

# A Frenchman at the US Air Force School of Advanced Air and Space Studies

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*[Theory] is meant to educate the mind of the future commander, or, more accurately, to guide him in his self-education, not to accompany him to the battlefield.*

—Carl von Clausewitz

Clausewitz's assertion seems to capture the essence of the education provided at the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies (SAASS), an institution that produces the next generation of US Air Force strategists. Part of Air University, the school is located at Maxwell Air Force Base, in Montgomery, the very heart of Alabama, where the Wright brothers opened the nation's first aviation school in 1910. According to Col Timothy Schultz, SAASS commandant, the school seeks to "develop the weapon system of one's mind, the most powerful of all weapon systems." To do so, SAASS, which celebrates the 20th anniversary of its founding this year, brings to bear three strengths that account for the school's success.

## SAASS's Tripartite Foundation

### *Faculty*

The school's faculty members, all of whom hold a PhD and have earned recognition for their academic achievements, offer SAASS students extraordinary guidance. Most of them have published reference works in air and space history or strategy, and the faculty-to-student ratio of one-to-three makes the education process highly personal-

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\*The author—a fighter pilot with 2,100 flight hours, 1,500 of them in the Mirage F1CR—graduated from the Ecole de l'Air (French Air Force Academy) in 1995. He received appointments to Reconnaissance Squadron 1/33 "Belfort" and to the Centre d'Expériences Aériennes Militaires (French Air Force Evaluation Center) in Mont de Marsan. He participated in various operations such as Epervier, Alysse, Artémis, Héraclès, and Serpenteaire, as well as the European Union Force (EUFOR) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A member of the 17th class of the Collège Interarmées de Défense (Joint Defense College) (CID) (Maréchal [Marshal] Lyautey), he studied at the Air Command and Staff College (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, USA) in 2009–10 and was selected to attend the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies at Maxwell.

ized.<sup>1</sup> During the first semester, each student is assigned to a professor who mentors him or her in such areas as writing techniques and reasoning. This proven system reaps substantial benefits.

### ***Students***

SAASS's highly selective admissions system (restricted to the top 5 percent of applicants) yields an extraordinarily capable student body—the best of the best. Although the class of 1991, the school's first, included only 25 students, the success of those graduates forced SAASS to increase that number.<sup>2</sup> The current class, the 20th, boasts 59 members, among them six international officers (representing France, Great Britain, Australia, Germany, Sweden, and India), two US Army officers, and two from the US Marine Corps. Having grown constantly since 1991, SAASS now seeks to preserve its high-quality, personalized education by limiting the student body to about 60 officers.

### ***Curriculum***

The curriculum, which represents the third pillar of the school's foundation, is designed to improve students' capacity for critical thinking and their grasp of air and space power. SAASS's motto, "From the Past, the Future," reflects the sound historical basis of the course of study.<sup>3</sup> Guided by their professors, students must apply theory to historical events and then extrapolate their findings to the present and future.

The education program includes three stages. During the first, students read classic works by Carl von Clausewitz, Julian Corbett, Antoine Henri Jomini, Thucydides, Sun Tzu, Alfred Thayer Mahan, and so forth, exploring the foundations of military theory and analyzing the decision-making process with regard to strategy. They also study theories related to international relations, organization, and decision making. The second part applies these concepts by examining the history of airpower and coercion as well as the use of armed force from the Napoleonic wars until today. The third portion addresses the future, including topics such as space, cyberspace, counterinsurgency, and operational planning. Each stage of the curriculum, phased over three to four weeks, culminates with a comprehensive written test that evaluates the student's originality, clarity, and powers of persuasion. The best efforts are often published as journal articles.<sup>4</sup>

## **The Intellectual Challenge**

SAASS students embark upon a highly demanding journey of learning that covers 150 books and 42,000 pages of reading material in less than one year. Unsurprisingly, the reading requirement of 250 to 300 pages a day inspired the US Air Force student contingent to label SAASS the “book-a-day school.” All current and former students describe the program of study as a marathon that everybody must run at the speed of a sprint. Rather than conduct lectures and conferences, the school offers seminars of 10 students (or fewer) guided by a professor, each seminar devoted to the study of concepts that emerge from the reading list. During these sessions, professors assess the extent and quality of the students’ participation as well as the relevance of their reasoning and the clarity of their arguments. This educational program, which pushes the officer attendees to their intellectual limits from the first to the last day, concludes with an oral comprehensive examination based on the entire curriculum.

## **Recognized Excellence: Path to the Doctorate**

The 20th SAASS class is the first to follow a new program that replaces the master of airpower art and science degree with the much more prestigious master of philosophy in military strategy. Most importantly, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, SAASS’s accreditation authority, recognizes this curriculum as the basis for study toward Air University’s doctorate of philosophy in military strategy. Students admitted to the doctoral program can move to SAASS graduate assignments for two to three years, during which time they begin writing their dissertations, and then return to Maxwell to finish and defend them. This program allows the US Air Force to foster general officers who will hold a terminal diploma without putting their careers at risk by spending years in graduate school and missing command assignments.<sup>5</sup> Even though the *École supérieure de guerre* (French War College) does not confer a master’s degree and many of our officers join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization or European Union staffs, this innovative means of producing generals with PhDs certainly merits consideration.

## **The SAASS Graduate: A Scarce Resource**

To the consternation of the US Air Force Personnel Center, at the end of the school year, generals directly recruit SAASS graduates for their staffs. This prac-

tice still occurs; however, it is now subject to better supervision, and the appointment of those graduates receives special attention. Without question, this custom makes SAASS even more attractive. Furthermore, the school's graduates enjoy the highest promotion rate in the US Air Force, all of them attaining the rank of lieutenant colonel. More importantly, 98 percent of those who remain in the service become colonels, compared to 47 percent for the entire Air Force. Finally, 13 of the 25 students in the eighth class are now general officers. Clearly, SAASS is an exceptional producer of senior leaders for the Air Force.

### A Frenchman at SAASS

The author owes his presence at SAASS to the efforts of Gen Stéphane Abrial, former chief of staff of the French Air Force, and Gen T. Michael Moseley, former chief of staff of the US Air Force. Following in the footsteps of Lt Col Géraud Laborie and Lt Col Olivier Brault, I am the third French student to attend SAASS. The French Air Force appoints its students, who must hold a master's degree from an English-speaking university, to Air Command and Staff College (ACSC) so that they can later attend the US Air War College. During their year at ACSC, they earn a master's degree, apply for admission to SAASS, and if accepted, begin the course of study the following summer.

In conclusion, this school has no peer in terms of teaching strategy in general and air strategy in particular.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, if mastering strategy is a lifelong endeavor, then the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies is undoubtedly one of the best places to start.

#### Notes

1. Try to imagine 120 professors, all holding a PhD, working full time at the École supérieure de guerre (French War College).
2. Stephen D. Chiabotti, "A Deeper Shade of Blue: The School of Advanced Air and Space Studies," *Joint Force Quarterly* 49 (2nd Quarter 2008): 74.
3. Ibid.
4. See, for example, Géraud Laborie, "Sparta Delenda Est," *Le Piège*, December 2009.
5. Under the previous system, students interested in earning a doctorate attended a university for three years, thus jeopardizing (with very rare exceptions) their chances of becoming general officers.
6. Tamir Libel and Joel Hayward, "Adding Brain to Brawn: The School of Advanced Air and Space Studies and Its Impact on Air Power Thinking," *Air Power Review* 13, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 69.

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