

Past in Review

WEST POINTERS LEAD THE WAY TO MILITARY MEDICINE: A STORY OF COURAGE AND COMMITMENT

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To date, a total of 657 West Point graduates have attended medical school and (based on figures through the Class of '97) approximately 90 percent ended up or will end up serving a minimum of 15 years in the Army. While impressive on its own, this retention rate is especially extraordinary given that Dorsey Mahin '45, the first graduate to attend medical school, and others after him for the next decade had to resign their commissions in order to become doctors.

The Class of 1955 made the first significant inroad to changing the path for graduates wanting to attend medical school while on active duty.

The effort was led by '55ers John Feagin and Paul Lenio, who were accepted to medical school, but found themselves facing an uphill battle. Feagin framed their quandary as follows: "Why would the Army take combat arms officers, pay their way to medical school, and hope for the best when trained doctors could be drafted for nothing?" Rather than get discouraged, Feagin and Lenio

negotiated with their branch representatives to accept a "leave without pay" compromise. To their surprise, their branches gave them enthusiastic support, and they were soon on their way to the Pentagon to present their case to General Maxwell Taylor '22, the Chief of Staff of the Army. The branch colonels instructed the lieutenants to remain quiet as they "would do all the talking." Taylor never looked up from his paperwork and simply said, "If you can make it work for the Army—do it." Both lieutenants saluted and marched out past the one-star aide Brigadier General William Westmoreland '36, his glare indicating that he was not as willing as his boss to agree to these terms. Feagin and Lenio were shortly joined by classmate Preston Mayson, son-in-law to the future Surgeon General of the Army, Lieutenant General Leonard D. Heaton. This trio began their medical training

while on leave without pay, and all became residents at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in orthopedics, general surgery, and radiology. More importantly, all volunteered and served in Vietnam after finishing their residency training in 1966.

The door was now open for West Point graduates to pursue medical careers. On April 3, 1968, the Army widened that door by approving Army Regulation (AR) 601-112, which allowed qualified, highly motivated officers to attend professional schools on a subsidized basis, provided that funds were



Six of the first seven West Point graduates to attend Medical School. From left to right: Dr. Michael Ziegler '56, Dr. George Ward '56, Dr. Thomas Runyan '57, Dr. Paul Lenio '55, Dr. Lewis Mologne '54, Dr. John Feagin '55. Dr. Preston Mayson '55 was not present for the photograph.

available. The participants received pay, allowances, tuition, and reimbursement for textbooks each year in exchange for additional active duty commitments. A total of 238 USMA graduates took advantage of this AR, which remained in effect through the 1970s and ultimately helped the Medical Corps meet its dire need of retaining physicians in the military at that time. Also in this time frame, a few West Point officers lobbied to allow a select number of cadets from the Class of 1970 to go directly into medical school after graduation rather than into their two-year minimum commission in combat arms. This idea started with Colonel Milton Cohen, the Deputy Commander of Staff at Keller Army Community Hospital (KACH) at West Point, who persuaded regimental tactical officer Colonel Robert Haldane '47 to recommend a policy change. Brigadier General John

Jannarone '38, the Dean at this time, agreed to the idea, but Major General Sam Koster '42, the Superintendent, did not. However, Koster was abruptly relieved as Superintendent and replaced by Major General William Knowlton JAN '43, whose son was a member of the Class of 1970. Knowlton approved the applications and forwarded the paperwork to the Department of the Army; coincidentally, it was Westmoreland who granted final approval.

These changes led to the current policy which took effect with the Class of 1979. At present, the Department of Defense permits up to two

percent of each USMA class to attend medical school immediately following graduation, or an average of 15 graduates for the past 10 years. From the Class of 1945 through the Class of 1982, there have been a total of 360 graduates who have served as military medical doctors. Of these, 200 have obtained the rank of colonel and eight were promoted to general officers (including Major General

James Peake '66). Two West Point doctors, Thoralf Sundt Jr. '52 and Feagin, have also received the Distinguished Graduate Award. In their years of medical service, West Point graduates have had and will continue to have the privilege of treating many soldiers and their dependents. The mission of the Medical Corps is "To Conserve Fighting Strength," and the commitments incurred after many years of medical training are ultimately rewards for the opportunity to serve both honorably and proudly.

COL Blakeslee was commissioned Field Artillery and then sent on scholarship to Northwestern Medical School. He retired after 20 years of service and practiced medicine for another 20 years as a civilian. He was recalled to active duty and is now the Chief of Otolaryngology at KACH.