

Cadets Give Resigning Chief an Ovation

By MARTIN ARNOLD

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WEST POINT, N. Y., March 17—At 30 minutes past noon today, Samuel W. Koster, an Iowa-born major general, stood on the stone balcony in the United States Military Academy mess hall and, facing the flags of the United States and the 50 states, told his cadets that he had requested assignment elsewhere to save them from the publicity of his involvement with the alleged massacre at Songmy.

General Koster, the 48th superintendent of the academy, then twice saluted the corps of cadets and turned to march down the balcony steps and out of the hall. The 3,700-member corps stood and gave him a 90-second ovation.

And thus, for the first time in the academy's 168 years, a superintendent had left his office—one of the most honored in the Army—to face possible court-martial.

"I wish to say that throughout my military career," the general told the cadets, "the cherished principles of our [the academy's] motto—Duty,

Honor, Country—have served as a constant guide to me. I shall continue to follow these principles as long as I live."

"My appearance before you today is the most difficult I have ever had to make," he began. "I want you to be among the first to know that I will soon leave West Point."

Noting that "action has been initiated against me," he said that "I have therefor requested reassignment in order to sepa-

rate the military academy and you of the corps from the continuing flow of public announcements or any other connection with the alleged events which took place in Vietnam involving elements of my former command." He went on:

"My tenure as Superintendent of the United States Military Academy has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life." I am most proud to have been associated with you of the corps during this time."

He ended his six-paragraph statement this way: "To serve one's country true and faithfully is of the highest calling. To this end, may good fortune and success come to all of you in the future."

The corps includes General Koster's son, Samuel Jr., 20, a member of the class of 1972.

After his talk to the cadets, General Koster went into seclusion at his home on the academy grounds and declined throughout the day to comment further on the case.

His announcement did not



Maj. Gen. Samuel W. Koster

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take the academy by complete surprise. All the cadets knew that the general had commanded the Americal Division in Vietnam before his appointment to West Point in June, 1968. When word of the alleged massacre became public, many assumed that in some way the superintendent finally would be involved.

But this noon—the corps had been told an hour earlier that the general would make an announcement—there was a great deal of sorrow among the cadets. There also was some bitterness toward the news media — a feeling that, in the words of one cadet, the media had “blown up what happened over there.”

For General Koster is a very popular man at the academy. At 50, standing a trim 6 feet 2, with clipped iron gray hair, he is the model of a professional soldier.

To the cadets, however, he is more than that. For one thing, he is the superintendent who allowed them to take more elective courses during their academic career here than they ever were allowed to take before.

To Jack Allen, an 18-year-old

plebe from Rochester, the general's speech “moved everybody.”

Robert Tully, a 19-year-old plebe from Fairfax, Va., said, “Everybody was caught up in the emotion of it. Everybody seemed to sympathize with the general.”

And so the comments went, as more cadets than usual in some subtle way managed to break away from the academy's routine today to stand in little clusters and discuss the events.

“It was a good move on his part,” said Cadet Gordy Schnabel, 20, of Cleveland, a member of the class of 1971. “Being a graduate, he wanted to make sure that no trouble would wash over us. It shook me up.”

Cadet Schnabel, like other classmates, expressed the opinion that, in his words, “the news media has made a bad scene out of everything over there.”

At West Point today, “over there” is Vietnam and Cadet Schnabel wants, when he graduates, “to go there myself—to see for myself what's going on.”

For while the cadets do debate the pros and cons of Vietnam, most of them will go no further than question whether

the United States should have “gotten in” in the first place.

“I would not expect anyone would stay here if they really thought we were doing a bad scene over there,” was the way Charles B. Wilson of Coatesville, Pa., summed up what clearly is the majority feeling in the corps.

But for most the shock of what has happened today was absorbed by the routine. Easter leave starts Thursday, and many cadets spent their spare time today packing.

For the 1,200-member class

of 1973, the afternoon was spent in the front of MacArthur Hall practicing for Saturday's plebe-parent review parade.

The plebes will have the campus for themselves, for the first time since entering the academy in June, and they want to show their parents what they can do.

“Maybe it's better,” said Jack Kincart, 19, of Bloomfield, Iowa. “Nobody's sure about their thoughts now. Most of us have mixed feelings, and preparing for the weekend should help see us through this.”