

# Before there was a USAFA Prep School ...

*part-one  
of two parts*

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**F**rom whence came the Air Force Academy Preparatory School (USAFAPS)? It didn't spring fully formed in 1961 from the head of ... well, who cares? It's an actual Fun Fact that from 1957 through 1961, the young Air Force Academy "borrowed" the U.S. Naval Academy's and the U.S. Military Academy's Preparatory Schools, aka USNAPS and USMAPS.

## MUCH ADO ABOUT NUNN

Herein lurks a short history lesson. In 1992 the combined Senate and House Committees on Armed Services co-sponsored an expensive study titled "Academy Preparatory Schools Need a Clearer Mission and Better Oversight." This document, otherwise known as the Nunn Report, offered recommendations, including (1) the armed forces consider merging programs into a consolidated Preparatory School, (2) the armed forces consider sending academy candidates instead to private preparatory schools, and (3) Congress determine whether the Army, Navy and Air Force preparatory schools were cost-effective.

In the following pages, I'd like to point out that each of these well-meaning conclusions offered up in the Nunn Report had been already been tried over the previous 66 years with varying successes. If you will keep that thought in the back of your

mind, allow me to go through the history of the Preparatory Schools.


## IT ALL STARTED WITH WORLD WAR I

In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson signed into law the sweeping National Defense Act. This new law reorganized the Army, recognized the National Guard, and created the Reserve Officers Training Corps. And in the spirit of democratization, the law also increased the size of the Military Academy's Corps of Cadets to 1,334 and authorized 180 cadet slots for prior enlisted men. Alas, the enlisted quota was going to be difficult to fill, as the average U.S. citizen then possessed somewhat less than an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education. World War I put on hold any plans for direct, sizeable enlisted appointments to West Point and Annapolis.

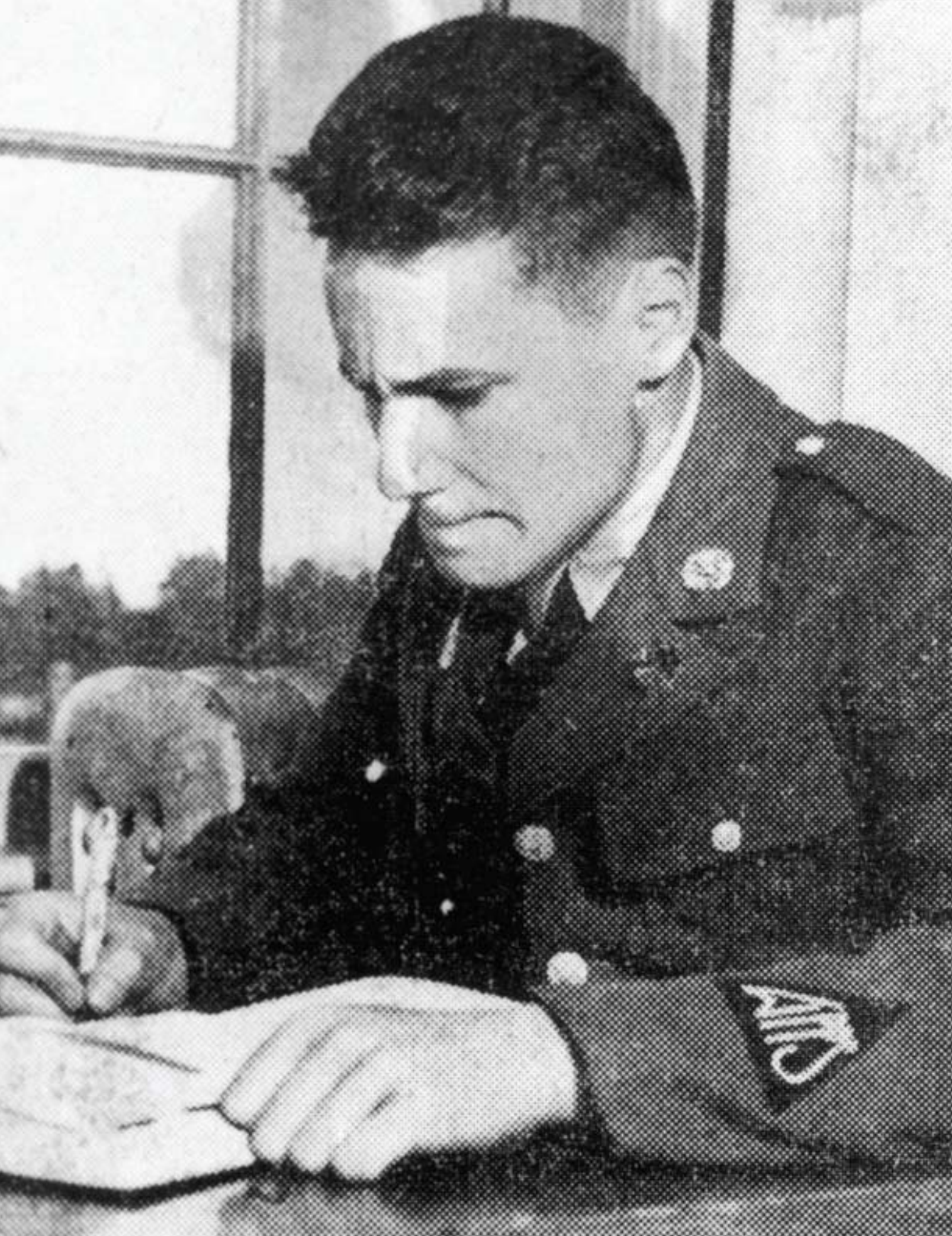
## THE PREP SCHOOLS WERE OFF TO A BUMPY START

