

An Old Grad Revisits Ft. Benning

By Bob Arnold

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*You think about your duty
Your wonder why you're here,
And why you'll fight old Charlie for a year
In Vietnam
Infantry OCS marching song, 1969*

FORT BENNING, Ga. – Until a few days ago, I had never met anyone who liked Infantry Officer Candidate School. That's because the program I went through four years ago was intimidating, frustrating and humiliating.

But on a return visit a few days ago, I squatted in Fort Benning's red clay beside Officer Candidate Laurence Loftus, who volunteered for OCS the day he was drafted, and asked what he thinks of the program after 17 weeks of the 23-week cycle. "It's outstanding," he enthused, using the Army cliché. He looked shocked when I laughed.

So I turned to Gene Wolfe, Candidate Loftus' foxhole buddy. "I thought it was going to be a whole lot rougher than it is," he said.

That evening, the men of 50th Company, the unit to which Messrs. Loftus and Wolfe belong, changed from fatigues to civilian slacks and tee shirts, then joined their wives and children for a relaxed mess hall dinner of barbecued steak and draught beer. Afterwards, since it was Friday, they went home for the weekend. Clearly, this wasn't the pressure-packed OCS I'd known.

As the end of the Vietnam War approached, things changed throughout the Army. But the changes here are among the most dramatic. “We’ve tried to make the program sensible and logical without affecting the quality of the officer we turn out,” says Lieutenant Colonel Gordon M. Hunt, who commands the four remaining OCS companies at Fort Benning. Acting upon higher orders, he has created this small sideshow in the Army’s much-advertised attempt, via pay raises and improved living conditions, to rebuild its own respectability and popularity after a decade of declining soldier morale and increasing public disrespect.

Some of the changes are merely practical. With no war, the need for officers has diminished. Thus Infantry OCS will graduate only about 350 second lieutenants in fiscal 1974, compared with a production of about 7,000 “grunts” annually during peak Vietnam years at a cost to the taxpayers of about \$15,000 per officer. Most of those volunteered through the college option program. Pushed by an impending draft notice, and often lured from campus by unknowledgeable or misleading recruiters, these recruits spent four months in basic and advanced infantry training, before going to Fort Benning’s “School for Boys.” But last month, the college option program, which provided 20,000 infantry platoon leaders for Vietnam, was ended.

A New Course

Starting this month, the 23-week program will be replaced by a 14-week course called Branch Immaterial OCS. It will commission officers into all branches of the Army, and will be open only to prior-service soldiers – enlisted men who have no other way to advance to the officer corps.

Officers graduated a year ago from two Branch Immaterial test classes have proved equal to ROTC and Military Academy graduates, the Army says, as well as to the survivors of the six-month program.

Underlying those major administrative changes are changes in day-to-day requirements which have reduced harassment and increased the freedom of officer candidates. It's about time.

I remember distinctly my own arrival at Fort Benning in February 1969. Rumors of the program's terror had drifted down to basic training, and the words "Infantry Officer Candidate School" in light blue above the arch through which new candidates had to pass might as well have been Dante's inscribed warning to the unfortunates entering hell.

My company – 50th Company – would start with 237 men and graduate 161, better than the 35% average attrition rate. We would have three weekends off in six months. Married men would see their wives after four weeks, but be able to spend some time with them only after eight. Merely having civilian clothes in our possession was cause for dismissal.

OCS is a child of World War II, for which it produced 66,000 infantry lieutenants. Its purpose is to provide officers fast in an emergency; its theory to simulate the pressures of combat with pressures in training. Our 250-pound bear of a captain went to over-imaginative lengths to provide that. When, after the first five weeks, the shine on the barracks still did not meet his standards we endured three shock reveilles within seven days. For those, senior candidates from another battalion would flood our junior company at 4:40 a.m., dropping for pushups and other constructive things. Some fellows would be made to crawl the 200-foot length of the

barracks in the sleeping bags, while others lay on their backs for 20 minutes, arms and legs stretched upward in the dying cockroach position.

On weekend afternoons we washed rocks which lined the sidewalks; hot, soapy wash, warm rinse, then spread on the sidewalk to dry. On July 8, the brigade commander mentioned to some lower authority that 50th Company's lawn looked ragged. So all candidates fell out with miniature sewing kit scissors for an hour of lawn manicure.

