Military schools: in the trenches at age sixteen

It's all about "being, rather than seeming"

by Marco Fosci

A bright red brick citadel, known as the *Rosso Maniero* ('Red Manor') overlooks the city of Naples from the top of the Pizzofalcone Hill. Every year these buildings host an evocative and ancient ceremony. Young men and women reach it on parade with their rifles on their shoulders, wearing turquoise trousers with a magenta stripe down one side and a navy blue jacket with two rows of brass buttons. The number '1' on their caps indicates that they belong to Italy's first battalion.

The ceremony culminates in the centre of the citadel's large courtyard, where six cadets exchange a symbolic wooden slat used to clean brass buttons without soiling the uniforms. Yet, despite this traditional handover between older students and new recruits, this is not yet a military academy, properly speaking, and even though they are in their third year, the uniformed 'elders' have only just entered adulthood.

La Nunziatella, its official name, is one of the oldest military schools in the world. Its young students abide by strict rules and share spartan living conditions. Their days begin with the raising of the flag and end with evening roll call, with studies and athletic activities in between.

Ask any Italian officer, and they will tell you this place, along with the military elite, forges the country's ruling class. In fact, even though students are chosen through a Ministry of Defence application procedure, and Army officers run the institution, not all cadets awarded a place in military academies take advantage of it. Nearly half opt to go to university instead.



Founded by decree in 1787 by Ferdinand I Bourbon, Nunziatella alumni include prime ministers, presidents of the Constitutional Court, commanders in the armed forces and members of Italy's political, cultural and professional elite.

Military academies like West Point and Annapolis in the United States are well-known, but their students are young adults, destined in nearly all cases to become career officers in that country's Army, Navy or Marines.

As a public senior military college that enrols no civilian students, the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) is perhaps the closest equivalent to Nunziatella. Founded in 1839, students can enrol in the federally funded school at 16, the same minimum age required by the Italian institute. After four years, they receive a bachelor's degree and generally return to civilian life (over 80% of them).

Former US Secretary of State and Nobel Peace Prize laureate George Marshall went to VMI, as did director Mel Brooks (briefly) and numerous Pulitzer Prize winners, senators, high



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La Nunziatella is among the oldest military academies in the world. The youngsters who attend the academy have to obey very strict rules and endure extremely Spartan living conditions.

ranking American public officials and civilians.

Following a rigorous selection process, every August VMI admits approximately 1,000 young men and women, including foreigners. They follow daily rituals that date back nearly 200 years, in extremely harsh conditions: they don't sleep in beds but on foam mats known as 'hays' they must roll up every morning and air every Monday.

The new cadets accept deprivations that would be unthinkable for their peers: they can't watch TV, listen to music or make unsupervised phone calls. They voluntarily comply with strict rules which the older cadets, with the institute's approval, are required to enforce: a series of conditions, trials and punishments that teach them how to keep their boots, uniforms and rifles spotlessly clean, respect a code of honour and master self-control and self-discipline.

The cadets' young age and the rigors of the training at these schools fuel a fierce sense of pride and belonging. "You're essentially torn away from your family, your friends, your city. All these allegiances are severed," says professor and Nunziatella graduate Francesco Fedi.

"Your classmates," continues Fedi, "become your brothers, the people with whom you share your hopes and disappointments. That stays with you." With a long scientific career behind him, today Fedi is active in the school's alumni association and recently organised his class's 60th anniversary reunion.

In the United Kingdom, the 44 weeks of training at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst (RMAS), known simply as Sandhurst, are equally harsh. Located in Berkshire, 35 miles from London, the academy's stated aim is to be "the national centre of excellence for leadership." The present RMAS was founded in 1947, when the Royal Military College, Sandhurst (founded in 1801) merged with the Royal Military Academy Woolwich, which dated back to 1741.

A mandatory step for aspiring officers in the British Army, it has traditionally also admitted members of the European aristocracy and candidates from former British colonies. Alumni include British princes William and Harry, Winston Churchill, the Grand Duke of Luxembourg, the Sultan of Brunei, the Emir of Qatar and the kings of Jordan and Bahrain.

In France, the Prytanée National Militaire is a secondary school set up at Napoleon's behest that still offers a foundation course for students wishing to enter military academies; Canada's Royal Military College was also founded in the 19th century; and the Kuleli Military High School in Turkey, founded by Ottoman Sultan Abdülmecid I, boasts celebrated graduates too.

Although they differ in their traditions and administrative structures, these institutions select talented young people and foster their growth through stringent educational criteria and emphasis on meritocratic principles.

The students' potential is developed by focusing on values such as loyalty, integrity and a sense of duty. "Values you carry with you and shape your existence," concludes Fedi.

So it is no surprise that the motto *Esse quam videri* (Latin for 'To be, rather than to seem'), which hangs in Rosso Maniero's main auditorium, should echo along its hallways. E

Marco Fosci *has worked for* Il Sole 24 Ore *and* Class Editori, *and spent ten years as the editor of the news website* www.corrispondenti.net *for foreign correspondents in Italy.*