Big Personalities: Captain Smith, and other Faces in the Crowd

Daily Life: Billets, Platoons and TACs

Like most OCS companies, 50th Company was structured into six platoons of almost forty men each. Each platoon was housed in one third of the top two stories of our three-story barracks. Whenever we were in the barracks, we were kept so busy that there was little time to socialize between platoons. While no one got to know every man in the company, we all got to know our platoon-mates well. We roomed together, marched and ran together, showered together, cleaned our barracks area together, and basically were around each other twenty-four hours a day. In short, we had to learn to understand each other, accept each other's weaknesses, and take advantage of our individual strengths to help each other out for the good of both the individual and the platoon. While much the same also took place at the company level, it was the platoon that was the core of our daily life.

Rather than the Drill Sergeants of Basic Training and AIT, each platoon had a Tactical Officer (a "TAC"). All of our TACs were second lieutenants who had recently graduated from OCS. The TACs' responsibilities were basically the same as those of Drill Sergeants, only this time their goal was to turn out qualified second lieutenants, not just privates trained to meet minimum standards.

Captain Thomas J. Smith

At the top of 50th Company's chain of command was our commanding officer, Captain Thomas J. Smith, a hulking bear of a man with a crew cut who had played football in college, graduated from OCS himself and served as an Infantry Company Commander in Vietnam. Each candidate's feelings toward Captain Smith are unique and were shaped by personal interactions. Some resented his rough demeanor and the harsh treatment he doled out to whip us into shape and make officers of us. In retrospect, almost all of us have come to realize that he was a decent guy who understood how the game was played and what his role was in our training. Whatever he was, he completely dominated our lives in OCS. He set standards that seemed beyond our reach. This often seemed arbitrary: we frequently were never sure just what his standards were, and it was no surprise when he told us we had fallen short. When we did succeed, he immediately told us of the next milestone and how much harder we would have to work to meet it. Many of us had virtually no individual contact with him other than through the regular inspections that he conducted. Most tried hard not to attract his attention throughout the entire cycle. Without a doubt, he was tough and demanding, but he did get results, and OCS was never supposed to be easy.

Gary Zittlow remembers "that Capt. Smith was one of the most competitive people I have ever met in my life. That is why our teams and our performance at the PT final test had to be the 'best'. As I recall our softball team was undefeated, it was really an incentive to play on that team so we could practice and didn't have to do company PT."

Kief Tackaberry echoes this: "Captain Smith liked basketball. Since our company was mostly college graduates, he determined that we had five or six candidates that played college-level basketball. Captain Smith decided to challenge the post champions. The best part was that our group got time away from the barracks to play a game we enjoyed. After a couple of practices, we played the post champions. Unfortunately we lost by three points."
But the Captain's competitive spirit sometimes ended in frustration, as Kief Tackaberry recounts in this story about a TAC vs. candidate basketball game:

"Captain Smith decided to organize a game between our team and the TAC officers (the TACs were furious with him - they didn't want to play; they were not basketball players). Since Burt and I were on restriction, I told Captain Smith if he would let us off restriction, we might let him score a few points. He of course said no. Burt and I doubled-teamed him the whole game, with the other three players guarding the rest. By the end of the game, Captain Smith was elbowing, shoving, etc. – he was furious. He didn't score a point. We had fun, but remained on restriction. My take and experience with Captain Smith is that he had to play the game, but he respected those who would stand up to him or the TACs. Deep down he was a good guy."

Smith's obsession with beating the candidates in sports didn't end with basketball. Doug Cannon remembers when it was candidates vs. cadre in softball (it's also a good illustration of how we learned to meet challenges as a team – who knows, maybe this was the captain's hidden goal):

"After the softball season was over, we were marched to the playing field for a competitive game with the cadre. However, since I was the pitcher, Captain Smith thought it would be appropriate for me to carry a bat held high above my head for the however many mile march to the field. I started with the bat above my head but soon the bat was being passed among fellow members of my platoon. The bat was never lowered and always visible to the Captain. The crowning moment was then crushing the cadre in the game. And they thought they could beat an undefeated team!"

