
The Men of 50th Company OCS

A Recollection of
and a Reflection
upon, US Army
Infantry OCS in
1969.



Compiled and edited by
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significant contributions
from the members of 50th
Company, OC 24-69 which
graduated from US Army
Infantry OCS on August 1,
1969.

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The 50th Company discussed here, OC 24-69, graduated on August 1, 1969 at Fort Benning, Georgia. This document was prepared to coincide with the first reunion of the men of 50th Company, (OC 24-69) in October 2017.

The Men of 50th Company OCS consists of three parts:

Part One, “*Breaking Starch: Recollections of 50th Company – US Army Infantry Officer Training in 1969*,” is a review of the military training that the young college graduates underwent in preparation for Infantry OCS at Fort Benning, Georgia, followed by a detailed description of the OCS program itself, from the first days of their challenging training regime to graduation day, when they were commissioned as Second Lieutenants. The narrative is laced with stories, anecdotes, and memories submitted by 50th Company graduates.

Part Two, “*50th Company Scatters: The Many Paths We Followed*,” consists of mini-biographies shared by many 50th Company alumni. They describe what they are up to today; their Army experience after OCS; the career path they pursued; and their vivid memories (good, bad, or ugly) about their OCS experience. Unfortunately, twenty-three members of 50th Company have been identified who are no longer with us, including two who died in combat in Vietnam. Wherever possible, information about their lives has been included.

Part Three, “*50th Company OCS Tells Its Stories*,” is a compilation of short memories, vignettes and anecdotes from graduates drawn from their post-OCS military experiences. The collection is a tad Vietnam-heavy, as that is where well over half the class eventually served, but there is a variety of stories covering other deployment destinations and assignments. There is a rich diversity in subject matter and tone, ranging from humor and irony to drama and pathos. The intent was simply to let the 50th Company tell its stories.

We hope you find ***The Men of 50th Company OCS*** to be enlightening as well as entertaining. Above all, we hope to have conveyed, to at least some small degree, what members of our Armed Forces have gone through to protect our country and the sacrifices they have made along the way.

Part One Breaking Starch:

Recollections of 50th Company – U.S. Army Infantry
Officer Training in 1969.

Prepared by Brian Flora, Mike Thornton and Brian Walrath with major
contributions from their classmates in 50th Company, OC 24-69

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Introduction

In January 1969 a group of men, the large majority in their early twenties, gathered at Fort Benning, Georgia for Infantry Officer Candidate School (OCS) training. They formed up in the 50th Company, one of the scores of companies to pass through Infantry OCS during the 1960's and early 1970's. Their goal, like that of the thousands of others who have taken on the challenge of Officer Candidate School over the years, was to earn the right to become Army officers and leaders of men. The patch they wore on their shoulders during the 23-week training course said "Follow Me"! These young men came from all over the country and were from diverse situations and backgrounds. Almost all were college graduates.

Two hundred and twenty-four "candidates" (as they were called) made up 50th Company when the course began. Most were unaware of the rigorous and grueling program they would undergo. The training was designed to place the candidates under intense psychological, emotional and physical pressure, combined with a challenging academic component. The program was designed to winnow out those who could not hold up under the pressure and intended to simulate what leaders in combat would encounter. Maximum effort and performance was necessary to complete the training and reach the goal of graduation. Along the way, some members of 50th Company left of their own volition after deciding that this was not what they wanted to do. Others were selected out through a process known as "paneling." In August 1969, 161 of the original 224 graduated as proud Second Lieutenants from OCS at Fort Benning (the "Benning School for Boys," as it was dubbed by many of the graduates).

What was it that brought this group of young men to OCS in 1969? Except for a few with prior military service, they had enlisted or had been drafted into the Army in the fall of 1968, a turbulent, head spinning year that still challenges historians and other observers of our social fabric. January 1968 saw the "Tet Offensive" in Vietnam which led to an increase in the ongoing anti-war protests; race riots erupted following the assassinations of Martin Luther King in April and Bobby Kennedy in June; rioting broke out in front of a prime time television audience at the Democratic National Convention in August; a vibrant counter-cultural social movement gained currency with a younger generation of such size and influence that it had been named Time Magazine's "Man of the Year" just the previous year. In December, the year closed with a manned orbit of the moon by American Astronauts. (Brian Flora's personal recollection of the year 1968, and the impact it had on him, is found in Part Three of this publication.)

To be sure, everyone who joined the 50th Company had volunteered for the program. Ironically, however, most were there because of the Vietnam War and the nationwide call to military service. Few in the 50th Company would have attended OCS or would even have joined the military had there not been a war going on. In peacetime, young men seeking careers as military officers usually sought to do so through admission to one of the Service Academies or obtain their commissions through the popular Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) scholarship programs on their campuses. But in times of a major war, the relatively small number of officers produced through these means falls far short of the need, so the military has typically ramped up Officer Training programs. So it was during the Vietnam War.

Thus, the men who showed up for officer training at Fort Benning in January 1969 were a combination of volunteers, "reluctant" volunteers (those who figured they were going to be drafted anyway), and draftees who then volunteered for OCS. What the men in all three groups shared was a self-assurance (or the hope) that they had what it took -- with good training and personal commitment -- to become officers and leaders. Today, as they look back upon and contemplate their 50th Company OCS experience almost fifty years later, they agree that the challenges of OCS had made them better, stronger, and more resilient individuals.

This narrative is the story of these men of 50th Company. In a larger sense, it is also the story of the thousands of others who went through OCS at Fort Benning during the Vietnam Era, for their stories would be much the same. There were, however, some distinguishing characteristics of 50th Company which should be kept in mind. First, it was one of the first OCS classes, and perhaps *the* first, to be made up almost entirely of recent college graduates with no prior military service. Second, according to several accounts, the pressures and expectations placed on them were greater than for "typical" classes. This may have been specifically because of the makeup of the class -- there were those in the Army who had doubts as to whether the "soft" young men coming out of college would prove tough enough to make it. And third, either because of, or in spite of, their college backgrounds (depending on one's point of view), 50th Company was an unusually successful OCS class, achieving high academic and leadership records while setting the highest physical training average by an OC class since 1962.