



Second Lieutenant

"Many of our graduates hold commissions in the Army. I am sure Mr. Marshall is fully the equal of the best."

—General Scott Shipp to President William McKinley, February 14, 1901.

MARSHALL had applied himself diligently at VMI and acquired focus, skill, and self-confidence. But to become a general he needed in addition the chance to become a second lieutenant. That chance he got most obviously by graduating at just the right juncture, when the Army, after long neglect, was being enlarged and reorganized.

Americans probably do not dislike military service more than other people but they have a historically ingrained and generally healthy distaste for large standing armies as well as an aversion to paying for them in peacetime. The facts of geography and fortunes of history, reinforced by democratic theory, permitted America to develop a tradition of waging war with volunteers quickly raised to fight and as quickly disbanded afterward. Between wars a small professional army was maintained, initially to fight Indians, put down civil disorders, and provide a cadre of trained leaders and men in case of future troubles. In principle the system was not so bad, but in practice Congress

tended to treat the Army with neglect rather than wise frugality. The result, by the end of the nineteenth century, was a military organization that could not play even the minimum role that democratic theory assigned it.

The chaotic blundering of the Spanish-American War revealed the inadequacy of the professional Army as an instrument of war. But though the blunders raised cries for the scalps of those thought to be responsible they brought no public demand for essential reform.

For the duration of the war Congress had raised the Army's authorized strength from 28,747 to 62,597 and permitted the President to call up more than 200,000 volunteers.¹ After the peace all the regulars in excess of the prewar establishment were by law to be mustered out. But before the Senate could be brought to ratify the treaty the Philippine Insurrection broke out. Congress then had in effect to extend the emergency, and a new law authorized the retention of 65,000 regulars and recruitment of 35,000 volunteers for service not beyond July 1, 1901.²

When 1901 arrived the insurrection showed no signs of abating, and Congress had again to face the politically unpleasant fact that to win and hold overseas possessions required an army sufficient to the task. Another stopgap measure might have served. In fact Congress now faced—or partly faced—the longer-range military needs. That it did so may be credited at least in part to the new Secretary of War.

Alger in 1899 had at last to resign. It is one of the fortunate accidents of history that he was replaced by a New York corporation lawyer noted in the legal profession and strong in the Republican party but with no special background for the job. McKinley picked Elihu Root to be Secretary of War, and Elihu Root accepted the appointment, under the delusion that the War Department was to be preoccupied with the problems of administering America's new colonies. In such guise did the Army find its first civilian chief since Stanton who attempted to learn its problems and who had the courage and skill, as well as the presidential backing, to solve them.³

Alger had plainly deserved his reputation for bungling and

complacency. But he was not the prime author of his own and the nation's misfortune. He inherited a military organization that the ablest chief could not have made to work in war. The Army at this time had a dual directorate: the commanding general, who by law was responsible directly to the President for military operations and discipline; and the Secretary of War, who was charged with supply, recruitment, and fiscal management and who exercised that control through the War Department bureaus. There were ten bureaus, the most powerful being those of the Adjutant General and the Inspector General. Bureau chiefs were permanently assigned to their jobs in Washington under conditions that encouraged each to build an autonomous empire, protected by political influence, remote from the forces in the field and jealously fenced against any encroachment by rival bureaus. They were not answerable to the commanding general, and he was not answerable to the Secretary of War. The commanding general, who was ordinarily the biggest military name of his day, had unlimited power to meddle but almost no power to command. The ten little unco-ordinated bureau kings had vast capacities to frustrate one another but almost none to direct the establishment. No one was charged with planning for war and no one could direct it when it came.⁴

An obvious answer, often put forward since Civil War times, was the general staff system. Abolish the commanding general, who had nothing to command; establish instead a military executive, under the President and Secretary of War, with a general staff to collect information and see that his decisions were carried out; place under him the bureaus, with their functions reduced to administration.