Captain Smith's enthusiasm for athletics extended to our training as well. We took the Army PT test twice in the cycle. The first time early in the cycle and then later near graduation. It would make us (and the cadre) look good if we could show some improvement in the scores. To make sure this happened Captain Smith took us out the evening before the first test and put us through a grueling session. The next day we were tired and sore and did not make a good showing. This was his leverage to take us out for evening PT for the rest of the cycle. Before the second PT test we rested the day before and achieved a remarkably high score.[i]

In his zeal to improve our PT performance, Captain Smith tried a number of things. Clair Palmer recalls that, "One day we returned to the company area for lunch and he announced that from now on the last platoon for lunch would run the Airborne track with him. It was the Third Platoon's turn to be last, so we stripped off our shirts and

went off with the CO to do a little run. As we were running, we realized that we ran this route nearly every day and the Captain didn't. So, as one we slowly started increasing our speed so that before long we were running and not jogging as usual. We were fine, but the CO seemed about ready to collapse as we came back to the company area. For some reason he never showed up at lunch time again."

Sometime after graduation, Gary List found that the Captain was still the same as we remembered him from OCS. Says Gary, "I ran into Captain (by then Major) Smith at the Ft. Belvoir Officers Club. After introducing myself, his only comment was 'List…you need a haircut!' I guess the tiger never changes his stripes."

TACs

2LT Anthony Travaline, 2nd Platoon

Like all TACs, Lieutenant Travaline was supposed to play the role of both a father figure and tough task master. But it was a little difficult for us to take him seriously as the latter, since he was a really nice guy who stood about five and a half feet tall. In fact, our nickname for him was "Boo-Boo," after Boo-Boo Bear, a popular cartoon character from the Yogi Bear cartoons.

Bob Winship recalls following Trav on the way out to formation and mimicking his walk. "Never got caught at that, thank God," says Bob.

An even more elaborate imitation of Trav came during the variety show that all companies are required to stage several weeks into their cycle: two candidates walked on stage, one of them gently placed a highly polished pair of jump boots on the ground; on top of the boots the second candidate placed a helmet liner with a gold bar. Everyone immediately recognized this as Lieutenant Travaline and roared with laughter.[ii]

2Lt Robert Cross, 3rd Platoon

In one incident, Kief Tackaberry relates how "a group of us got together one night to line Lieutenant Cross' desk drawers with tin foil and filled them with water, fish and various aquarium gravel and ornaments." Undoubtedly, if the actual perpetrators could not be identified, the whole platoon felt Cross' wrath.

2Lt Eric Toolson, 4th Platoon

All the TACs interacted with every platoon, not just their own, so we became familiar with each and every one of them. In general, they were OK, but they certainly did their job of keeping things tough for us. Probably the worst was Lieutenant Eric Toolson. Brian Walrath has a special recollection of Toolson: "One morning when I was student company commander we were lined up in formation ready to march off to class (actually, to *run* off to class) and Toolson was the TAC in charge that day. Standing before me, he glared into my eyes and said, 'There's a VC sniper on that building who is

aiming an AK-47 right at your head. He's going to kill you. You're going to go to Vietnam and die.' I suppose that was his way of putting us under stress. I wonder how he would have felt if he had said that to one of our OCS classmates who *did* die in Vietnam. My guess is that he probably would not have given this any thought."

Wayne Ferrentino adds a comment about Toolson: "Quite a weird guy. He was enamored of an exotic dancer at a club just off base. After 18 weeks, we were allowed weekend passes. Brooks Doyle, Rich Goodman and myself went to the club and while they distracted the bartender, I jumped over the bar and stole the scarfs she used in her act – quite a show. Draped them around Toolson's office and I'm not sure I want to imagine what he did with them."

2Lt David Sullivan, 5th Platoon

Craig Biggs had an experience that showed even TACs could have a soft spot. "When I requested time to go the base hospital to see my just born son, Captain Smith said the Army had all kinds of doctors and nurses who were more than capable of taking care of both of them. Lt. Sullivan snuck me out the next night. What a guy!"