The Department of the Navy had already established its Naval Academy Preparatory School as early as 1915, and by 1920 it had set up two formal 10-month schools at Naval Station Newport and Naval Station San Francisco now named the Naval Academy Preparatory Course (NAPC), each with an enrollment of about 100 midshipman candidates.

The U.S. Army, which by now included the Army Air Service, took a while longer



Cadet Candidate George Pappas, WPPS 1940, USMA 1944. Note the distinctive WPPS sleeve patch.



to get generated, but by 1925 it started on the path by creating no fewer than 11 (yes, eleven) separate preparatory schools, most of them located within the various Army Corps areas and also within the Overseas Departments. It was also believed that a few Army posts conducted their own informal preparatory schools. National Guardsmen were also permitted to enlist for the purpose of attending these prep schools. Figure 1 shows a roomful of West Point hopefuls preparing for the entrance exam to the Ft. Totten, Queens NY preparatory school, circa 1925.

It was obvious that none of these schools had any coordinated, standardized curricula or goals—other than to prepare enlisted men to pass the USMA entrance exam(s). Military discipline and academic standards varied widely. The prep school at Ft. Winfield Scott in San Francisco was rigorously modeled after West Point, whereas at the Ft. McKinley, Philippines prep school, students had no duties other than to attend academic classes from Monday through Friday. At a few over-

seas posts, civilian aspirants were allowed to attend classes. At some schools, cadet candidates pulled KP and latrine duties; at others, these future gentlemen-officers were excused from menial chores. The size of prep school student bodies varied widely, but they probably averaged around 20 cadet candidates each.

Academic standards also varied, but courses offered were vanilla English and mathematics, oftentimes with a sprinkle of geometry and history tossed in. It was all intended to be a rigorous repeat of everything-you-should-have-learned-in-high-school. This was not unexpected, as certainly not all enlisted men had even high school diplomas. The size of the “faculty” varied from three to seven instructors, many of them junior lieutenants fresh from West Point. It’s noteworthy that even most officer-instructors possessed neither bachelor’s degrees nor teaching certificates. This was not an oversight, as West Point and Annapolis did not become academically accredited until 1925, and the academies did not award their graduates formal

bachelor of science degrees until 1935. This might seem odd, for as late as the 1880s, USMA and USNA had national renown as America’s premier engineering schools. (Even the future Nobel Laureate Albert Michelson, USNA 1873, was not awarded an undergraduate baccalaureate.)

