

## Basic Training/Advanced Individual Training (AIT)

The first step for all but those of us already in the service was to report, sometime in mid-September 1968, to a local induction center. Often this was the same building in which we had gone through our pre-induction physical. Anyone who has gone through these physicals remembers following colored lines on the floor and moving from station to station clad only in underwear and socks. Now, rather than taking a physical, we were there to start our Army “career.” We showed up with the clothes on our backs and with a small gym bag with a few toiletries and a change of underwear and socks. We would not need more.

At the induction center we filled out a seemingly endless stack of forms. An officer administered the oath taken by all new inductees. Once we were sworn in, (and except for the few with prior military experience) those of us who had signed up for Officer Candidate School would start, just like every other recruit, by completing **Basic Combat Training**, universally known as “Basic,” which is exactly what the name indicates – a training course to teach us the “basics” of being a soldier. Then off we went to one of the several Basic Training centers scattered across the country, from Fort Dix in Jersey to Fort Ord in California, and as far south as Fort Polk in Louisiana.

Depending on which training center we were assigned to, we lived in either modern brick barracks or old, two-story, World War II era, wooden “three-minute” barracks (that’s how long they would take to burn down), often heated with coal burning stoves. Because the danger of fire was so real, there were red, sand-filled “butt buckets” placed strategically throughout the building, and a fire watch was mounted each night.

Basic gave us our first taste of barracks life, which was a new experience for most of us, even those who had lived in college dorms. There was an almost total lack of privacy; there were no doors on the toilets; and hot water for showers ran out quickly. At night, a host of manly noises filled the air; at meals, we ate hurriedly in silence surrounded by others who all looked and acted alike; we marched together, exercised together, stood in lots of lines together, and even got chewed out together (although there were also plenty of opportunities to get chewed out individually.) All this is done not so much in an effort to eliminate one’s individuality, as many military critics insist, but in an effort to make individuals think and act as part of a unit, to become part of a group that is more effective working in concert than they would be as individuals. They were also becoming individuals who could be counted on by their buddies.

We learned military courtesy, how to salute, how to address our superiors (“Sir” for officers; “Sergeant,” “Drill Sergeant,” or “First Sergeant” for non-commissioned officers (NCOs), depending on their role). It was impressed on us to never address a sergeant as “Sir,” as it would likely elicit the response, “Don’t call me sir – I work for a living!”

We were taught how to wear our uniforms and put on our field gear; how to maintain our living quarters in a neat and military fashion; how to stand at attention, at parade

rest and at ease. We learned how to salute. We were drilled in marching and the finer points of “twenty-two dash five,” the Army manual for drill and ceremonies. We had classes on the “chain of command,” in military justice (i.e., the Uniform Code of Military Justice or UCMJ), and in Army insignia of rank. We also were assigned to Kitchen Police or KP duty, which was a long day doing menial tasks such as peeling potatoes or cleaning grease traps under the direction of our Mess Sergeants.

Our day-to-day activities were done under close supervision of Drill Sergeants, the NCOs in the Smokey Bear hats. By the way, the uninitiated often refer to Army Basic Training as “Boot Camp” and call Drill Sergeants “DIs” (Drill Instructors). Boot Camp and DI are strictly Marine Corps terms. In the Army they are Basic and Drill Sergeants.

Many of our Drill Sergeants were highly professional and skilled in transitioning civilians into soldiers. But at this point in the war the manpower requirements in Vietnam were so great that some of Drill Sergeants were not sergeants at all, they were inexperienced corporals thrown into a Drill Sergeant’s job.

More technical subjects were taught by specialized instructors, either in huge classrooms big enough to hold an entire company, or out in the open air. Map reading, or “land navigation,” was a technically complex subject, so we spent considerable time conducting classroom exercises, followed by field exercises in which we had to move successfully one from one point to another based on direction and distance. This is one of a soldier’s most important skills, so every trainee had to pass a test to prove his mastery of land navigation.

We were schooled in First Aid so we would be able to assist a wounded comrade even if there was no medic around. Many an old soldier can still recite the three lifesaving steps: “Stop the bleeding. Clear the airway. Treat for shock.”

Of course, part of Basic was learning to handle weapons, primarily the M14 rifle and the hand grenade. Although by 1968 the Army was transitioning from the M14 to the M16, virtually all of our training was with M14s. This held true through AIT and OCS. In the late 60’s, demand for M16s for the troops in Vietnam, plus the Army’s desire to use up old stocks of ammunition and rifles, meant trainees would get M14s. For now, we would receive only cursory familiarization with the more modern M16.