2Lt John Hook, 6th Platoon

Clark Yokley tells of the time when

"…one evening after our dinner meal, we found ourselves down on that activity field, as usual, getting our second round of PT training. The field had a lot of low areas and when it rained, there were little ponds all around. On this particular day, we had endured the rain and Lieutenant Hook was marching us, probably running us, back to the barracks dodging the ponds. Some crazy, but brave cadet in the 6th Platoon decided it would be a good idea to dump the "Hooker" in one of those ponds. All of a sudden, we were all on top of the "Hooker"; he was soaked and totally pissed off. As a result, the "Hooker" had us in a low crawl position for our trip back to the barracks. I don't remember how far it was but I do remember low crawling across a road and past Infantry Hall. Was it worth it? I'd say yes, without a doubt. It showed the 6th platoon was together, one for all and all for one. We knew we were a platoon at that time."

The matter did not end there, as Lin Zimmerman recalls having "to explain to Captain Smith and Lieutenant Hook why Hook had been dunked by his platoon. It was a very 'enjoyable' experience with Smith asking the questions and Hook yelling in my ear at the same time. I often wonder if my hearing loss has anything to do with this incident."

NCO's

The 50th Company staff also included a cadre of NCOs including a First Sergeant, Supply Sergeant, and various other NCOs and clerks. We didn't have a great deal of contact with them, since they were busy doing the behind-the-scenes work of making things go smoothly. The one NCO who stood out was our First Sergeant, Carlee Steed, a

"threewar" man – a veteran of World War II, Korea and Vietnam. Tall and spare, he was a man of few words. But when First Sergeant Steed spoke, we all listened. His praise, though hard-won, meant a lot to us young, eager candidates.

Sergeant Steed was adamant about one thing: No one was to call him "Top," the nickname often used for a company's "top" sergeant. "A top is a child's toy," he would growl.

Daily Life: Isolation, Mornings

One of the things that stands out about OCS is how isolated we were, how cut off from the rest of the world. Basic and AIT were also like this, but it seemed worse at Benning. For the first several weeks, the only people we interacted with outside of our fellow candidates and the TACs were instructors, senior candidates who harassed us, barbers, civilian mess hall workers (to whom we virtually never spoke) and the medics who gave us shots, which we continued to get regularly. We were not allowed to watch TV or listen to the radio until late in the program. When we did get radio privileges it was a kick to hear commercials for events that would take place after we graduated. Some of the married guys' wives lived nearby, but they were seen only on laundry runs. With each minute of the day tightly scheduled, there was no time to wonder about what was going on in the rest of the world. Recalls Brian Walrath, "The only time I remember the TV in the day room being turned on was once when, for some forgotten reason, I was rewarded with TV privileges. I sat alone in front of the set watching shows that were completely unfamiliar to me, having watched virtually no television since I had started Basic many months earlier. If I remember correctly, one of the shows was "F Troop," an army comedy set in the old West. It seemed appropriate."

The day began with the CQ (Charge of Quarters) walking through the barracks and speaking in a clear voice, "First Call." You could hear those words repeated as he continued down the corridor and even when he went to the next floor. We got up, made our way to the latrine to use the facilities, shower and shave. We then got partially dressed, (boots and shirts went on at the last moment) and went to our assigned detail area. The Latrine, including showers, needed to be wiped dry and spotless, our beds needed to be made, and our rooms had to be ready for inspection before we departed for our day. The team assigned to buffing the floors was the last off the floor. We then pulled on our starched fatigue shirts, and carried our boots down the stairs and put them on just before we stepped outside. These purposeful actions were hurried to conclusion by loud whistles that carried up from the first floor. One whistle meant 10 minutes until formation, two whistles meant 5 minutes, and three whistles meant 2 minutes.

Bill Snodgrass offers an interesting take on our isolation:

I was in the latrine at Ft. Benning meeting with the Second Platoon (we would have our meetings in the latrine because we did not want to mess up the hallway floor that we had waxed in preparation for the next day's inspection and the latrine could be cleaned easily) when a runner from the day room came in and asked, "Is there a Candidate Snodgrass here?" He handed me a telegram (you do remember what a telegram was) from the Red Cross telling me my wife in California had a baby girl and I was a father.

The next day I went to the First Sergeant to ask for a leave to see my new baby. He looked at me without a hesitation and said, "Candidate, women have been having babies for thousands of years without your help; the Army needs you here."

Six weeks later my wife and baby girl, Priscilla, joined me at Ft. Benning. In those days the airlines would not let infants less than six weeks fly.

