington and there they were organized into an experimental or provisional General Staff to develop a permanent organization and distribution of duties for the General Staff Corps, to draft new regulations, and to revise the old regulations.

The organization of the War Department General Staff relieved the War College Board of a wide range of general staff duties originally assigned to it. On August 15, 1903, therefore, the board was abolished and the War College was placed under the direct control of the Chief of Staff. The college retained supervision over military education, and the rendering of assistance to the Chief of Staff and the General Staff in the preparation of plans for the national defense was made its special duty. To this end, it received from time to time instructions from the Chief of Staff as to the problems it should consider and the general line of investigations it should pursue. After careful study of the various problems, reports and recommendations were submitted to the Chief of Staff. A selected number of officers were also assembled from time to time at the War College for the minute and detailed study of the projects thus formulated.

RECORDS¹

The records created by the Office of the Chief of Staff—those in the so-called “General Staff files”—constitute one sub-group; those created by the Army War College and retained by it as its own immediate files constitute a second sub-group; and the records of the Board of Ordnance and Fortification form a third sub-group. Although throughout its period of existence the board was an independent unit, its functions eventually were assumed by the War Department General Staff and at the same time its records were turned over to the staff, which maintained them as an entity related to but separate from its own files. Prior to 1917, the records of most of the subdivisions of the General Staff are interfiled in the records of the War College, which for a number of years was the record-keeping agency, and papers relating to the divisions are also contained in the records of the Office of the Chief of Staff. Material filed under certain numbers in the War College collection has been retained for current use by the college. Of the later records of the

¹ The use of all the records described below is restricted to the extent that approval must be obtained from the Adjutant General's Office.

General Staff, some are in the National Archives and others are in the War Department Records Branch of the Adjutant General's Office.

Until the period of the first World War the War Department General Staff was very small and in a general way it represented an experiment to see to what degree the general staff technique, so widely employed in European armies, might be suitable in the United States. As a consequence there is not a great quantity of records created by the General Staff proper prior to that war; the records of the Army War College for the same period are much more voluminous and, in many ways, contain material of greater value. The War College performed many of the functions normally considered to be general staff functions, so that its files—constituting those of one unit of the General Staff—must frequently be searched for information that seems more appropriately sought in the main files of the staff. The total volume of records described is approximately 455 feet, slightly over half of which are those of the Army War College.

War Department General Staff Records

The most important files of the General Staff during the first years of its existence are the Reports of the General Staff covering the period 1903-1916 and amounting to 100 cubic feet in volume. Despite the title assigned to these records they consist of memorandum reports and related papers on subjects considered and acted upon by the General Staff. The questions dealt with vary in importance and therefore these records contain material of great historical value in connection with the military affairs of the United States as well as data on relatively unimportant details. Notable among the subjects of the reports are the following: distribution of troops and the construction, location, and enlargement of Army posts; detail of officers to the general service schools; reorganization of field batteries; organization of maneuver divisions and plans for mobilization; revision of Army Regulations, Infantry Drill Regulations, and the Articles of War; organization of the militia; and the rearrangement of territorial departments.

The records are arranged in two series, one covering the years 1903-1906 and the other the years 1907-1916. The first series is filed alphabetically by subject and is well cross-referenced. The sec-

ond is filed numerically and has a card index arranged alphabetically by subject. As all the papers received and sent by the General Staff were filed as "reports," the form of the files varies from a single letter to a comparatively bulky dossier.

Closely related to these files but of almost negligible volume are the records of the provisional General Staff that operated for a few months in 1903. Since many tasks and problems appropriate for General Staff action were referred to the provisional staff, the subjects covered by its reports range from major matters of policy, such as the distribution of troops and mobilization plans, to the comparatively minor questions of the practice of cutting the tails of cavalry horses and the most suitable designs for soup and commissary carts for field use. The records, which consist of memorandum reports and related papers on matters considered and acted upon by the provisional General Staff, also include much information on the revision of regulations and on service and post schools. The papers are filed numerically and the record cards relating to them are interfiled with the documents. The cards contain abstracts of the subject matter of the papers to which they pertain and indicate the action taken. In instances where there are a number of papers relating to the same subject, such as the General Staff and Service School at Fort Leavenworth, the records are consolidated under one number. Other files consist of single documents. The papers are well arranged, appear to be complete, and include a card index arranged alphabetically by subject.

Army War College Records

The earliest records pertaining directly to the War Department General Staff are those of the Army War College Board, 1902-1903. They consist of correspondence, reports, and memoranda on such subjects as education of officers and military education in land-grant and other colleges; organization of the militia; location of military posts, the acquisition of land therefor, and the construction of buildings on military reservations; the securing of military information; details of officers; and badges adopted by organizations. Only about two cubic feet of these files have been preserved as an entity and they are very fragmentary. There are record cards, arranged numerically, giving abstracts of the papers and of action taken but the index to the records, as well as many of the individual dossiers,

having been integrated and interfiled with later records of the War College.

