West Point and the Culinary Institute of America: An Exchange of Experiences

By Terry Babcock-Lumish and Major Erin Hadlock

May 15, 2015 6:00 am

We are hard pressed to think of many world-class liberal arts colleges with entire student bodies ambitiously studying and training toward a single profession – and in uniforms that are far from Vassar’s or Columbia’s baseball caps or yoga pants. While the Culinary Institute of America prepares its student chefs for successful careers in hospitality, just across the Hudson River, the United States Military Academy at West Point’s mission is to “educate, train and inspire” its own student body for the profession of arms. The two institutions seem worlds apart, yet conversations over a couple of meals quickly demonstrate otherwise.

Most readers will be familiar with West Point’s role in American history, dating back to when George Washington, as a general, recognized the strategic importance of the real estate perched on the west bank of the Hudson River. Its neighbor is similarly steeped in military history. Despite no small amount of Capitol Hill gridlock, Congress passed the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, known as the G.I. Bill of Rights, to support veterans’ transitions into civilian life. Frances Roth, a lawyer, and Katharine Angell, the wife of James Rowland Angell, then the president of Yale, created the New Haven Restaurant Institute, the “culinary center of the nation,” with the mission to retrain returning World War II veterans for postwar livelihoods.

Within four years of opening its doors in 1946, 600 veterans from 38 states had graduated from the institute, and Eleanor Roosevelt, the former first lady and a supportive neighbor at Hyde Park, even helped settle the debate about whether “culinary” should be pronounced “CULL-in-air-ee” or “COO-lin-air-ee.” (The former
won out.) In 1970, the Culinary Institute of America purchased the St. Andrew-
on-Hudson Jesuit novitiate and moved the school from Connecticut to its current “rockbound highland home” in New York.

A mere 50 years ago, Americans would have known veterans and heard their stories. At the peak of World War II, just shy of 10 percent of the population was serving in the military. Today about 0.5 percent of the population serves in the armed forces. With such contrast between then and now, it is little wonder that young people have scarce knowledge of or experience with those in uniform, even with the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The gaps in historical memory and civil-military understanding cut both ways. Despite the schools’ proximity, today’s era of celebrity chefs and the Food Network means West Pointers are better equipped to name the Culinary Institute of America graduates Anthony Bourdain and Duff Goldman than to recount their neighbor’s rich military history. Cadets certainly know what awaits when opening a can of Chef Boyardee, but few can recall that Ettore Boiardi’s company was commissioned to operate around the clock to feed American soldiers during World War II. And when we mention our partnership with the C.I.A., our Army colleagues quickly assume we are referring to spooks, not chefs.

In 2012, the West Point professors Brian and Terry Babcock-Lumish met Rich Vergili, a C.I.A. faculty member, at a Slow Food Hudson Valley event. While picking organic strawberries at Thompson-Finch Farm, the three found themselves comparing teaching experiences at their respective schools, and imagined the conversations their students might have if given the opportunity.

Since then, the two institutions have grown closer, and in doing so, are reclaiming their common history. An initiative started on the anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks, the “day in the life” exchange, is now an established program each fall and spring semester, during which 10 competitively selected West Point cadets are paired with 10 student chefs to take turns spending the day on one another’s turf.

When hosting in Hyde Park, the student chefs quickly put the West Pointers, sporting iconic chef’s whites and toques, to work in the bustling kitchens of Roth Hall, uniformly cubing carrots and dicing potatoes. For cadets without access to
kitchen facilities and limited to one regulated appliance in cramped barracks rooms, even holding a knife properly can be a new and dangerous experience.

When the C.I.A. students arrive at the academy, they are immediately launched into a simulation as if they were new cadets reporting for duty. Chefs step up to the academy’s fearsome Cadet in the Red Sash — a tradition of Reception Day — and go on to march in formation, fire simulation weapons and complete obstacle-based workouts.

The point is never to overwhelm or haze, but to immerse. In doing so, future leaders are encouraged to build relationships — challenging assumptions, combating misconception and starting a dialogue — early in their careers.

When it comes to food, many West Pointers are socialized to prioritize quantity over quality. An army may march on its stomach: A bad meal, or no meal, adversely affects everyone. The prospect of stopping, savoring and appreciating complex flavors does not fit neatly into aggressive schedules involving military responsibilities and parade practice on top of problem sets and papers.

In contrast, aspiring chefs relish the opportunity to explore the area’s farms, sourcing local ingredients and brainstorming dishes to which they will dedicate hours. While visiting the academy, they find themselves most at home in the bowels of Washington Hall, exploring the spotless kitchen complex — commercial combi ovens and giant Hobart mixers — responsible for producing tremendous quantities of food daily.

Despite initial anxieties, none of these students are strangers to the rigors of basic training. Today’s chefs are steeped in the tradition of Auguste Escoffier, who canonized cooking techniques and recipes, and created the kitchen brigade system that keeps today’s professional kitchens ticking. Cadets and chefs recognize their many parallels: Grace under pressure is essential; attention to detail matters; and a certain obsession with logistics is critical to success, even if manifested differently across the Hudson or throughout one’s career.

When the conversations turn to hopes and concerns for their future, or dating and drinking the following weekend, distinctions quickly blur. Although we
collaborate with the C.I.A.’s leaders to convene these initial visits, a successful partnership quickly takes on a life of its own. Armed with Facebook and smartphones, 21-year-olds are 21-year-olds and definitely do not need their professors interfering. This is precisely the point.

Before his retirement after 43 years in uniform, Adm. Mike Mullen, then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, addressed the increasing civil-military divide in American society. Reliant upon a leaner, all-volunteer force isolated on fewer military installations after base closures, Americans have less exposure to service members.

At the same time, Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, the current chairman of the Joint Chiefs and a former West Point English instructor, insists that the civil-military dialogue must go both ways: Failure to do so will exacerbate the disconnect between the military and the broader society it serves.

On the civilian side, the State Department’s Diplomatic Culinary Partnership elevates the role of food in America’s public diplomacy efforts abroad. However, one need not be an ambassador to recognize the value of food in bringing people together across borders and boundaries. Most cultures view food as far more than sustenance, but as a textured form of communication, rich with both flavor and meaning.

Understanding not only what one eats but also where it comes from, how it is prepared and who has a seat at the table offers tremendous insight into a community and its priorities. Ultimately, breaking – and making – bread together offers invaluable opportunities to connect cultures and cultivate trust.

Dr. Terry Babcock-Lumish, president of Islay Consulting, taught economics at West Point from 2012 to 2014 and founded the Culinary Institute of America partnership with her husband, Major Brian Babcock-Lumish of the Army. Major Erin Hadlock serves as an Army aviator and currently teaches English at the United States Military Academy. Today, she leads West Point’s exchange efforts with Dr. Ruth Beitler, an anthropologist and director of the academy’s Conflict and Human Security Studies Program.

The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent those of the United States
Military Academy, the Department of the Army or the Department of Defense.