Other Faces in the Crowd

Clarence Kugler was made student company commander just after we moved into our 50th Company barracks but before the OCS Program began in earnest. After a few days of supervising us in such important duties as waxing floors and trimming grass, Clarence went to see Captain Smith, who was having a meeting with his TACs. "What do you want, candidate, we're having a meeting?" growled Smith. Standing rigidly at attention, Kugler informed the captain, "that I thought since we were meeting all the standards set for us it would be a good idea to reward the men by taking them to a movie. Suddenly, I had four TACs three inches around my head yelling to the point that veins were sticking out of their foreheads. When they finished Captain Smith remained silent and I remarked to him, 'Does this mean no movie?' More yelling from the TACs ensued and Smith then jumped up from his desk and ripped my commander epaulette off and sent me double timing out of his office."

So what became of Clarence? Later he asked his TAC if his "performance in front of Captain Smith was the death knell" for him. "No," replied the TAC. "Captain Smith said you have balls, you will be OK." Clarence survived OCS.

Richard Bardsley, one of the few former enlisted men in 50th, was a Special Forces (Green Beret) sergeant whom we viewed with respect because of his Vietnam service. When the time came to elect class officers we chose him to be class president. Richard served for about a month, then the Captain decided that we should choose a new president. We figured that Smith was playing a game with us – testing us to see if we would show solidarity as a company. So we took another vote and reelected the Green Beret. But the Captain was serious. "This man is not going to be the president of your class. Elect someone else." This time we caught on, and elected a candidate who met with the Captain's approval. Smith's problems with Richard were never clear – he wasn't in the habit of explaining his decisions. But they may have been influenced by Richard's penchant for, as he put it, "pissing off Captain Smith as much as possible, [for instance] asking if his Purple Heart was from friendly fire." Richard was also instrumental in convincing the entire company to fall out "with subdued combat belts and buckles so we didn't have to shine the brass buckle" (a gross violation of one of the underpinnings of OCS – the daily shining of anything brass.) Additionally, he was a ring leader in a stunt to "greet" a new TAC by moving all his office furniture onto the barracks roof. Not the sort of things designed to ingratiate oneself with the CO.

We all remember Richard Geib, if for nothing else because he shouted his name when called upon in class. "SIR, CANDIDATE GEIIIIB," is still a vivid memory for many of us. Before he died in 2016, Richard wrote to us about why he shouted. "…I did holler

back at the TAC's because I know that what little attention I got for this was far better than being singled out as a pussy."

Kief and Burt Tackaberry were identical twins. They were always amiable and always optimistic even in the dreariest of times. They were Army brats and we all expected that they would stay in the Army. Captain Smith separated them into different platoons and many candidates never truly knew which one they were talking to.

A number of the wives of married candidates moved to the Columbus, GA area. Wanda Hummel remembers how this unfolded for her. "With the New Year of 1969, I began a very new, unexpected life. A friend, who lived near me in Iowa, called me to ask if I would like to share a trailer house with her and her baby in Columbus, GA. Until that call I did not expect to be with Terry once he began his OCS training. So, I contacted friends who had a trailer house in Columbus and were being transferred elsewhere. I rented it by phone. The price was $50 per month, a real air-conditioned palace.

The next step was to resign my teaching job in Iowa at mid-year. I was fined for that decision, but being near Terry was more important. Vietnam was in our future. With much anxiety about the unknown, I became a "camp follower".

Before long, navigating around Ft. Benning and Columbus became the norm. The other wives who had husbands in the company would gather at each other's homes. We made cookies for the guys to enjoy at the ball games."

Big Personalities: Notes

[i] Wayne Ferrentino recounts one of his interactions with Captain Smith:

I received word that my fiancée was in a terrible auto accident and it did not look good. I went to Smith and asked for a short weekend leave. He said no, smiled and then asked what I was going to do. I told him I was leaving and would be back Monday. I was totally surprised that he relented. Shortly after I returned he was happy to hear that the wise guy from NY was getting paneled. My only hope was my turn as Student CO. I guess I did OK, since I did graduate.