Many new recruits have absolutely no experience with rifles, so, as with everything else, training started with the most basic elements: nomenclature, fieldstripping, cleaning, lubricating. Then on to how to sight correctly and adjust the sights. We finally went to the range where we first got our rifles “zeroed.” To “zero” or “sight-in” a rifle means to align the sights so that you, the individual shooter, can hit a target at a specified distance. Once our weapons were zeroed, we then learned to shoot and hit a target at various distances, adjusting the sights as the distance increased. While “zeroing” was done on bullseye targets, most of our training was done with electrically-controlled man-sized silhouette targets which fell when hit, then rose back up. When qualification

time came, our Drill Sergeants gave us some helpful advice: aim low rather than high. A high shot will result in a clean miss. But a low one might ricochet or at least kick up some dirt which will cause the target to fall. One way or another, our instructors got even the least experienced shooters to qualify.

Most of our hand grenade training was with dummy grenades. Considering how dangerous they are, that was a good thing. To qualify, it was necessary to lob the grenade into a relatively small circle at a certain distance, which required a pretty good arm. We also got to throw one live grenade. All firing ranges put great emphasis on safety, but the grenade range was even more so. Everyone huddled behind a large bunker and, one at a time, we were brought forward to toss our grenade. The trainee would stand facing downrange behind a wall of dirt and heavy wooden timbers several feet high. Right next to him stood an instructor sergeant. On the ground near the front wall was a hole, or grenade trap, another safety device. The plan was that if a trainee dropped a live grenade either the trainee or the instructor would kick it into the grenade trap. The instructor explained the procedure that the trainee was to follow, with special emphasis on getting down behind the wall as soon as he threw the grenade.

The trainee was handed a grenade and, on command, he would pull the pin, still holding down the small metal “spoon.” Then, also on command, the trainee would bring his arm back, then lob the grenade downrange. This caused the “spoon” to fly off, igniting the fuse, which would burn for a few seconds while the grenade flew through the air. If the trainee did not get down quickly enough the sergeant would come down on top of him and flatten him on the ground. The grenade would explode, and the next trainee would move up to the wall.

We were also introduced to another “favorite” activity that would be repeated over and over: shots. “Shots” of course meant being poked with needles or injected by air guns, which, if you moved while the shot was administered, could slice open the skin. (More than one recruit had a rivulet of blood pouring down his arm either because he moved or the medic administering the shot was clumsy.) We each were issued a yellow “shot card” that we carried with us from post to post throughout our time in the Army.

And, of course, there was physical training (PT). Some of us had been told by our Army recruiters that smart guys like us shouldn’t have any problem with Basic since it is really geared toward the lowest common denominator. Nevertheless, even those who had gotten into shape before arriving at Basic could find that PT was more than a bit of a challenge. PT ranged from the classic “drop and give me ten” pushups, through long marches, mile runs, and obstacle courses, and even to “rifle PT.” Rifle PT doesn’t look that difficult – how hard can it be to exercise with a ten-pound weight? Pretty darn hard when you hold that weight at arm’s length and do repetitions until your arms fall off.

Maybe the most unpopular exercise was the “low crawl.” When they said low, they meant *low*. This was not hands and knees crawling. Instead the chest and belly had to

touch the ground, which meant the arms were out to the side like a turtle. The consequence of not crawling low enough was inevitable: a Drill Sergeant's boot on the back. To make it even more difficult, this was a timed event so we had to low crawl and do it quickly.

There was also an exercise called the man carry. To make it "equitable," each recruit had to carry a man about the same size as he. In theory, it is as easy for a big man to carry another big man as it is for a small man to carry someone his own size. Some of the larger guys would debate that.

Another unpopular form of PT was bayonet training. The last US Army bayonet charge was in Korea in 1951, but bayonet practice was integral to Basic Training until 2010. It supposedly instilled aggressiveness and a willingness to close with the enemy. (Even today there are those who have strong objections to the decision to eliminate bayonet training.) But mostly bayonet training is hard physical exercise. Hollywood likes to show bayonet training as running up to a straw dummy and poking your bayonet into it. In practice, the basic thrust move is a complex, multi-step and difficult maneuver.

As part of our CBR (chemical, biological, radiological) training we were treated to another staple of military movies, the tear gas house. In this exercise each of us would enter a hut wearing our gas mask, which successfully protected us. Once inside, we would have to step in front of an instructor, remove our mask, and state something like the date and location or our name and serial number. We would then be dismissed to move quickly outside, teary-eyed, coughing and gasping. (If the instructor wanted to make your life difficult he would ask you another question, or require that you state your answer louder.)

In the sixth week of training, we started to do squad and platoon exercises. This involved going through various blank-firing and live-firing exercises on combat assault ranges in which we performed as members of squads or platoons, not just as individuals.