Secretary Root, after long study, accepted the general staff idea and with the devoted assistance of Adjutant General Henry C. Corbin and his assistant, Major William H. Carter, set out to overcome the considerable political obstacles that had frustrated his predecessors. Step by step he drew the blueprint of the modern military establishment in which George Marshall was to rise to eminence.⁵

In his first report at the end of 1899, Root recommended re-organization and noted the need for public education, which he himself was to push relentlessly for more than three years. The

following February he took the first step. Finding it possible to establish an Army War College without congressional approval, he appointed a board to organize it. The War College, which opened in Washington in November 1901, was to serve not only for the advanced education of Army officers but as a coordinating agency "through which all means of professional military information shall be at any one time at the disposal of the War Department." ⁶

Early in 1900 Root submitted to Congress a bill, approved in February 1901, to enlarge the Army to a maximum of a hundred thousand, which was to be maintained until Congress should vote otherwise. The President was allowed to exceed the maximum when men were being recruited for service in the overseas possessions.⁷ The bill provided for thirty infantry regiments (one of which was the 30th, in which Marshall was to serve), fifteen cavalry regiments, and an artillery corps. Each regiment was reorganized to include three battalions of four companies each—the basic combat structure that persisted through World War II. The bill also took one small cut at the underbrush in the way of a general staff: it provided that officers assigned to staff positions henceforth would serve tours of duty of four years and not be eligible for reappointments until they had spent at least two years with the line regiments in which they were commissioned.⁸ It was an edict of celibacy for the bureaus; the incumbents were safe but they were to have no bureaucratic heirs.

In 1902 Root sent to Congress the General Staff bill, which abolished the post of commanding general, established the position of Chief of Staff, authorized a general staff under him of forty-four officers, and gave him supervision over the bureaus (Adjutant General, Inspector General, Judge Advocate, Quartermaster, Subsistence, Medical, Paymaster, Ordnance, Corps of Engineers, and Signal Corps). Though Congress balked in 1902, the next year (February 1903) it passed the bill. The importance of that Act of 1903 for the future of the Army and for the fate of this nation can hardly be exaggerated. Although it was a long time before the old bureaucracy was forced to yield and the reforming principle became effective in practice, the act laid the groundwork for a military organization.

Hardly less significant than Root's reorganization of the War

Department was his inauguration of a system of Army education designed primarily to train officers for the increased responsibilities which the nation's enlarged commitments would put upon them and which the reformed organization would permit them to accept. At almost every Army post throughout the country he ordered a prescribed training course for junior officers, aimed particularly at officers commissioned from the ranks during the war and those taken in after the February 1901 act had permanently doubled the size of the Army. But Root also believed that even West Pointers might profit by continued "intellectual exercise." He wished, moreover, to discover the livelier minds among the officer corps fit for further training in higher command and staff work. These were to go on to special service schools for artillery, engineer, medical corps, and cavalry officers—schools which had functioned before the war but had atrophied. Now, by being placed in an educational hierarchy, they were for the first time made relevant to the officer's career and so very slowly they gained prestige and began to deserve it.

In 1902 Root reopened the old infantry and cavalry school at Fort Leavenworth, which had closed during the war. Within two years there was functioning there, besides a basic field command course, a small Army Staff College to begin special training of officers of the General Staff. Finishing school for the latter was to be the Army War College.⁹

Finally, in the Militia Act of 1903 (the Dick Bill), Root brought the citizen army into the educational system and imposed on it professional standards. Candidates for commissioning in the National Guard were required to pass federal examinations. Guard regiments were to be instructed by regular Army officers (George Marshall was one of the earliest and most successful of the instructors) and were to join regular troops in maneuvers. To qualified officers of the Guard the course at Leavenworth was to be open for advanced training.¹⁰