[ii] Another famous incident with Lieutenant Travaline had to do with "the rock." It seems that when Trav was an OCS candidate, he had such trouble with the hand grenade throw that he was in danger of failing the final PT test. His TAC's solution was to have Trav constantly carry a rock about the size and weight of a grenade, and to practice throwing it whenever there was a break in training. This must have worked, since Trav graduated and went on to become a TAC himself. Boo Boo decided to pass on this tradition by having his student platoon sergeant carry the rock and care for it at all times. At one point when Bob Hines was in the role of platoon sergeant, he either temporarily lost his senses or just plain became fed up with lugging the rock around. Says Bob, "My memory of that afternoon is quite vivid. I can still see that rock leaving my hand, sailing over the platoon, and into a dry creek bed" near our barracks. Traveline promised to have Bob shot if we didn't find it, so the entire platoon was forced to crawl around the creek bed searching for the precious stone. According to Bob, "there were about a million rocks of that size, shape and color." Whenever a candidate would hopefully take a stone to Trav, he would pronounce it not to be THE rock. Ultimately, the rock was never found and Bob was restricted to the barracks while the rest of us got one of our few weekend passes, plus he was rewarded with three hours of walking tours.

The incident also led Bob to write a sort of "confession," much like a grade schooler having to write "I will not talk in class" over and over on the blackboard. It is a classic example of how candidates could maintain their sense of humor even in those trying times:

ROCKS (and how to lose 'em) by OC Bob Hines

And I remember "the rock," a symbol of purity, honesty, integrity, and stractness. Yes, it seems like only yesterday that I, Bobby J. Hines, hurled that treasured object into Ranger Creek, Ft. Benning. How anyone could commit such a heinous crime as this leads me on occasion to doubt my own sanity. The thought of this precious stone lying on the bottom of Ft. Benning's largest outdoor latrine, amidst all that slime and mold, and all those common everyday stones, causes me to awaken in a cold sweat in the middle of the night.*

When I think of the international crisis this performance of mine could have created I wring my hands in anguish and despair. However, I do feel that the disposal of the platoon rock did illustrate one important facet of modern life. No matter how ridiculous it may seem, you cannot take a platoon rock for granite.

*[*From the urbandictionary.com: STRAC – A 1970's era US military acronym, meaning: Strategic, Tough, and Ready Around the Clock. To be labeled "strac" was considered high praise.]*

What we learned

Overview

The curriculum of Infantry OCS had several different components upon which each candidate was evaluated: academics, leadership, physical training, teamwork and, for a lack of a better way to say it, adherence to military standards.

Academics

To be an effective Infantry Officer you need to have capability in subjects such as weapons, tactics, military organization and procedures, military law, and land navigation (map reading to civilians). Training in subjects began with classes in an academic setting. We spent many hours in indoor and outdoor classrooms, listening to lectures, watching training films, being called on to answer questions. It was a surprise to many of us recent college graduates that something so large and complex as the Army had escaped our notice for so long.

Our indoor classrooms seemed to have only two temperature settings: ninety-five degrees or just above freezing (the latter was an attempt – unsuccessful – at keeping us awake.) Since we were soaking wet from running to class, we would sit in either a hot box getting even sweatier or shivering in an ice box. It's a wonder that we didn't all catch pneumonia. But we were young and tough.

We were also tired. Any chance to sit down was an invitation to fall asleep, and this coupled with the generally boring nature of the classes (unfortunately the tendency of many instructors to simply recite verbatim pages out of the subject manuals) made keeping awake a real challenge. One reasonably effective technique was "the ripple." Every few minutes the man at the right end of each row would poke the man on his left, who in turn would jab the next fellow, and so on down the row. All this was dependent of course on the man on the far right staying awake so he could start the ripple. Looking around the room, one could always see heads bobbing, candidates slumped over their desks, and at least a few sprawled back in their seats, mouths agape. The instructors must have been used to this and were generally pretty tolerant. But every now and then they would single out a sleeping candidate, jolt him awake and have him do pushups, run around the room, or some such thing.

We were sometimes able to earn certain "privileges" as a company, although it was never clear what we had done to earn them. It could have been simply a matter of having reached a certain point in the program. One of the biggest privileges was being allowed to buy snacks from civilian vendors during class breaks – things like ice cream or honeybuns. Even on the coldest days on outdoor classrooms or ranges, candidates would gobble down ice cream whenever we got the chance. The vendors seemed to know when we would get these privileges (either they had been tipped off or else they knew enough about the system that they could predict it.) But now and then a vendor's truck would pull up just at break time, only to be turned away because of something we had done or had failed to do. It was never clear who was more disappointed, the poor vendor or us, the always hungry candidates.

