

USMA Featured History Alumni –COL Charles Bowery

Branch: AV

Current Assignment: Joint Staff J-8

Years Assigned to West Point: 2001-2003

(1) Please tell us a little about yourself. I am a 1992 ROTC graduate from William and Mary, where I earned a B.A. in History and a commission into Aviation. After OBC and flight school, I served at Ft. Bragg (platoon leader, BN S1), in Korea (Squadron S4, troop commander), at grad school/USMA/CGSC, then back to Aviation. In Germany 2004-2008, I served as a BN S3, BDE S3, and BDE XO, with two OIF deployments. After selection to battalion command, I moved to Ft. Hood in 2009, served in the III Corps G3 briefly, and took command of 1-4 Aviation (Attack) in July 2009. We deployed to OEF in June 2010 to support SOF across Afghanistan. I gave up command in September 2011 and moved to Fort Rucker, where I served as chief of Doctrine and Lessons Learned for Aviation Branch. After my Rucker assignment, I requested a Joint Staff assignment and moved to DC, where I have served in the J-8 as a requirements analyst since June 2013. I was promoted to Colonel in February 2014.

(2) Can you please describe your duties as a History faculty member? I served in the Military Division from 2001-2003, and taught HI301/302 and HI351/352, as well as a colloquium on Civil War Generalship for history major cadets. In 2002 I was the Assistant Director of the West Point Summer Seminar in Military History, and I served as the Director for the 2003 Summer Seminar. I co-led an AIAD on the Civil War Eastern Theater in 2002, led cadet staff rides to Antietam and Gettysburg both years, and led 4th Regiment, USCC staff rides to Antietam and Gettysburg as well. I taught MS301 during Intersession in the 2002-2003 academic year. Unrelated to D/HIST, I was an OR for men's track and field and cross-country, and served as a volunteer with the Ski Patrol.

(3) What made you decide to come to USMA as a History instructor? I have a lifelong passion for the study of military history. When I discovered as a 2LT that I could compete and earn a spot in graduate school and teach at West Point, I decided to pursue the assignment from that point forward. I went to the Department for an in-person interview before PCS to Korea, and this cemented the decision in my mind. It was essentially a decision for selfish purposes- benefits to me, but I came to realize the powerful role I could play in a lot of others' lives as an instructor.

(4) Please tell us a little about your graduate school experience at North Carolina State University. My sole negative comment about my USMA experience was the lack of assistance I received in the graduate school application process. I was generally very naïve about the politics of graduate admissions, and made some very bad assumptions about my ability to get into a top-tier program, assumptions that an experienced advisor would have called out. I wanted to attend school in North Carolina because my wife had a good job there, I wanted to study the Civil War, and I knew of the strong reputation the Triangle schools had in these programs. UNC-Chapel Hill and Duke both rejected me, but I obtained admission to N.C. State, which gave me the opportunity to take classes at all three schools. I can't say enough good things about the reception I received at N.C. State, or about my experience there. The only drawback to N.C. State was the lack of a PhD program; and again, I didn't really have any advocates to push coordination with UNC or Duke to transfer over to their programs to remain on track for a PhD. Overall though, this was a family decision, and I got an outstanding graduate education essentially from all three programs. My advice to the prospective applicant is to seek out assistance with the process from the Department and the schools in which you are interested.

(5) What was the most rewarding part of serving on the faculty? I had such a tremendous experience at USMA that it's hard to point out one rewarding aspect. Getting to immerse oneself in military history and communicate that critical subject area to future Army officers is one of the most fulfilling things I have done as a Soldier. I was able to make a positive impact on hundreds of future Army leaders as a result. The mentorship I provided to cadets, both in and out of the classroom, was intensely rewarding. The professional relationships I formed as both an officer and a scholar have also continued up to today, and my impact on the larger community of military historians through the Summer Seminar was priceless.

(6) How did your study of history in graduate school help prepare you for future assignments in the operational Army? On a purely personal level, my first two Army assignments had taken a lot out of me, and almost two years of separation in Korea was rough (although nothing compared to what the current generation of company grade officers has endured). Graduate school was a chance for me to reset, take a breath, and gain some perspective on where I stood as an Army officer. Essentially managing my own education process, and completing a M.A. thesis, provided valuable professional lessons in time management, task management, and organizational skills. Overall, the break from life in a battalion was really important for me at that time in my life.

(7) How did your faculty time prepare you for future assignments in the operational Army? As an ROTC graduate, I knew very little about USMA; the teaching assignment gave me a very useful understanding of the system that produces these officers, and of course I gained an additional appreciation of the special place West Point holds in Army culture. The academic perspective I gained through immersion in military history has materially improved my leadership in other venues, and I also learned a great deal about working with, leading, and building teams composed of diverse populations- Soldiers, civilians, contractors, cadets, civilian scholars. Over the years, I have encountered numerous of my former students in the operational Army; to see them doing well is very rewarding in itself.

(8) How was your West Point assignment in terms of family time and work-life balance? It was fantastic. Proximity to New York City was really nice, and my wife also gained a lot out of the assignment- she entered the Army JAG Corps on a direct commission in 2001, and USMA was her first duty station. We enjoyed opportunities to serve as ORs and members of the Ski Patrol, to travel and interact with the cadets in other venues. The social life of the Department and the Academy was very enjoyable.

(9) What advice would you give to officers considering a faculty position at West Point? As others have no doubt said, there are many paths to success as an Army officer, but defining that success is a very personal process. If it's important to you to leave a lasting legacy within the profession of arms, USMA is a great place to do it. If your goal is battalion or higher command in the operating force, a USMA assignment is not necessarily incompatible with it; an urban legend has grown over the years that a USMA teaching assignment is a kiss of death in that regard. All of my closest friends in the Department have gone on to BN-level command, and some to O6-level command. If battalion and/or brigade command is your primary goal, talk to your branch manager about your timeline and determine if you can take the 4-5 years that USMA will require. If it can, I cannot recommend a USMA teaching assignment highly enough! It was second in my experience only to battalion command. The personal and professional benefits you receive from the assignment, combined with what you are able to give back to the Army, make it a very special experience, one that I will always treasure.

(10) *Can you think of anything else you'd like to share?* I will echo others' advice to be very clear with your HR manager about your goals and aspirations; USMA may not fit with the timeline to complete KD positions to remain competitive for battalion command. Brigade XO or S3 time is absolutely essential for battalion command selection (at least in my branch), and getting into those jobs depends on building a reputation in a unit as a battalion S3 or XO first. My branch manager laid out my timeline to complete company command, get to grad school, teach, and return to the operating force in such a way that kept me competitive. I decided that I wanted to do both, and don't regret that decision one bit.

With all of this being said, I believe that the choice I made to teach at West Point led materially to my not being selected for brigade command. The four years I spent in school and at USMA are critical years in Army Aviation for establishing a reputation in a certain unit or at a certain post; given that battalion and brigade-level CSL selections are made largely on the officer's time in service in certain places, I became somewhat of a 'nomad' as compared to many of my peers. Downstream from my USMA time, I was selected for battalion command at a post where I had never served, in a brigade that deactivated right after I left command. Those circumstances disadvantaged me in the very tough look for brigade command. But as I stated earlier, if I were to go back in time and see the results of my career decisions, I would take the same path. I led Soldiers in combat as a battalion commander; I studied my profession and mentored cadets in the classroom and in numerous other ways. That is for me the very definition of a full and fruitful Army career.