That the Army was thus reformed along lines to encourage and reward the true and devoted professional was critical for the ultimate success of George Marshall, but the fact that the Army was enlarged was what immediately counted. The Act of 1901 authorized an additional twelve hundred officers, at least

one-fifth of whom were to be selected by examination at once and commissioned.¹¹ As soon as the terms of the pending bill were reported, Marshall pointed his course toward taking the examination. His parents remained opposed to his choice of a military career. But his father, obliged to recognize that George's "whole heart was in it," now put aside his own doubts and harnessed himself to his son's cause with remarkable devotion and drive. He wrote to Superintendent Shipp to ask whether the superintendent really felt sure George had "the qualifications so essential to the making of an officer that would be a credit to the Institute."¹² General Shipp was more than encouraging. George, he wrote, was "as well qualified for officer of infantry as any man who has been turned out here." He could assert "with complete confidence that if commissioned in the Army, young Marshall will in all respects, soon take his stand much above the average West Point graduate."¹³

What more could a father ask? Mr. Marshall, who boasted he had "many warm and influential friends in the administration," set out to pull all the strings he could.¹⁴ The vigorous campaign he now launched on behalf of his son showed him in the light of a devoted, or at least devotedly ambitious, father. He thought of everything. He buttonholed everybody who could conceivably help. He fussed over details of tone and timing, fearful that the slightest slip might lose the cause.

Even before the final approval of the February 1901 bill, Mr. Marshall turned to a graduate of VMI who had the ear of the President, John S. Wise, and asked him to write personally to McKinley on George's behalf. The son of a former governor of Virginia, Wise was himself one of the cadets who had fought at New Market and the cousin of Henry Wise who had succeeded Shipp in command of the "Baby Corps." He was—luckily for the Democratic Mr. Marshall—a converted Democrat, having left the party after a factional fight in Virginia, and as a Republican had moved to New York, where he had organized support for McKinley in the 1896 convention.¹⁵ With reason, therefore, to favor the ambitions of an able VMI cadet (especially one with the illustrious name of Marshall), and with claim on the President's gratitude, Wise sent a personal note to McKinley. "This boy's

kinsman, the illustrious John Marshall," he wrote, "was a captain in the 11th Virginia . . . commanded by my great-grandfather in the Revolution, and the records fail to disclose since then one of the name who was either fool or coward. They are filled with instances of intelligent brave gentlemen of this name, and this boy bears it most worthily—I heartily commend him." 16

Apparently he sent this to Mr. Marshall, who then wrote again to Superintendent Shipp to ask him for a similar note to the White House. This, he thought, "will have great weight—particularly as it comes from VMI,—the West Point of the South." He intended to present the letters "in person and do the talking for VMI." His purpose then was to take George with him to Washington to insure the proper backing.¹⁷ He does not appear to have made the trip. Instead, he advised George to go by himself and provided him with letters of introduction.

In April young Marshall used the letters, along with one of his father's cards and a large measure of his own gumption. He saw Philander C. Knox, newly appointed Attorney General, whom he had never met, though Knox, a fellow Pennsylvanian, was a friend of his father's. He burst in on a reception to try to see John A. Hull of Iowa, chairman of the House Military Affairs Committee. Mrs. Hull took him upstairs to the congressman's den where the congressman was resting. Hull "took time to talk with me although he didn't promise anything much."

With characteristic drive and directness, Cadet Marshall went to the White House. "I had no appointment of any kind. The office was on the second floor. I think the President's bedroom, as I knew it in Mr. [Franklin] Roosevelt's day, must have been Mr. McKinley's office. The old colored man (the head usher) asked me if I had an appointment and I told him I didn't. He said I would never get in, that there wasn't any possibility. I sat there and watched people, some ten or fifteen, go in by appointment, stay ten minutes, and be excused. Finally a man and his daughter went in with this old colored man escorting them. I attached myself to the tail of the procession and gained the President's office. The old colored man frowned at me on his way out but I stood pat. After the people had met the President they

also went out, leaving me standing there. Mr. McKinley in a very nice manner asked what I wanted and I stated my case. I don't recall what he said, but from that I think flowed my appointment or rather my authority to appear for examination."