The most important early War College files, which contain much material that might be expected to have been in the main War Department General Staff files, are the Reports and Monographs of the Army War College, 1903-1919, amounting to about 225 feet in volume. Prior to the establishment in 1918 in the Office of the Chief of Staff of a War Plans Division and a Military Intelligence Division, many of the important functions of these divisions were exercised by the Army War College. These functions included the collection and dissemination of military information, the study and preparation of plans, and other such work of a strictly general staff character. The War College therefore investigated matters of prime importance to the Army and its studies contain much valuable historical data. The records include reports and studies on topics of the following nature: military policy, training and organization of a national army obtained by universal service, military problems of mobilization and supply, officers' training corps, maps of Mexico that would be of value in case of war, journeys through foreign countries, a field gun about to be adopted by the British government, and the transfer of the Coast Artillery from the Army to the Navy. The papers are filed numerically in dossiers, many of which are voluminous and have sub-numerical breakdowns. There are record cards arranged numerically and two sets of alphabetical index cards, one arranged by subject and the other by name. The numerical document file has gaps, because some of the records have been disposed of. The pertinent record cards have been retained, however, and indicate the disposition made of the files.

In addition to the main series of records of the Army War College there are files relating to personnel, administration, appropriations and expenditures, training, maneuvers, investigations and studies (a few reports and studies are included), foreign armies, courses of study, the collection and dissemination of military information, and requests for and transmittals of maps, publications, bibliographies, orders, and similar materials. The papers are numbered but are not filed by number. In several instances groups of papers on the same subject, notably personnel matters and letters of transmittal, have been removed from their proper numerical sequence and have been placed together in an approximately chronological arrangement.

There are record cards arranged by number, but the index is interfiled and integrated with that to the main series of records of the War College.

Included among these records are papers of the Third Division of the General Staff, 1904-1908, which constituted the permanent personnel of the War College and was charged with the supervision of military education and the preparation of instructions for the guidance of officers of the Army serving or traveling abroad or acting as military attachés and with the arrangement or digest of information in their reports. The records consist of reports, correspondence, and memoranda on the educational system of the Army, military courses of training at civilian institutions and the detail thereto of officers as professors of military science and tactics, submarine and seacoast defenses, and military systems in foreign countries. The volume of papers is small, and it is believed that many of them are duplicated in form or content in the reports of the Army War College or the General Staff. Included is a file of copies of weekly reports on the activities of the Second (Military Information) Division of the General Staff, May, 1906-May, 1908. These records are arranged in a numerical series distinct from that of the Army War College and do not include record cards or indexes.

The map collection of the Army War College is small in volume and consists of manuscript maps and file copies of printed maps relating to the American Revolution, to Napoleon's campaigns of 1806-1809, to the Civil War, to Canadian border areas, 1890, to Cuba in the Spanish-American War and in the occupation of 1906-1909, and to the Italian front in the first World War.

Board of Ordnance and Fortification Records

The Board of Ordnance and Fortification was never a part of the War Department General Staff but its activities after 1903 were closely related to those of the staff and ultimately its functions were taken over by the staff. The board was established by act of Congress approved September 22, 1888. This act provided that the board, which was under the direction of the Secretary of War, should be composed of the Commanding General of the Army, an officer of engineers, an officer of ordnance, and an officer of artillery. A civilian member, who should not be an ex-officer of the regular Army or Navy and who should be nominated by the President and confirmed

by the Senate, was added to the board by act of Congress approved February 24, 1891. The act of February 14, 1903, providing for a General Staff, also provided that the duties prescribed by law for the commanding general as a member of the Board of Ordnance and Fortification should be performed by the Chief of Staff. The functions of the board were to consider and recommend projects for fortifications and to examine and report upon ordnance and other inventions submitted to the War Department. When the Inventions Section, War Plans Division, was established in 1918, the work of the board was greatly reduced, and it was finally discontinued in 1920.

The records, covering the period 1888-1919, include a main file of correspondence, reports, and related papers, including some drawings and photographs, pertaining to inventions, guns, projectiles, tanks, equipment for fortifications, and other matters handled by the board. This material is arranged numerically, with a card index arranged alphabetically by subject. In addition, there are the following other series of records: press copy books of letters sent, 1890-1915, arranged chronologically with alphabetical indexes in each volume; bound volumes of proceedings of meetings and annual reports, 1888-1917, arranged chronologically; maps, blueprints, drawings, designs, and charts of experiments, arranged by subject (filed flat in map containers); ledgers, journals, bills for printing, price lists, and estimates, reports of tests of ordnance equipment and fortifications; and miscellaneous printed material.

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