Frustration and Harassment

Physical training was both a catharsis for frustration and a vehicle of harassment. Most evenings, 10 minutes after chow we double-timed to a nearby field for an hour of calisthenics, running and low-crawling. During these sessions, men whom the captain doubted would be good infantry officers were singled out for special mistreatment, and it was possible to watch a comrade's determination to continue the program wither as his muscles cramped. Anyone could quit after seven weeks, but his choice then became re-enlisting for an extra year or two and a safe job, or orders to Vietnam as a private first class. One who chose the latter killed before we who stayed graduated, and the rumor network brought that news two days before his last letter to a friend reached the company. Without the negative motivation provided by such incidents the attrition rate from the program would have been even higher. We rated each other five times during the course, and men who received consistently low ratings were dismissed from the program.

Almost secondary to the harassment was 44 weekly hours of instruction in leadership, weapons, tactics and Army organization. Some subjects were well taught, and other not, and candidates often fell asleep in class out of

boredom or fatigue. Perhaps most depressing, no one could – or even tried – to explain why the war was necessary. (The distinction between enemy and ally was reduced to “gooks” and “friendly gooks” in our endless drills.) Our conclusion became that it wasn’t. But we were caught in the country’s Vietnam dilemma: plunge ahead and hope for luck.

At first, we blamed the Army. As the course went on, our anger grew to include a civilian society which took little notice of us and remained preoccupied with its own whims, comforts and wealth. Later, we reasoned that the fault was ours, for having put ourselves at the disposal of institutions we had always believed in. Finally, as it became apparent that the four months of training inductees were given before being sent to Vietnam was physically and psychologically inadequate, we congratulated ourselves on having avoided the draft. The program had its good points. We gained self-knowledge, expanded patience and greater willingness to understand divergent points of view. “Cooperate and graduate” the captain commanded, and misery became the cement of permanent friendships. Paradoxically, the program which taught us terrible ways of killing other men also taught us to live, in close confinement, in better harmony with other men.

Wary and Skeptical

But we emerged wary officers, skeptical of the worth of a system based on harassment and three hours of barracks-cleaning a day. As it rippled, that skepticism resulted in the largely self-preserving changes that have been made here. Nowadays, there’s no low-crawling; no dropping for pushups; no shock reveilles; no Saturday classes; no mess hall harassment. Barracks will be kept “clean” rather than “shined.” Candidates have weekends

off. Wages after taxes have risen from \$160 to \$335 a month.

The power of captains has changed, too. Whereas the old course was nearly immune to criticism, the current program is closely supervised to make sure it adheres to the new rules. "You can't do anything to these guys anymore," one captain says. If a candidate's relative, for instance, "makes a complaint at higher headquarters by the time it gets down to me an H-bomb."

Another captain, an old-program graduate and combat veteran, question the changes. "It's good to know how much you can take," he says, "but do you know without ever having undergone the pressure in training?"

Even he will admit, however, that his question is an attempt, common among OCS graduates, to justify having undergone training which, upon reflection, he realizes was overdone. A better test of the program is whether candidates perceive that their mental and physical stamina is being challenged. Present-day candidates appear to think so.

The old program created a lingering, mind-numbing anomie in which life seemed tentative and our emotions turned flat. We were programmed men, awaiting orders, ready to withstand misery but fearful that the civilian comfort which surrounded us would weaken us psychologically and physically before we were sent to fight. We were cynics.

By contrast, the candidates I talked with a few days ago see themselves in a positive role. They like the Army, and many of them will make it a career. But their new-found self-confidence contains a disturbing naiveté: Somehow, they don't yet realize that the Army produces second lieutenants because second lieutenants are expendable.

It's no accident that the word "Vietnam," which haunted us 20 times a day four years ago, is never mentioned in OCS these days. The nation has buried its mistakes, and quite successfully if today's inhabitants of 50th company are any indication. The Army is winning new converts – new tools. Four years ago, our motto, dictated to us by the powers that were, was "Win in Vietnam." Now, 50th Company's is "Professionals for Peace." And who can argue with that?