One would like to confirm that history did indeed turn on that moment of charming brashness and informality. But unless McKinley, as a result of the interview, asked a certain Pennsylvanian to recommend his constituent, it seems unlikely. As soon as the bill enlarging the Army was approved in February, it became clear that quotas for applicants had been assigned to each state and that appointments for the examinations from Pennsylvania had to be approved by Senators Penrose and Quay, both noted for their party regularity in a partisan age. Perhaps the elder Marshall sent copies of the letters of Shipp and Wise to Quay or more likely had him approached by some Republican Uniontown friends. In any case, Quay in early February commended Marshall in a letter to Secretary Root. In April he wrote the Secretary of War "to recommend the appointment of George C. Marshall," the present "Captain of Cadets at the Virginia Military Institute," whose name, he noted, "was not upon the list handed in by Senator Penrose," but whose papers were on file. "He is a young man of excellent connections and marked ability," Quay wrote, putting first things first, "and I am assured will be an ornament to the service."¹⁸

The day after the letter was written the other Pennsylvania senator, Penrose, who was technically senior at this time, submitted a supplemental list of recommended candidates, noting that Quay had asked in particular for the consideration of three men, of whom one was George Marshall. In his list, arranged in order of political urgency, Marshall's name was eighth.¹⁹ It was lever enough to win him a nomination among the twenty-three Pennsylvania candidates selected to be examined for commission. The selections were published on June 17 in time for the Lexington newspaper to announce it before Finals.²⁰

Applicants were first instructed to appear in New York in early September before a board headed by Major General John R. Brooke, commander of the Eastern Department, but the examination was delayed by the death of President McKinley. Gen-

eral Brooke, as senior military officer in New York, was detailed to head the military escort which accompanied the President's body from Buffalo to Washington.²¹ It was therefore late September before Marshall came to New York and put up at the Marie Antoinette Hotel at 66th Street and Broadway, ready to take the examinations, which were now set for the twenty-third on Governors Island. Still determined to leave as little as possible to chance, he was fortified with a letter from a family friend, James A. McGonigle, to Lieutenant Colonel C. A. Woodruff, a member of the examining board. In New York he called on John Wise to ask him to put in a good word with General Brooke. In good humor, Wise wrote of the aspiring cadet that "General Shipp regards him as one of the fittest pieces of food for gunpowder turned out by his mill for many years."²²

For three days the applicants were put through a course of academic hurdles which may have tried their nerves but were set so low intellectually as to make one doubt the seriousness of the exercise.²³ Marshall emerged with a final average of 84.8 per cent—one of the highest scores. In it was included a mark of 100 for physique and another 100 for moral character and antecedents. His other grades, considering the elementary level of the questions, tend to confirm his own strictures on the defects of his formal academic education. While he scored 89 in history, in which he had partly educated himself, he could get only 75 in English grammar, 65 in geography, and 86 in mathematics, where his success in simple arithmetic, algebra, and geometry outweighed a 70 in trigonometry and a 44 in logarithms. It is notable that nothing in the examination demanded more than high-school training with the possible exception of a few problems in trigonometry and logarithms and the paper on international law (on which he had a mark of 42).²⁴

After the examination Marshall went to Danville, Virginia. During the summer he had hedged his bet on a commission by accepting an appointment as commandant and instructor at the Danville Military Institute (a military elementary and prep school). His duties there—which included teaching arithmetic, algebra, history, English, drill regulations, and discipline—kept him busy if not absorbed while the weeks passed and he heard

nothing from the examinations.²⁵ His father applied to the faithful John Wise, who made inquiries at the War Department. The explanation was simple enough: Marshall had, of course, passed—high enough, indeed, to be recommended for the artillery, his first choice—but the board had decided to delay his commissioning until after December 31 when he would become twenty-one. Somehow someone had just neglected to let him know.²⁶

The news nevertheless made a “very acceptable Christmas present,” as he wrote General Shipp. The young applicant promptly resigned as general factotum at Danville. He spent Christmas at Lexington and talked about the future with Lily. Now that he was practically a second lieutenant they could get married, and they intended to—as soon as possible.²⁷