### THE PREP SCHOOLS AS WANDERING ORPHANS

Most facilities were decidedly marginal. Nearly all prep schools were treated as orphan tenants and were, therefore, located in either temporary or surplus facilities. The Camp Dix preparatory school was located in abandoned temporary nurses’ quarters. The Ft. Sam Houston school was banished to peripheral tarpaper shacks.

Author and retired Navy Captain William J. Lederer, USNA ’36, (and also co-author of the best-seller *The Ugly American*) wrote with cynical delight in his irreverently humorous memoir *All the Ships at Sea* (1951) when he described his 1931 drafty, leaky, and moldy quarters during his 10-month attendance at the NAPC Newport, Rhode Island. USNAPS/NAPC shifted locations at least five times, including relocations to Norfolk, Virginia and San Diego, California, and Bainbridge, Maryland.

Calculating moves for the Army are more difficult, but USMAPS and its WPPS predecessors bounced around at no fewer than seven main geographical locations until it has reputedly found its final, future home at West Point starting in 2011. USMA’s lack of permanent facilities for the various prep schools was likewise a chronic headache for the Air Force until the Air Force Academy Preparatory School was granted a permanent site on the Academy’s Colorado grounds proper in 1961.

### WORLD WAR II AND FURTHER CHANGES

In mid-1943 the Army prep schools were turned over to cooperating civilian facilities at Amherst College, Massachusetts; Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania; and Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. But in 1945 as the war was winding down, it was clear the civilian universities would need the space for returning veterans, so the three schools were consolidated at Amherst College. One can only suppose that USMA Superintendent Major General Maxwell Taylor had



Aspirants applying for the West Point Preparatory School at Ft. Totten. Location believed to be Governors Island, NY, 1925.

had enough of this relocation business, so in 1946 he directed the establishment of a single Preparatory School at Stewart Army Airfield, Newburgh, New York.

### USMAPS GOES TO STEWART AIR FORCE BASE

From 1946 until 1956, USMAPS settled down into its new residence at Stewart. In the early days, the composition of the 250-man Preparatory School cadet candidate battalion had a high percentage of World War II veterans, including many decorated NCOs and commissioned officers. The 1949-1950 USMAPS prep school battalion included four lieutenants and two master sergeants. However, prior rank (but not their pay) was rendered indistinguishable and meaningless, as all cadet candidates removed their identifying stripes and bars and wore just their generic uniforms with lapel brass and a "USMA Prep" shoulder patch.

Recruited athletes were unheard of in those days. Cadet candidates participated widely in basketball, baseball, tennis, and lacrosse, but sports were largely restricted to competition with other base organizations. The USMAPS footballers were integrated with the base football team and mostly played teams from other Army posts. Unfortunately, equal opportunity was also unheard of in the early days of USMAPS, for typically less than 1 percent of the cadet candidates came from ethnic minorities.

Sailors and Marines were also welcomed to USMAPS. There was no Air Force Academy, so fully one-third of the cadet candidates were Air Force, and they competed equally for appointments to USMA along with those men from the Regular Army.

Again, the buildings and facilities were recycled pre-1900 drafty, steam-heated brick buildings. Cadet candidates, like any ordinary enlisted men, lived in open bay barracks and pulled their share of KP and CQ duties.

With few exceptions, the 13-man USMAPS faculty was civilian, many of them with impressive Ivy League credentials. The 10-month program of coursework consisted of instruction in English, mathematics, and history. The military staff was equally as impressive, as most of the NCOs and officers were hand-selected, decorated combat veterans.

Established as the prep schools were, they were in for yet more changes. The



creation of the U.S. Air Force Academy in 1954 required that enlisted aspirants for the new academy would need their own route to gain competitive appointments. In the interim, beginning in 1957, the Army and the Navy would have to share their real estate with the Air Force. ✓

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Top: Cadet Candidates at Stewart AFB forming up for class, 1949. These were the days before back packs. Bottom: Future USAFA Dean of Faculty, Cadet Candidate Private William A. Orth, USMAPS 1950.