Toward the end of Basic, we were put through the classic crawl-under-barbed-wire-with-machine-guns-firing-overhead exercise. This took place at night, which enhanced the fright factor. We started by crouching in a trench downrange, waiting for our turn to advance by squads. We could hear machine guns firing from the direction in which we were going to advance and see tracers going overhead (every sixth round was a tracer, so there were even more bullets whizzing over than we could see.) They seemed close.

At a signal from the instructor, we clambered out of the trench and started crawling toward the guns. Explosions went off all around (in sandbagged holes, so they weren't really presenting much danger). We crawled through barbed wire entanglements, slowing down only to un snag ourselves. Finally, we reached the end where we crawled past the guns and could finally stand up. This is when we realized that the guns were firing from raised platforms and the bullets had been going far enough overhead that we

probably could have stood up and walked the whole way. If nothing else, this exposed us to what it is like to be on the receiving end of fire, plus it also brought home another point: the loneliness of the battlefield. Even though other men were going through it at the same time, we couldn't escape the feeling that we were all alone out there.

After eight weeks we went through proficiency tests, including the dreaded PT test, to determine whether we had mastered the basics of being soldiers. Some failed and were "recycled," that is, sent back to a Basic company that was coming along behind ours to repeat part of the program.

From Basic, everyone went on to **Advanced Individual Training (AIT)**. While Basic taught what every soldier needed to know, in AIT the training focused on the soldier's specific branch – Infantry, Armor, Signal, and so forth. As one would expect, for almost all of us who would be going to Infantry OCS, our AIT specialty would be Infantry. While the training in AIT was good, there were lots of days when we were assigned work details. It often felt like we were just marking time.

Lots of emphasis was placed on weapons beyond M14 and M16 rifles. For the M60 machine gun we actually lived in tents near the firing ranges. We heard over and over the safety broadcast made on every Army firing range: "Ready on the left...ready on the right...ready on the firing line. Is there anyone down range? Is there anyone down range? Is there anyone down range?" (Or as Bruce Braden remembered from Fort Ord, "Are there anyone down range?") Now and then, the range officer might add something like, "If there is, God be with you!"

Lunch would usually be trucked out to the ranges in big, insulated cans, and we would dutifully shuffle by while food was ladled into our metal trays or mess kits. In the winter, we acted quickly to eat before the food froze. At least eating in the cold was better than eating in the rain. There were times when hot chow was trucked out to the field and we found that the task was to eat before our metal trays filled with water. We were not always successful.

In addition to M60s, we learned how to shoot the infantry's "portable artillery," the M79 grenade launcher, and two anti-tank weapons, the 3.5 inch rocket launcher and the M72 LAW. We were familiarized with the .45 pistol. We also were trained on the various types of anti-personnel land mines used throughout the world. We learned how mines are used; how to identify, arm, and disarm them; how to map out a mine field; and how to find and remove enemy mines which were not mapped. We were also trained in how to set an ambush and how to react when we were ambushed.

By the time we 50<sup>th</sup> Company OCS members reached AIT, fall was turning to winter. Nevertheless, we conducted "jungle warfare training," which required a bit of imagination since in most places trees had become bare, leaving our "jungle" mighty sparse. In northern posts, jungle training was even more imaginative as we slogged

through several inches of snow. But we tried, setting up ambushes, going on patrols, and at least learning some fundamentals.

Despite the winter cold, we continued to do our share of PT, especially running. Our training schedule kept us busy, but the atmosphere was a little more relaxed than in Basic and we got some time off on weekends for movies or sleeping in. We soon learned that the best way to avoid work details on the weekends was to get out of the company area – to church, the PX or a motel near the base.

In Basic we had been driven to the outlying training areas in large semi-trailers with bench seats and windows, sort of like busses pulled by a semi-tractor. They were universally known as “cattle cars.” In AIT we still often rode in cattle cars, but we were also introduced to riding in two-and-a-half ton trucks with canvas covers on the bed, in what everyone in the Army calls a “deuce-and-a-half.” They were noisy, uncomfortable, smelled of diesel exhaust, and by the time we got to our destination over dirt roads, we were covered with dust. But we learned that during the ride we could sleep, despite all this, a skill that we could use for the rest of our lives.

In both Basic and AIT, every company included two types of troops. First, there were those who would remain on active duty after training, either to go on to OCS or some other training, or to be assigned to a regular Army unit. Some of these had enlisted, while other had been drafted (in the parlance of the day, their “friends and neighbors” had sent them). The second type were those who, after completing Basic and AIT, would return home to serve in either the Enlisted Reserve or National Guard.

Those of us who would end up in 50<sup>th</sup> Company were ready for our next challenge, and we would find it at Fort Benning, Georgia.