Indeed, all the dilatoriness and uncertainties of the past months were suddenly swept away and Marshall’s career moved with a breathless rush. On January 4, 1902, orders were issued making him a second lieutenant with date of rank from the approval of the enabling act, February 2, 1901. The appointment was confirmed on January 13 and Lieutenant Marshall was assigned to the 30th Infantry, stationed in the Philippines.²⁸ Surprised at assignment to the infantry when he had asked for the artillery, he inquired and was told the artillery was not taking officers newly commissioned from civilian life. It might be possible to change places later on with an artillery officer who might prefer assignment with the infantry. Marshall swallowed the slight disappointment and soon no longer felt it. The exchange was never made and the general’s destiny continued along its charted course.²⁹

In Uniontown, Marshall received his commission on February 3 and took his oath at once before a notary public. Five days later he had orders to report to Fort Myer, thence to go immediately to Columbus Barracks, Ohio, to accompany recruits to San Francisco, where they would all take ship for the Philippines. He had until the thirteenth to check in. And before that date he had to get married.³⁰

Arrangements were made in haste. He arrived in Lexington on the ninth. Mr. and Mrs. Marshall, Stuart and Marie, and his

best friend, Andy, came the following day. Edmund Coles was on hand to give his sister in marriage. The wedding was to take place the evening of February 11 in Mrs. Coles' home on Letcher Avenue, where the young cadet had first been charmed by the music of Lily's piano heard through the windows on an autumn night.³¹

Though the bride was dressed in white and the ceremony performed by the pastor of the Episcopal Church, the Reverend R. J. McBryde, there was little formality in the gathering of family and friends. They say in Lexington that the guests and the bride and groom chatted a few moments in the parlor and then Lily turned to the young lieutenant and said, "Come on, George, let's get married."

Bride and groom the next morning took the train to Washington for a honeymoon they expected to last one day. They took a room at Washington's most fashionable hotel, the New Willard, recently built on the site of the first Hotel Willard, in which Lincoln had stayed before his first inaugural.³² Soon after his arrival George walked the three blocks to the baroque old War Department building on Pennsylvania Avenue. There he reported to the office of the Adjutant General with his orders and word that he had just been married. Later that day an understanding officer extended for five days the date at which he had to report to Fort Myer just across the river. The letter was signed by Major Carter, who at that moment, with his chief, General Corbin, and Secretary Root, was embarking on the first and unsuccessful fight to get the general staff bill through Congress. Carter personally noted that in addition to a copy of amended orders to be sent to Fort Myer, a special copy was to be delivered to the young lieutenant at the Hotel Willard.³³

Those five days of grace must have been filled with the exquisite pain of happiness under the sentence of time. They knew, of course, that they would have to part and that George would be gone two years or so. Even if wives had been permitted to accompany junior officers, Lily could not have gone. The Philippine Insurrection was over, but a lieutenant assigned to the Islands could expect rugged duty with troops under war conditions even if not actually in a state of war. Lily, moreover, was

in poor health. She had a heart condition (mitral-regurgitation) which she believed had been brought on by excessive strain of social engagements, particularly a series of weddings of her friends in St. Louis, several years before Marshall met her. Although she was not in the ordinary sense an invalid, Lily's physical limitations were always to circumscribe her activities and to enforce when they were together a pattern of quiet domesticity to which Marshall in any event was not averse.

One would like to know what was in the heart and mind of the young lieutenant when February 18 arrived; his honeymoon was over, and he reported for duty across the river at Fort Myer. He had with extraordinary force of will and singleness of purpose fought for and won a wife and the start of a career. As the events would show he had chosen well, but he could have had no easy sense of success achieved or of a comfortable course ahead.

Lily went back to her mother's home in Lexington. George stayed five days at Fort Myer, three weeks at Fort Slocum, New York, to which he was sent instead of to Columbus Barracks, and then with seven other officers took a troop train west. On arrival in San Francisco, Marshall was quartered in the tented area at Tennessee Hollow in the Presidio while awaiting his ship. On April 12, 1902, he boarded the transport *Kilpatrick* for Manila.³⁴