Many of our classes were held in Infantry Hall, an imposing six-story edifice built in an unattractive '60s style. Infantry Hall was the home of the U.S. Army Infantry School. Inside were dozens of large, auditorium-style classrooms, where classes were held for not just officer candidates like ourselves, but also for newly-commissioned ROTC lieutenants and West Point graduates who had been assigned to the Infantry, plus more senior officers taking advanced classes. It may sound prejudiced, be we officer candidates in our spit-shined boots and heavily starched fatigues certainly looked sharper than most of the other students there, especially the ROTC grads, who we all agreed were the sloppiest of the bunch.

Infantry Hall is now (i.e., 2017) unrecognizable to those who attended OCS in the 1960s. It has been completely remodeled and is now the headquarters of the Maneuver Center for Excellence, which is what Ft. Benning now styles itself since headquarters for the Armor branch moved from Ft. Knox, KY in 2010, combining Infantry and Armor under one umbrella. We old soldiers would probably find that many things about today's Army are as unrecognizable as Infantry Hall (such as the name "Maneuver Center for Excellence").

For almost every subject there was a field training exercise that accompanied the academic component. This was where we were supposed to demonstrate our mastery of the subject by actually performing what we had learned, whether it was employing weapons, conducting a tactical exercise, or moving across the wooded landscape from point A to point B.

Much of our "classroom" training actually took place in bleachers out on ranges. Here we learned about the practical application of weapons and were sometimes treated to firepower displays, which were always pretty impressive. These included things like tanks firing their main guns, artillery bombardments, helicopters and C-130 gunships – all designed to show us what was available to support the infantry.

The "mad minute" was a firepower demonstration that duplicated a tactic that was actually used in Vietnam. If a company commander felt an enemy attack was imminent, he might order a mad minute to break up the enemy's plans. When the order was given, everyone would open up and keep firing for a minute or so – rifles, machine guns, and grenade launchers. In OCS we actually got to do this once at night, which was even more impressive than in the daytime since red tracers streaked across the sky by the thousands and explosions lit up the night. We quickly decided that we wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of a mad minute.

There were a number of other weapons we also trained with. One of them was the Recoilless rifles that are crew-served anti-tank weapons. What makes them recoilless is that both the cartridge case and the breech are perforated, so that a certain portion of the explosion that sends the projectile down-range blows out the back of the barrel, exactly counterbalancing the force that goes out the front, thus cancelling out recoil.

We got to fire one round apiece from a vehicle-mounted 106mm recoilless rifle with the warning that if you fire this weapon at an enemy tank, “don’t miss” because the sound and the smoke will instantly make your position known to the enemy. It was incredibly loud, with a back-blast you could feel right through your sternum. Although recoilless rifles of a wide variety of sizes are still in use around the world today, they are little used by the U.S. military, having been largely replaced by wire- or laser-guided weapons. Recently, however, the Army adopted a new Swedish recoilless rifle weighing only fifteen pounds.

One of our more interesting field exercises was known as “escape and evasion” or E&E. This was designed to give us experience in what to do if we became separated from our unit. We were trucked out to a remote part of the post and dropped off one at a time just as it got dark. Our goal was to travel several miles to a friendly camp, all the while avoiding enemy patrols in the area. This required a combination of land navigation and stealthy movement. Any unfortunate candidate who was captured was taken to an enemy camp and subjected to “torture,” which usually involved being locked inside a wall locker that had been placed in the ground like a coffin. There was a rumor (there were always rumors) that this “torturing” had gotten out of hand in the recent past and some candidates had been hurt. Whether or not there was any truth to this one, none of us wanted to find out.

For the rest of the night, most of us crept through the woods, pretty much lost. A few actually made it to the objective and some others were taken prisoner. A certain time had been designated – probably about 3 am – for the end of the exercise. At that point, all of us who remained in the woods were to head in a pre-designated direction, which would bring us to a road where truck were patrolling to pick us up. That’s how most of us made it to the friendly camp. If nothing else, we got our first real lesson in how easy it is to get impossibly lost in the woods after dark.